

“IN THE BEGINNING
WAS THE WORD”:
MERCY AS A “REALITY
ILLUMINATED BY REASON”¹

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“[T]he separation of ideas and reality . . . leads to a dialectic of ‘idealism’ *and* relativism.”



In his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* [EG], Pope Francis insists that we need to anchor our approach to the Church’s missionary task in the Incarnate Word as the principle of reality (“il criterio di realtà”: 233). This principle can be a guide for “the development of life in society and the building of a people,” and its “application can be a genuine path to peace within each nation and in the entire world” (EG, 221). It is a path that involves in particular the inclusion of the poorest and weakest among us (*inter alia*: EG, 17). Citing John Paul II, Francis states that preaching

1. A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the conference “*Lumen gentium*: The Church as Sacrament of Trinitarian Communion” at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., 14–15 November 2014.

the Gospel “is the first task of the Church”; and “that missionary outreach is [thus] paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity” (15).

Furthermore, recalling the Council’s Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 6), the pope says that this outreach demands “ecclesial conversion”: “every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase in fidelity to her own calling. . . . Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way . . . to that continual reformation of which she always has need . . .” (EG, 26). “The integrity of the Gospel . . . must not be deformed”; and each truth must be “related to the harmonious totality of the Christian message” (39). It is “important to draw out the pastoral consequences of the Council’s teaching” in this light (38). “I dream of a ‘missionary option,’” he says, which is “capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s . . . ways of doing things . . . can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (27).²

The key to the harmonious totality of the Christian message, according to Francis, can be found in the view of St. Thomas that “mercy is the greatest of the virtues. . . .” “[A]s such it is proper to God to have mercy, through which his omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree” (EG, 37). Francis states, citing both John Paul II and Benedict XVI, that “for the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one. God shows the poor ‘his first mercy’” (198). This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have “this mind . . . which was in Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:5) (EG, 198). This option for the poor—“as Benedict XVI has taught—is implicit in our Christian faith, in a God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty” (EG, 198).³

2. In the words he cites from John Paul II: “All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion” (Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania* [Vatican City, 22 November 2001], 19 [EG, 27, fn. 25]).

3. “So the Son of God entered the world by means of a true incarnation that he might make men sharers in the divine nature; though rich, he was made poor for our sake, that by his poverty we might become rich. . . . The Fathers of the Church constantly proclaim that what was not assumed by Christ was not healed (*sanatum*). Now Christ took a complete human nature (*integram humanam naturam*) just as it was found in us poor and unfortunate ones but one that was without sin (cf. Heb. 4:15)” (*Ad Gentes divinitus*, 3).

Stressing the principle of the priority of reality over ideas (“La realtà è più importante dell’idea”: “realities are more important than ideas”),⁴ Francis states: ideas that are “disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but not of calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason” (232: “Ciò che coinvolge è la realtà illuminata dal ragionamento”). This priority of realities, or rejection of ideas disconnected from realities, the pope says, “has to do with incarnation of the Word and its being put into practice. . . . The principle of reality, of a Word already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew, is essential to evangelization” (233).⁵ Francis concludes: “The good news is the joy of the Father who desires that none of his little ones be lost. . . . The Gospel has an intrinsic principle of totality: it will always remain good news until it has been proclaimed to all people, until it has healed and strengthened every aspect of humanity, until it has brought all men and women together at table in God’s kingdom” (237).

We wish in what follows to reflect on the missionary task of the Church in the light of Francis’s insistence that this task consists above all in the communication of mercy to “the little ones” of the Gospel, focusing in particular on the emphasis Francis rightly places on linking ideas with reality, and ultimately on putting into practice the Word become incarnate in Jesus Christ. “Ideas,” he says, must be “at the service of communication, understanding and praxis” (232: “L’idea—le elaborazioni concettuali—è in funzione del cogliere, comprendere e dirigere la realtà”). Otherwise, they will be incapable of calling us to action. Indeed, they will involve us in such things as “angelic forms of purity, dictatorships of relativism, empty rhetoric, objectives more ideal

4. Cf. *EG*, 231–33, at 233. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states that the four permanent principles of the Church’s social doctrine are the dignity of the human person; the common good; subsidiarity; and solidarity (161). Francis says that the four principles he wishes to offer as a guide derive from the four “pillars” affirmed here. Francis’s four principles are these: “Time is greater than space” (=“initiating processes rather than possessing spaces” (222–25, at 223); “Unity prevails over conflict” (226–30); “Realities are more important than ideas” (231–33); “The whole is greater than the part” (234–37). We focus in this article on the third of Francis’s principles.

5. “Word” (“Parola”) is capitalized in the Italian text but not in the English translation.

than real, brands of ahistorical fundamentalism, ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom” (231).⁶ “Idealism” and “[f]ormal nominalism,” Francis stresses, “must give way to harmonious objectivity” (232).⁷ The principle upon which Francis insists here is of fundamental significance. Our purpose is to indicate what lies at the origin of the disconnection between ideas and reality, and what it takes to affirm instead a “reality illuminated by reason.” Our proposal will involve showing the sense in which ideas are words (of God), words that are indeed summed up in the Incarnate Word, and the sense in which the Incarnate Word becomes sacrament in and as the Church.

