

CONSECRATION AND HUMAN ACTION: THE MORAL LIFE AS RESPONSE

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“The responses of Christ and Mary, precisely as poor, virginal, and obedient, possess universal significance, that is to say, are crucial for understanding the meaning and form of the human response to God.”

The consecrated state begins and ends in the yeses of Christ and Mary. Christ's yes is inscribed in his Incarnation and death on the Cross, his humiliation and sacrifice for the sake of his bride the Church, his not deeming “equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Phil 2:6). He takes on both the ontological poverty of the creature and its expression in the lived circumstances of poverty among an obscure and powerless people as the only adequate means of expressing the riches of God.¹ The three evangelical counsels that together offer the fullness of consecration participate in this paradox and in the virginal and fruitful giving-of-self entailed in Christ's nuptials with his Church and obedient carrying out of the Father's will.

The counsels' foundation is clear in Mary's yes as well. Mary's virginity is inseparable, as Hans Urs von Balthasar reminds us, from the Incarnation and therefore from God's self-disclosure in Christ. We can

¹*Redemptionis donum*, 12 (1984, hereinafter cited in text as “RD”).

see the depth of this inseparability in the fact that God awaits and relies on Mary's freedom. He does not work the Incarnation of his Son in her womb without her consent. At the same time, her consent is embodied in her virginity. Pope John Paul II simply elaborates a traditional teaching when he emphasizes the nuptial or spousal character of this fruitful consent:

Mary accepted her election as Mother of the Son of God, guided by spousal love, the love which totally "consecrates" a human being to God. By virtue of this love, Mary wished to be always and in all things "given to God," living in virginity.²

The apparent paradox of Mary's virginal and nuptial yes offers the source and meaning of the paradoxical fruitfulness in the virginal sponsality of the consecrated life. Thus, her nuptial-virginal yes bears a positive rather than a negative or dialectical relationship to her motherhood. She is not mother *despite* being virgin. Her virginity is rather the cause of her motherhood.³ For this reason, Mary's yes constitutes, in union with that of her Son, the source and foundation of the Church, where the Church "becomes the womb for all that is in her," "the place of the Incarnation of God, of his descent into the flesh of the Virgin and into his own flesh."⁴

If the yeses of Christ and Mary give birth to and nourish the consecrated state, it is because the three counsels constitute a direct and visible participation in the fundamental "act" of Christ and Mary, the

²*Redemptoris Mater*, 39 (1987). The tight unity of the specific vocation of consecration and the universal vocation of "the Christian state of life" suggests the interiorly nuptial character of the *sequela Christi* as such. That the human vocation is structurally nuptial, of course, finds support in Scripture. Consider the entire legacy of the prophets' use of the analogy of marriage for Yahweh's stormy relationship with Israel (see, e.g., Hos 1-3; Is 54:1-17; Is 62:1-5; Jer 3; Ez 16), culminating in the repeated New Testament use of the image of "the Bridegroom" for Christ (see, e.g., Mt 9:15; Mk 2:19-20; Lk 5:34-35; Jn 3:29; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:27; Rev 19:7-8, 21:2, and 9).

³Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Layman and the Church," trans. Brian McNeil, in *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 315-331, at 330 (emphasis original); id., *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 205. Cf. also Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 208-212.

⁴Balthasar, "The Layman and the Church," 315.

act to which their entire beings are devoted. This participation, the tradition tells us, means following “more closely” in the footsteps of Christ and imitating the “transparency” of Mary’s action. Along with Christ and Mary, the consecrated person’s entire life and person are given over to the will of the Father. The whole of such a person’s life, in other words, becomes a “yes.”