The burden of our argument is that the separation of ideas and reality—the abstraction of ideas from reality, which implies simultaneously the abstraction of reality from ideas—leads to a dialectic of “idealism” *and* relativism. This separation, in other words, presupposes and brings about at the same time an unattainable and so far objectivist notion of truth, on the one hand, and a relativist and so far subjectivist notion of the human subject, on the other. The crucial point, as we shall see, is that this objectivist truth and this subjectivistically conceived human person both—from their different directions—eliminate the possibility of and call for mercy: objectivist truth because of the remoteness and harshness of its demands on the subject (transcendence lacking immanent form); the subjectivistically conceived person because of the softness that is without objectively given demands on the subject (immanence lacking transcendent form).

We hope to show, in a word, that resolution of the problem of the disconnection between ideas and reality, in the face of the question of mercy, requires the inner reference of ideas and reality to each other. It is the original mutual relatedness of truth and human subjectivity that alone secures the abiding integrity of each, and thereby anchors the demand for mercy.

The term mercy means God’s forgiveness of his creatures’ offenses (from the Old French, *merci*—reward, kindness, grace, pity). More generally it means a disposition to forgive or show

6. “[I] purismi angelicati, i totalitarismi del relativo, i nominalismi dichiarazioniisti, i progetti più formali che reali, i fondamentalismi antistorici, gli eticismi senza bontà, gli intellettualismi senza saggezza” (231).

7. “Bisogna passare dal nominalismo formale all’oggettività armoniosa” (232).

compassion (from the early thirteenth century). Francis stresses the priority of reality over ideas, tying this priority to the incarnation of the Word as the principle of reality, “a Word already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew.” My argument begins from this premise. Its intention is to show the link between ideas and the Word incarnated in Jesus Christ and sacramentalized in the Church. And to show thereby the ontological-theological *source that warrants, or constitutes the authority for, mercy as a “reality illuminated by reason”*: as a reality, that is, which expresses (objective) truth *in* and indeed *as* a comprehensive openness to the depths of human subjectivity.

I.

(1) *Ideas and words.*⁸ First of all, we may say that, for the heart of the ancient and medieval tradition of Christian thought, ideas were in principle integrated with reality. That is, for example, the burden of Thomas’s understanding of truth as a transcendental, of truth, that is, as convertible with being. For Thomas, every being is true because it is related to an intellect. Every being is related to God’s creative mind or intelligence, and every being is so far inherently intelligible and intrinsically apt for being known by human beings in their spiritual capacity. Key here is the principle of form, which Thomas of course inherits from the Greeks. Form is the immaterial principle in the thing that makes it what it is, and the human soul in its spiritual nature is the place of forms, so to speak: indeed, the human soul (*anima*) for Thomas (following Aristotle) is *quodammodo omnia* (the soul in a sense is all things). What we call an idea, then, is most basically another word for form, which is that in a thing that enables its being known by another—its being taken up into a relation with human intelligence that does not distort but, on the contrary, precisely releases the inner meaning of the thing to the knower. Every being thus bears an aptness for generous communication: by its very nature as a creature, each being is already related to the mind of God and so far innerly apt for true relation and community with humans through the latter’s

8. The argument in (1) is indebted to Josef Pieper’s *The Truth of All Things (Wahrheit der Dinge)*, in *Living the Truth* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1989).

cognitive spiritual capacity. Indeed, the human mind is by nature a capacity *for* such community.

We should thus say in this light that ideas bear an intrinsically word-like character, as intelligent communications rooted ultimately in God's creative, intelligent activity. This is how Thomas resolves the Platonic problem of multiple ideas or forms that transcend the particular beings in which they are present: all of these are gathered up and given unity in the single divine Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Forms are the created words spoken by God that render each created being intelligible in itself and apt for interior community with all creaturely spiritual-intelligent beings. It is important to see that it is this original presence of ideas in things—as the forms *of* things—and the consequent word like character of things, that is decisive in revealing the human being to be naturally constituted as a listener, as one whose basic stance toward reality is contemplative. The human being is meant to be in relation with others (with all of created reality), meant first to see and hear creatures *as they are given*, and not to manipulate or instrumentalize them. The word like nature of things in their inner reality *as creatures* demands this priority of *listening* to things as *spoken*—and thus *given*.

The understanding that would disconnect ideas from reality—such that ideas would of their inner nature threaten to distort reality—presupposes that reality itself is understood first apart from ideas. Such an understanding, in other words, presupposes that reality is somehow constructed as a process of (empirically accessible) events that is anterior to “ideas,” which ideas reify into pale or ethereal abstractions. This approach, however, has its origin, not in thinkers who stand within the Christian tradition with its authentically creational horizon, but rather in the moderns who no longer take beings to be inherently intelligible: no longer generous in a way that enables a genuinely “realistic” relation between the human mind and things. At the heart of the problem of the moderns is the loss of the notion of form as a basic principle of being. With the loss of form comes a kind of opaqueness in things. Their identity takes on a mechanical-material character. Each thing as it were reduces to simply what it is in a merely “factual” or external sense. Things are no longer known in and through *interior* causes such as form and finality but rather only through causes (e.g., efficient and material) now con-

ceived in external terms, as reductively mechanical. Ideas become “idealistic,” matters of more or less arbitrary or functional classification and definition. Having lost rootedness in the principle of form, ideas no longer convey the inner meaning *of* things, nor do things bear any inherent (intelligible) relation to the divine mind. Knowledge ceases to be a matter most basically of a generous relationship and community between things and human beings ultimately originating with the Creator God. Knowledge, on the contrary, reduces to an external relation that tends as a matter of principle toward distortion via methods of experience (experimentation) and observation that incline toward forceful, instrumentalized, and controlling abstraction. (I believe this can be shown, in very different ways, in Descartes, Bacon, Locke, and Hume and Kant, for example.)

In the summary words of contemporary philosopher Kenneth Schmitz: “When the seventeenth-century philosophers threw out the four causes, they not only cast aside Aristotle, they also disavowed the transformed senses of these principles and thereby began the elimination of intelligibility from the very notion of creation, which ceased to play a role in the modern understanding of reality.”⁹

(2) *Integration of objectivity and subjectivity.* The foregoing comments of course need further development, but what has been said suffices to make an important first point: that ideas are apt by nature to *distort* reality or *turn our attention away* from reality only insofar as one assumes the modern as distinct from ancient-medieval Christian understanding of the world. We can put this in terms of the question of objectivity and subjectivity implicit in considerations of the relation between ideas and reality. Objectivity comes from the Latin, *obicere* (*ob-iacere*): what is thrown up or over against one—what is thus “given” to me and can be called an *object*. Subjectivity, on the other hand, comes from *subicere* (*sub-iacere*): what is thrown up from below, or from within—we may say, thus, what indicates an “inside,” and it is this that we characterize as the interiority or subjectivity that reveals a *subject*.

9. Kenneth Schmitz, “Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete,” in *The Texture of Being: Essays in First Philosophy* (Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy, vol. 46), ed. Paul O’Herron (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 106–31, at 125–26.

Objectivity in its customary modern sense, then, presupposes a reality conceived after the manner of what is primarily mechanical-material, lacking interiority. What is *given* is merely a *datum* bearing external, machinelike characteristics: something opaque, bearing no inner meaning. Objectivity in the medieval-Christian sense, on the contrary, is rooted in the form indicative of the order of the thing itself, the *inner order* of the thing as given, which order is a creaturely participation in the creative *mind* of God. Objects conceived of as *creatures* are thus simultaneously subjects: *the objective reality of things as given* always and everywhere—as a matter of principle—is revealed in the depths of their *reality as subjects*, their *properly subjective reality*. In a word: any original dissociation of objectivity and subjectivity in the thing, in either direction, in construing the meaning of a created being, distorts the integrity of its nature as a creature. This holds true *a fortiori* with respect to any such original dissociation in construing the meaning of *personal* creatures, with their specifically *spiritual* subjectivity.¹⁰

The objective order of things, understood in light of creation, is therefore never at base a mechanical or external order imposing itself from without. On the contrary, the objective order rightly understood indicates the inner nature of beings, what beings most basically *are* from within. The objective order indicates what things in their inmost subjectivity are meant to be: it indicates the form that they already are and (thereby) the end that they are meant to realize, in relation to God.¹¹ On the one hand, it is this original unity (within distinction) of objectivity and objec-

10. As should be clear, then, I am affirming a metaphysical subjectivity or interiority in all creatures by virtue of creation. As thus conceived in the context of creation, this metaphysical subjectivity does not deny but presupposes the specific (analogical) difference in the spiritual subjectivity of personal (human) creatures. On this, see Kenneth Schmitz, "Immateriality Past and Present," in *The Texture of Being*, 168–82; and *The Gift: Creation* (The Aquinas Lecture, 1982) (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982).

11. Here we find the foundational principle for the classical and Christian approaches to ethics common (with important differences, to be sure!) to Aristotle and Aquinas and St. John Paul II, all of whom conceive of moral activity as a matter of "becoming what you are." It is beyond present purposes, however, to show that none of these thinkers slip into those forms of ethics identified today as either "naturalistic," on the one hand, or "nonnaturalistic," on the other.

tivity stemming from the act of creation that demands the original unity of “idealism” and realism. “Ideas” in the most basic sense are the objective natural forms indicating beings’ inmost subjective way to their own proper realization as creatures and in relation to God. On the other hand, it is the original fracturing of objectivity from subjectivity (and vice-versa) that forces the simultaneous collapse of “idealism” into unreal abstraction and “realism” into subjectivism.

Here, then, is what we mean at root when we say that creaturely reality bears an intrinsically word-like character: ideas in their most proper sense indicate the forms of things that reveal things to be at their core, by virtue of their very being, communications of the intelligent Word of the Creator. Ideas speak not only of the *inner meaning of* beings; in so doing they express also the mind of God. Ideas identify the *objective form* of beings *qua created subjects* of relation to God.

It follows that the created world in its entirety is symbolic: all beings bear reference *from within* themselves to a *transcendent meaning* that is *from another*. “Objectifying” or “idealizing” beings through knowledge or judgment rightly understood is therefore never a matter of giving them unrealistic abstract form or directing them to unrealizable ends, but of first *letting them be*: of seeing and sustaining beings as they are objectively given *in themselves* and thus *as subjects, by the communicative Word of God*.

(3) *Nature and sacramentality*. We complete this reflection by showing how ideas conceived as natural words and symbols imply the notion of sacrament. The work of Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann is helpful here.¹² “The Western Chris-

12. All citations are from *For the Life of the World* [=FLW] (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000). Cf. also Joseph Ratzinger: “In a time when we have grown accustomed to seeing in the substance of things nothing but material for human labor . . . initially there is no room left for that symbolic transparency of reality toward the eternal on which the sacramental principle is based. Oversimplifying somewhat, one could indeed say that the sacramental idea presupposes a symbolist understanding of the world, whereas the contemporary understanding of the world is functionalist: it sees things *merely* as things, as a function of human labor and accomplishment, and given such a starting point, it is no longer possible to understand how a ‘thing’ can become a ‘sacrament’” (“The Sacramental Foundation of Human Existence,” in *Collected Works: Theology of the Liturgy* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014], 153–68, at 153–54). Citing the example of the person for whom eating is a meal and thereby bears a sacramental sense, Ratzinger says that such a person