It is beyond dispute, however, that these yeses not only offer the concrete form of the consecrated state’s three counsels, but that in doing so they also offer the concrete form and content—a life lived according to the ethos “God first”—of the Christian moral life as such. Indeed, this “ethos” (which, after all, arises from the necessity of living one’s life in accordance with the whole of reality in its concrete exigency) is not only the foundation of Christian morality, but is therefore the fullness of the moral life of all humanity. If the yeses of Christ and Mary constitute the source of the consecrated state, then they also possess a foundational significance for the human response to the Second Vatican Council’s “universal call to holiness” or *caritatis perfectionem*. As *Lumen gentium* puts it, there is “a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity.”⁵ They are the foundational yeses given “on behalf of” all humanity and human nature as such, constituting, precisely in their concrete form as poor, virginal, and obedient, the condition for the possibility of the human response to God’s self-disclosure and initiative in Christ. They cannot be only a model to be imitated by a religious elite, a particularly severe regimen for personal perfection that in the end has little practical application to human nature or life and its activities as a whole. Were this the case, the consecrated state could be conveniently dismissed as “irrelevant” to most people’s lives. It would constitute a kind of insular subset of the entire *ecclesia*. And if this were true, the emphasis on the consecrated state’s uniqueness would end in a perverse marginalization of its significance. Indeed, it might then appear to be a theoretically expendable feature of the Church, perhaps a holdover from another age.

In several crucial passages of his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, on the foundations of the moral life, John Paul II relates the

⁵*Lumen gentium*, 32. Of course, *Lumen gentium*’s universal call to *caritatis perfectionem* is not an invention of the council Fathers. It is rather a restatement of, and perhaps a new focus on, a constant and central feature of the entire tradition. See, for example, *ST II-II*, q. 184, a. 3.

basic meaning of the consecrated state to the inner structure of the entire moral life. The pope begins by emphasizing what I have just suggested, namely that the moral life, as a whole and in all of its particularities, is most fundamentally a “response,” whether positive or negative, “due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man.”⁶ As he tells us, the real question of the rich young man—and by extension the question that should be at the center of moral theology—concerns “the full meaning of life” (VS, 7), a meaning that can only be found in turning to God. Later the pope offers further clarification regarding the content of this response. As he explains, the basic structure of the response called for from the rich young man—“go,” “sell,” “give,” “follow”—is that of the moral life as such. It is not, therefore, “restricted to a small group of individuals.”

The invitation, “go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor,” and the promise “you will have treasure in heaven,” are meant for everyone, because they bring out the full meaning of the commandment of love for neighbor, just as the invitation which follows, “Come, follow me,” is the new, specific form of the commandment of love of God. [VS, 18, emphasis in original]

Or for example,

*The way and at the same time the content of this perfection consists in the following of Jesus, *sequela Christi*, once one has given up one’s own wealth and very self. . . . It is Jesus himself who takes the initiative and calls people to follow him. [VS, 19]*

It is significant, of course, that the pope has placed these passages at the beginning of his encyclical on the foundations of universal morality. Because the call to holiness or the perfection of love— however decisively embodied it may be in consecration—is universal in its demands, it is also at the heart of all Christian morality.

It would seem, therefore, that the concrete form of the yeses of Christ and Mary shows us not only the character or basic structure of the consecrated state as the paradigmatic response to Christ’s call to follow, but also—analogously—the structure of *any* adequate response

⁶*Veritatis splendor*, 10 (1993, hereinafter cited in text as “VS”).

to Christ's call. The end of the moral life generally, and the meaning of the universal call to the perfection of love, is to give such a response.

Clearly, the discussion up to now entails a certain tension. On the one hand, the precise form of the "yeses" of Christ and Mary is the form of life of those members of the Church who commit the whole of their lives by means of the three evangelical vows. Together, these constitute religious "consecration"—that is to say, the state of being "set aside" or of "belonging" "entirely" or "exclusively" to God (RD, 3, 7, 8, 11). Hence, the very notion of "consecration" indicates a special relationship with the Lord and a unique task within the Church as a whole. We are faced with the problem, therefore, of clarifying the specificity of this consecration. This issue turns on how we understand consecration, precisely in its role as the "state of perfection," in light of the simultaneous "universal call to perfection."