tian,” he says, “is used to thinking of sacrament as opposed to the Word, and he links the mission with the Word and not the sacrament” (21). The sacrament is recognized as essential, but as a “clearly defined part or institution or act *of* the Church and *within* the Church, but not of the Church as being itself the sacrament of Christ’s presence and action” (21). The difference indicated here, Schmemmann states,

is primarily a difference in the apprehension of reality itself, . . . a difference of “world view.” If, for the Fathers, symbol is a key to sacrament, it is because sacrament is in continuity with the symbolical structure of the world in which “*omnes . . . creaturae sensibiles sunt signa rerum sacrum*” [“All sensible creatures are signs of sacred things”: St. Thomas]. And the world is symbolical—“*signum rei sacrae*”—in virtue of its being created by God; to be “symbolical” belongs thus to its ontology, the symbol being not only the way to perceive and understand reality, a means of cognition, but also of *participation*.¹³ It is then the “natural” symbolism of the world—one can almost say its “sacramentality”—that makes the sacrament possible and constitutes the key to its understanding and apprehension. (139–40)

The Christian sacrament is of course unique and absolutely new. But this newness is best seen as a discontinuity conceived not as a “miraculous exception to the natural order of things created by God and ‘proclaiming his glory,’” but as a “fulfillment” (140). Schmemmann’s point is developed in terms of the separation of “*figura et res, veritas et figura*,” which betrays Christianity’s understanding of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The reality of the sacrament, the “real” presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist, is detached from its “symbolical” reality. Drawing on the work of Henri de Lubac, Schmemmann argues that the *figura* (“figure”) and the *res* (the thing or reality)—the *mystice* and the *vere*—cannot rightly be disjoined (142–43). The sacrament needs to be understood in terms of a causality that is not merely “extrinsic and formal,” but on the contrary “*intrinsic* and revealing” (144). A causality understood only in extrinsic and formal

“discovers that things are more than things: that they are signs whose meaning extends beyond their immediate sensorial power” (158).

13. Cognition is not only *about* the other but *of* the other: cf. *FLW*, 142.

terms “guarantees the reality of the sacrament’s *effect*,” rather than intrinsically “revealing through fulfillment” (144).

Schmemmann takes an important further step pertinent to our theme when he says that the foregoing indicates the root meaning of modern secularism: “the deep crisis of secularism,” he argues, is “the great confusion”—indeed “great heresy” (128)—“of our time” (133). Secularism according to him consists in a false conception of the autonomy of the (natural) world—and in a dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural. “In both views the world ceases to be the ‘natural’ sacrament of God, and the supernatural sacrament [ceases] to have any ‘continuity’ with the world” (129). Secularism in its most proper sense is thus, in Schmemmann’s view, by no means restricted to those who do not accept the idea of God or Christian faith (cf. 130). Indeed, a secularist “may deduce meaning from God and ascribe to God the origin of the world and the laws which govern it. He may even admit without difficulty the possibility of God’s intervention in the world’s existence. He may relate to God his ultimate aspirations to a just society and the freedom and equality of all men” (124). But

all of this changes nothing in the root secularism, which consists in the fundamental rejection of “epiphany”: the primordial intuition that everything in this world and the world itself not only have *elsewhere* the cause and principle of this existence, but are *themselves* the manifestation and presence of that *elsewhere*, and that this indeed is the life of their life, so that disconnected from that “epiphany” all is only darkness, absurdity, and death. (ibid.)

This rejection of the world’s and man’s inherent sacramentality, Schmemmann says, entails reducing symbols to “mere illustrations of ideas and concepts . . .”—for example, like “‘peace,’ ‘justice,’ or even ‘God’” (126).

Finally, there is the link between sacrament and *leitourgia* (liturgy) emphasized by Schmemmann. As indicated, sacramentality implies an “all-embracing ‘world-view’” (cf. 123 *et passim*). But note the consequences when we isolate “the sacrament from the symbol, i.e., from that connection and communication with the whole of reality which are fulfilled in the sacrament” (150). The sacrament becomes “a closed and self-contained ‘means of grace,’

and deprives “the liturgy of its proper function—to connect the sacrament with the Church, the world, and the kingdom, or in other terms, with its ecclesiological, cosmical, and eschatological content and dimension” (150; cf. 123). The liturgy, in a word, is left to mere piety, and human intelligence is released into rationalism (cf. 150, 123).

Thus we have Schmemmann’s summary conception of secularism: it is a negation of the fact that man in all his intellectual and social-ethical activities is ordered to worship and adoration (118). Secularism consists at its heart in a false notion “of man’s relationship not only to God, *but also to the world*” (119, emphasis added).¹⁴

The disconnection between ideas and reality, then, has its roots in the loss of the view that ideas indicate the natural forms of things as related to the creative intelligence of the Creator God. These forms are properly conceived of as words of God, and hence also as the words in and through which creatures first speak to him and move toward him. Ideas in this light are disclosed to be primordially “sacramental.” In revealing the *objective* meaning of things *in themselves*, ideas reveal their meaning as intended *by God*, and thereby what is also at base their *subjective way to God*. Ideas become, in their own proper worldly reality, epiphanies of the transcendent objective meaning that betokens the communication of God and the original-subjective way of our responsive communication with him. Herein is indicated the *primordial natural “sacramentality”* of beings that is taken over and transformed in the *supernatural sacramentality* of the Church.

We may say thus, in sum, in light of Schmemmann, that the disconnection of ideas from reality distorts the heart and soul of both ideas and reality; and that such distortion is best understood in terms of secularism: of the loss of the objective *meaning* of things as *natural words* and *signs* of God that are created in and through, and gathered up in, the *supernatural Word* of God incarnated in Jesus Christ and given sacramental form in the Church’s Eucharist.

14. “But once we discover the true *lex orandi*, the genuine meaning and power of our *leitourgia*, once it *becomes* again the source of an all-embracing world view and the power of living up to it—then and only then the unique antidote to ‘secularism’ shall be found. And there is nothing more urgent today than this rediscovery, and this return—not to the past—but to the light and life, to the truth and grace that are eternally fulfilled by the Church when she becomes—in her *leitourgia*—that which she is” (*FLW*, 134).

II.

Let us return to the question of mercy in light of this reflection on ideas, words, and sacramentality. John introduces his Prologue with the phrase, “In the Beginning was the Word.” The text continues: “and the Word was *with* (pros) God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning *with* God; all things were made through him, and *without* him was made nothing that was made” (Jn 1:1–3, emphasis added). “The Word *became flesh* and *dwelt among us*” (Jn 1:14, emphasis added). These words from John reveal the depth of meaning implied in the statement from St. Paul cited by Benedict and Francis and recorded in the title of John Paul II’s second encyclical: “It is ‘God who is rich in mercy’ (Eph 2:4) whom Jesus Christ has revealed to us . . . , manifested him and made him known to us” (*Dives in misericordia*, 1). God, who is rich, took on our poverty, so that we might become rich with his poverty (cf. *EG*, 198). The sense in which God is rich in mercy, and in which we become rich through God’s poverty, comes into relief when we ponder the link among the phrases expressed by John: the Word who was *with* God from the beginning *was* God; all things were created through him, and *nothing* was created *without* him; and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The main point here is succinctly articulated by Hans Urs von Balthasar in a homily prepared for Trinity Sunday: the Incarnate Word reveals the meaning of God to be *being-with*.¹⁵ I quote:

We suffer *with* Christ, we are crucified *with* him, we die *with* him. Thus Christian ethics [action] means rejoicing *with* those who rejoice, weeping *with* those who weep, simply “being with” all those *with* whom God is. The fact that we did not want to be *with* the Son but crucified him is taken by our redeeming God and used in a deeper context, namely, that the Son took upon himself our refusal to be with him: he was “with” us in this very form. (145)

“Whatever we regard as the ultimate meaning of human life,” says Balthasar, “is fulfilled in the original prototype: in the life of the eternal ‘with’” (144). Balthasar states that the feast of the

15. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “God Is ‘Being With,’” in *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 141–45, at 145.

Trinity is not some recondite mystery; rather it is the sum of all feasts: “The recurring meaning of all feasts [Christmas, Good Friday, Ascension, Pentecost, etc.] [is] God with us; but how could God be with us if the word ‘with’ were not part and parcel of his own being and life?” (142). Balthasar concludes: “At the root of all being whatsoever there is the mystery of an interplay that both presupposes and actually produces a ‘being with.’ Indeed, being itself is nothing other than this mystery. It is the origin and end of everything that participates—however fleetingly and superficially—in being” (145).

The word (*logos*) of God incarnate in Jesus Christ, then, reveals just this “being-with” to be the “form” of God (*morphe theou*: cf. Phil 2:6), of God’s richness as love. It is this richness of God that is to be shared above all with those who are most vulnerable and broken, and “the little ones” who are often invisible. But it is essential to understand the radical and all-inclusive meaning of this richness: God’s communication of richness takes its first form already in his creating beings *ex nihilo*, and naming them with the words called natures.

It is the reality of God as being-with that is the beginning and the end of what is meant by merciful love. This being-with, this merciful love, bears an objectively given form: it is the *word* of God, revealed (a) *in a primordially sacramental way in and as the natural order of creaturely beings*, the order of which is destined to be taken up and transformed (b) *in a properly sacramental way in and as the Church*—in the Eucharist of the Incarnate Word. The pre-sacramental order of creation and the sacramental order of redemption, in their difference within unity, indicate the objective form of God’s merciful love that indeed constitutes me as one *with* whom God has granted a double share in his richness, revealing me to be doubly rich in his mercy.

Excursus

We can summarize our point here as it concerns the unity within difference between creating love and redeeming love in terms of the link between “give” and “forgive” in Eng-

lish.¹⁶ In being created, I am given by God to myself out of nothing—created thus for nothing that is owed to me or that presupposes my contribution. Creation is gratuitous, and is thereby God’s first expression of merciful love. Forgiveness is fully and most properly realized, then, when God “re-creates” me out of the nothingness that is my poverty in being due to sin. “For-giveness” in the literal sense is a giving that is now *completed*, in the face of my loss in being brought about by my sin. It is a *giving* that takes the form of *pardonning* (re-giving) in the face of my failure to receive and realize what I have been given.

Our objective givenness as creaturely beings, then, is rightly understood as a first “moment” within God’s disposition to forgive (redemption), which is already “implicit” in his original meaning as Giver (Creator). There is a real difference between the orders of creation and redemption, even as there is also an original unity by virtue of the utter gratuitousness that characterizes God’s merciful love already in creating (cf. Aquinas, *loc. cit.*, fn. 15). The point of my argument has been to highlight the *objective givenness* of God’s word of love, which is borne in the (primordial) sacramentality of the world of nature, which is taken over and affirmed in an infinitely deeper and greater way as the *objective forgiveness* of God’s Incarnate Word of Love in the (proper) sacramentality of the Church (Penance, Eucharist).

III.

We return to the problem of mercy as a reality enlightened by reason, as framed by Pope Francis.

16. “Give”: from the Old English, *giefan* (German, *geben*), to give, bestow, grant. “Forgive”: from the Old English, *for-giefan* (German, *vergeben*), to give, grant, to pardon (an offense). The “for-” in “forgive” (German *ver-*) is a prefix meaning “away” or “completely.” “Forgiving” can thus rightly be understood as giving completely or all the way through. Cf. in connection with our discussion here the profound reflection by Bishop Stefan Oster of Passau, Germany: “Philosophieren aus dem christlichen Glauben: Ferdinand Ulrich’s Beitrag zu einer biblischen Ontologie,” in Ulrich’s *Gabe und Vergebung: Ein Beitrag zur biblischen Ontologie*, Schriften V, edited with an introduction by Stefan Oster (Einsiedeln, Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 2006), xiii–xxxix, at xxviii–xxx. Cf., e.g., the text from Aquinas cited by Oster: “The idea of mercy (*ratio misericordiae*) . . . is preserved in the change from non-existence to existence (*inquantum res de non esse in esse mutatur*)” (ST I, q. 21, a. 4 ad 4). That is, the idea of mercy is present already in the utter gratuity of the act of creation.

(1) We have argued that we cannot separate God's love and God's *logos*—as expressed in the orders of either nature or grace—if we wish to sustain the rightful sense of the claim that God is *dives in misericordia*. The *author* of mercy, and hence the authority for judging and administering its exercise, lies in the *intelligent Word* of God as love, as objectively participated in by the creature as its nature, and in the Church as the sacrament of the eucharistic sacrifice of Jesus Christ. To abstract “ideas” from their root meaning as words of love in this double sense is thus to fall prey to the trap indicated by Francis, wherein the objectivity signified by “ideas” becomes an empty form imposed from without (nominalism), and the subjectivity expressed by love becomes formless (relativism). This empty objectivity and this formless subjectivity dialectically imply each other. They both signal, albeit from opposite directions, a *reality* no longer *illuminated by reason*—a reality that thus cannot any longer be said to bear *with authority* a call to action in the name of merciful love. What is essential for us to see, in sum, is that the twin reductions of which Francis speaks—that is, into “objectives more ideal than real,” on the one hand, and “dictatorships of relativism” and subjectivism, on the other—are simultaneous with each other, because they ultimately stem from the same source: the separation of God's *Word* from God's *Love* as manifest in the pre-sacramental world of nature and the sacramental Church.

(2) There is frequent reference today to what is called the “law of gradualness” in discussions regarding the Church's mission of mercy, especially in light of the Church's synod on marriage and family. Though expressed in various ways, appeals to this law take the form of encouraging people starting from where they are and accompanying them with patience toward the realization of goals—of “ideals.” Our own argument indeed affirms just this, but with a crucial qualifier. All people to be sure are on a journey of life. But this does not mean that they are simply wandering. What distinguishes journeying from wandering is that the end of life operates (also) as an *immanent* ideal, an “ideal” that is so far integral to my original *reality*. We have argued that it is the “idea” or “form”—that is, the nature—of my being as a creature that indicates the basic direction of *my reality as a subject*: shows from within my inmost subjective depths what I am and what I aim for.

The “gradualness” that has become increasingly common today insists (not wrongly) on the need to recognize “that even those who strive toward a moral ideal tend to fall short; for all of us morality takes time and practice.”¹⁷ Moral theologian David Cloutier, for example, states in this light that the “deliberations of the synod make clear that Francis and many other bishops worry intensely that a focus on certain moral ideals, especially when they sound like a simple ‘no’ to many people, constitutes a barrier to [the] fundamental spiritual encounter with God, in the person of Jesus and the community of the church.” Gradualness in this context, says Cloutier, citing the words of Francis, means at root simply that “God is really at work in the world.” The point, then, is that we should be careful not “to separate the wheat from the weeds too quickly.” We cannot “force the pace of any human process,” because God is at work in these processes. “God is not a far-off deity that does not get involved in the world. . . . The structures of the world are not essentially sinful.”

All of this is important for authentic Christianity. Nonetheless, we interpret it differently from Cloutier. The heart of our argument has been to insist simply that the nearness of God to creatures and all human processes includes a nearness to their nature—after all, the inner nature of each creature is precisely a “sacrament” of God’s love. *What creatures objectively are*, already by virtue of creation, reveals the creature’s *original subjective relation and subjective way* to God. *My nature as a creature is precisely the first expression of the Creator’s merciful love.* In creating us, he does not leave us to our own resources. Our journeying does not involve a wandering whose aims have to be from the beginning and all along the way *invented by us*. Our created nature, on the contrary, which is God’s first way of being *with us*, indicates the *basic “logic”* of our being. God’s new way of being with us in the sacramental Church (Eucharist) does not leave behind or contradict but, on the contrary, presupposes even as it infinitely deepens and transforms this original-creational way of God’s being with us.

The Eucharist of Jesus Christ, then, does indeed reveal God’s infinitely patient (suffering) love in the face of our slowness due to sin. But the crucial point is that, in creating us, he

17. David Cloutier, “Is the Vatican Evolving? Not Like Politicians Do,” *The Washington Post*, 19 October 2014 .

gives us a nature and thereby places *within* us the abiding ideal toward which we always tend: which we always, in our deepest depths, *love and seek*. Indeed, our natural desire for the good that is ultimately God is itself an original participation in God's love operating within us, moving us from within. This so-far-immanent ideal that we call nature, therefore, does not at root repress us or burden us from the outside; on the contrary, it frees us, by virtue of its being a participation in God's creative word of love. It does so, in sum, because God's transcendent logic of love has become an immanent law of our nature in the act of creation.

The problem with Cloutier's version of "gradualness" in this light is that it presupposes a distinctly modern conception of "ideals," in contrast to the conception outlined above in terms of the more ancient Christian tradition. In his argument, "ideals" function more in terms of obligations expressing an imperative conceived outside what man naturally loves (cf., e.g., Kant) than in terms of love's very "logic" (cf., e.g., Augustine and Aquinas).¹⁸

18. It is important to take note of the influence in modern ethical theory, and modern thought generally, of the philosophy of Kant. I have in mind here Kant's construal of moral "ideals," or of the foundations of moral obligation, in terms of something that is other than nature, and that thus does not participate in the desire or love characteristic of nature in classical thought and the main Christian tradition. The problem of mercy identified here in connection with Cloutier's essay remains in principle insoluble as long as we continue to stand under this influence. Balthasar's understanding of human consciousness as at root responsive to the "objective presence" of a person—of the personal love borne in the smile of the mother—is illuminating here (cf. *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991], 613–27). Some such understanding of human-moral action as a response to an objective presence understood to be informed by love lies at the heart of the Catholic ethical tradition as reflected in the following statements, for example: "Since the moral order [nature, natural law] reveals and sets forth the plan of God the Creator, for this very reason it cannot be something that harms man, something impersonal. On the contrary, by responding to the deepest demands of the human being created by God, it places itself at the service of that person's full humanity with the delicate and binding love whereby God himself inspires, sustains and guides every creature towards its happiness . . ." (*Familiaris consortio*, 34). There is such a thing as the "truth of the one human existence within every man, what is referred to in the tradition as the 'nature' of man. We can formulate this . . . on the basis of our belief in creation: . . . In this idea, freedom and community, order and being turned toward the future, are all one thing" (Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004], 254). "Responsibility would then mean living our existence as a response—as a response to what we are in truth" (*ibid.*). "If the Ten Commandments, as expounded by rational understanding,

Cloutier’s gradualness presupposes that “ideals” lie (simply) beyond us, such that they first descend upon us from outside us, and function mostly asymptotically in relation to our actions. They give no indication of participating in God’s word of love in which we share by virtue of creation, and so far of acting first as liberators of our being. On the contrary, they function as external burdens and precisely not (also) as expressions of *our inmost natural desire* that God in his mercy has implanted in us as a way of accompanying us, as his “first” way of remaining near to us.

In a word, it is Cloutier’s modern view of “ideals” and nature, and not the ancient Christian view, that in fact (unwittingly) implies a “pelagian” logic leading to the displacement of God’s merciful love from the heart of moral and Christian life.

There is, to be sure, much here that needs further development. My criticisms do not assume that man’s nature is not always embodied in a singular way and not always affected internally by the conditions of history. Nor do the criticisms deny that man’s nature is always (deeply) weighed down by sin and is ever in a process of journeying. On the contrary, the criticisms presuppose all of this. But recognizing the singular, historical, and sinful conditions of man in his concrete reality scarcely entails a nominalist view of his nature—the nominalist view, that is, which would conceive nature as a name that classifies and defines but remains abstract, empty of concrete reality (“ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism” [EG, 232]). “Ideals” tied to a nominalistic view of nature spawn what is simultaneously (if dialectically) an objectivistic *and* a subjectivistic approach to the demands of an authentically Christian-moral life—and they do so for the same reason: the overlooking of nature as the also-immanent ideal of man that God grants as the first and abiding share in his merciful love, his first way of being-with us and remaining near us, which he continues and infinitely deepens and enriches in the sacraments of Jesus Christ (penance, Eucharist). Cloutier’s argument misses the fundamental point that it is just the objective form

are the answer to the inner demands of our nature, then they are not at the opposite pole to our freedom but are rather the concrete form it takes. They are then the foundation for every law of freedom and are the one truly liberating power in human history” (255). “Law is, therefore, not the opposite of freedom, but its necessary condition; it is indeed constitutive of freedom” (256).

of God's nearness to us in creating our nature that initiates his staying with us that continues to the very end, in an ever-greater way, in response to our constant weakness and sin.

The point here cannot be emphasized enough: God's planting of a natural-universal desire for the transcendent good and ultimately for himself at the heart of each creature, a desire that persists in showing the way back to God despite the weight of sin and the vicissitudes of history, is the supreme-first act of God's merciful love.

Authentic pastoral activity by members of the Church, which will express various ways of "'being with' all those *with* whom God [in Jesus Christ] is" (Balthasar, "God Is 'Being With,'" 145), must always presuppose, and be understood as extending and giving further concrete embodiment to, what is contained in this original natural—open to supernatural—sacramentality of God's merciful love.

Francis does indeed say what Cloutier quotes him as saying. But Cloutier does not reflect on the problem of the disconnection of ideas and reality that in fact informs Francis's explicit rejection of both objectivism and subjectivism in our approach to mercy and the Christian-moral life. What I have argued in this light is that, if we are to sustain Francis's rejection of these—and to sustain mercy thus as a reality enlightened by reason: by the Incarnate Word of God—we must not only tie ideas intrinsically to reality; we must in so doing and by logical implication also integrate reality with ideas. I have attempted to show that all of this can be done only by retrieving ideas in their root sense as the natural forms of things expressing the words spoken by God, words that are thus symbolic, "natural sacraments" of God apt for participation and transformation in the supernatural sacrament of God realized in and as the Church.

My argument, in a word, has been that we can truly meet persons where they are only if we meet them in their created natures-in-history.

IV.

Let us highlight in conclusion what is an important, if perhaps surprising, implication of our argument. Francis calls for the Church to renew her missionary task, and he centers this task in

the merciful love of God. Realization of the missionary task, he says, will require living out the principle of the primacy of reality over ideas, while conceiving of mercy as a reality illuminated by reason. We have proposed that the problem of the disconnection between ideas and reality has much to do with the shift in the understanding of creation emergent in modern Western thought and culture—in our way of understanding things and their relation to God and his creative love. If our argument with respect to the principles affirmed by Francis is sound, it follows that we must address Francis’s concerns also in the context of an examination of the new patterns of philosophical and religious thought—and indeed of the new notion of *scientia* (knowledge and science)—developed in the modern period. *This will entail examination of the institution where reflection on such issues has its natural home—namely, the university.*

The problem of the disconnection of ideas from reality is, *eo ipso*, a matter of how we approach reality, and so far also of how we think about reality, in its relation to the creative love of God. Problems with respect to the Church’s task of communicating God’s merciful love thus do indeed pertain essentially to the Church’s engagement with socioeconomic and political institutions. But, as the foregoing argument shows, such engagement rightly undertaken must be informed by a *right sense of ideas in their relation to reality as created by God*. The modern academy has played a central historical role in framing the prevalent state of the question regarding this relation, in ways that reinforce the separation of ideas and reality and thus marginalize the meaning of mercy by undermining its nature as “a reality enlightened by reason.” Our final proposal, then, is that the Church’s realization of merciful love in social institutions will demand realization of this love also in academic institutions, above all in the Catholic university—as an accompanying and inner condition for administering merciful love as a “reasonable” and not merely “idealistic” reality at the heart of social institutions.

The needed reform of the modern university must begin by seeking to recover ideas in their deepest reality as the natural forms of things that express the creative intelligence of God, and thus in their reality as primordial sacraments of God’s word of love. Insofar as we think of the mission of love in the modern Catholic university, we tend today to think most immediately of

the university's celebration of the liturgy, its commitment to social service, and its fostering of community among its members. All of this is indispensable, of course. But as customarily conceived, it still assumes love to be a merely subjective reality rather than also an objective word. It fails to understand God's creative love as intrinsic to ideas and beings in their proper integrity, and thus to the work that specifies the objective order of the university as such. It does not yet make the mission of love intrinsic to the mission of truth as this latter mission arises in different (analogous) ways in each of the modern disciplines—in the way each understands itself as *scientia*, as knowledge or science in the modern sense. In short, it does not yet show that it understands that liturgy, social service, and community among members of the university are all themselves bound up intrinsically with the problem of (re)integrating the life of the mind—thinking—into *reality* rightly conceived in terms of a creation that “sacramentally” symbolizes the word of God's love in which all things act and move and have their being.

Benedict XVI said more than once during his pontificate that the university needs today to take up a “comprehensive study of the crisis of modernity.”¹⁹ A crucial part of this task, he said, consists in “broadening . . . our understanding of rationality” (ibid.). Benedict develops this point in his well-known lecture at the University of Regensburg, in which he argues that reason needs to be opened up to the *logos* of love revealed in Jesus Christ.²⁰ The “critique of modern reason,” he says, “has nothing to do with putting the clock back before the Enlightenment and rejecting the insights of the modern age.” On the contrary, “the positive aspects of modernity,” he says, “are to be acknowledged unreservedly.” He insists only that such a critique needs to go to

19. Benedict XVI, Address to the Participants in the First European Meeting of University Lecturers (23 June 2007).

20. Thus Benedict states in his Regensburg lecture: “God acts, *sum logo*, with *logos*. *Logos* means both reason and word—a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason. John thus spoke the final word on the biblical concept of God. . . . In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* is God. . . . The encounter between the biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance. . . . Certainly, love, as Saint Paul says, ‘transcends’ knowledge . . . (cf. Eph 3:19); nonetheless it continues to be the love of the God who is *Logos*” (Meeting with the Representatives of Science [University of Regensburg, 12 September 2006]).

the very roots of the scientific ethos—its “will to be obedient to the truth.” The needed critique, whose difficulty of realization can scarcely be overstated, is thus meant not to negate reason but on the contrary to rediscover its wholeness.

Our argument has been that we will realize Pope Francis’s call for a renewal of merciful love only proportionately to our ability to live radically obedience to the truth as the word of God’s love: to live and think radically truth *in love* and love *in truth*. Only a missionary task so understood bears the principled capacity for reintegrating ideas and reality that is adequate to the words of *Lumen gentium*: we are called to share love with our whole heart and our whole soul and our whole mind (40), to proclaim it to all human beings, and to include every aspect of each human being, so that God and his love might be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:28).

In summary:

1. A culture that has lost its mind—uncoupled ideas and reality by virtue of its loss simultaneously of nature as the pre-sacramental word of God’s love and of the Church as the sacramental Word of God’s Love (Eucharist)—lacks the principled capacity to recognize and thus administer mercy as a reality illuminated by reason.

2. The Church’s missionary task in this light, which at root is always the same, nonetheless consists today in an especially urgent way in keeping her word: preserving nature as the pre-sacrament, and the Church as the sacrament, of the Word of God’s Love incarnated in Jesus Christ.

3. The authority (*auctor*) for judging in matters of mercy rests with God’s Word of Love, and thus also with nature as the pre-sacrament, and the Church as sacrament, of this love. Indeed, it is this authority carried “sacramentally” (in radically distinct ways) in nature and the Church that itself demands *remaining with* every human being to the end. □

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