On the other hand, the "concrete form" of Christ's and Mary's yeses—that is to say, precisely that they are embodied in time and space as virginity, obedience, and poverty—would also seem to possess universal significance. The poverty, virginity, and obedience of Christ and Mary constitute the concrete and fundamental form of response—the yeses—not only of those who have entered the state of perfection, but also of human nature itself (and finally of the entire cosmos). On this basis, they are also the responses given "on behalf of" every human person. We are therefore faced with the problem of specifying and clarifying the precise way in which the yeses of Christ and Mary pertain to human life and all of its activities. Resolution of this issue turns on the meaning we give to the "on behalf of" or the content we give to the "vicarious" nature of Christ's and Mary's yeses. Certainly, this vicariousness does not imply a simple passivity or a lack of personal activity on the part of the faithful and the rest of humanity. Rather, the moral life itself, in all of its activities, must in some way "participate" in the vicariousness of Christ's and Mary's yeses. It is a commonplace, of course, to speak of the necessity for all of the faithful to live according to the "spirit of the counsels." Our question, however, is what this phrase means. How, in other words, do the faithful appropriate the virginal, poor, obedient yeses of Christ and Mary?

Our basic question is, in short, how can we further specify both the particularity of the consecrated state and the universality of its interior meaning for the Christian life as a whole?

1. *Christ's and Mary's yeses as "universal"*

If the responses of Christ and Mary, precisely as poor, virginal, and obedient, possess universal significance, that is to say, are crucial for understanding the meaning and form of the human response to God, this indicates more than that these responses are given—externally—on behalf of the rest of humanity. More concretely, they disclose the inner form of the historical response of humanity as a whole and, as we have already suggested, the concrete form, meaning, and requirements of *any* adequate response. In order to understand this claim, we should consider several preliminary points.

First, the “universal call to holiness,” as well as *Gaudium et spes*’ teaching that Christ “has united himself with each man,”⁷ is grounded in the Incarnation’s taking up of human nature. This universality is described in a particularly suggestive passage by the pope:

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. The Incarnation, then, also has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension. The “first-born of all creation,” becoming incarnate in the individual humanity of Christ, unites himself in some way with the entire reality of man, which is also “flesh”—and in this reality with all “flesh,” with the whole of creation.⁸

Of course, this characterization of the Incarnation’s universality effectively presupposes the universality of Mary’s yes as well. As St. Thomas tells us, Mary’s consent, as Virgin, is the consent for—stands in the place of—the whole of human nature (*consensus virginis loco totius humanae naturae*).⁹

⁷*Gaudium et spes*, 22: “Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare. For, by his incarnation, he, the son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man.”

⁸*Dominum et vivificantem*, 50 (1986, emphasis in original).

⁹ST III, q. 30, a. 1, cited in Balthasar, “The Layman in the Church,” 315.

Because Christ's and Mary's yeses stand at the beginning of the Incarnation and the Church, they also stand at the beginning of the entire sacramental order, whose source is "the flesh of Christ (as a historical, Eucharistic, and Mystical Body)."¹⁰ On this basis they constitute the beginning of the Christian life as a whole, offering its concrete and original form. Thus, Balthasar speaks of the "supra-sacramental" character of Christ's and Mary's virginal yeses¹¹ and of their being "*forma sui et totius*."¹² The Church extends Christ's bodily presence through the work of the Holy Spirit to every corner of the world and to every moment of history. As *Lumen gentium* tells us, the Church, as the Body of Christ, is the "universal sacrament of salvation."¹³ She mediates God's call and grace in Christ not only to Christians, but to the peoples of all times and all places—not only to those who for whatever reason have not explicitly responded, but even to those who take a positive stand in opposition to the Gospel and the Church. If, therefore, human destiny is mediated by Christ through the Church as a universal sacrament to all of humanity, the yeses of Christ and Mary are the concrete foundation for the possibility of every personal yes in the world.¹⁴ In taking up all of human nature, the yeses of Christ and Mary take up every possibility of its concrete development through freedom and its expansion in time and space.

¹⁰Balthasar, "The Layman in the Church," 315.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 205.

¹³*Lumen gentium*, 48.

¹⁴If we follow Balthasar's line of reasoning a little further, then, all creaturely commitment and activity are given their fullness and sacramental meaning by the virginity, obedience, and poverty of Christ and Mary. Paradoxically, perhaps, one of the most striking examples of this is the sacrament of matrimony, which like the counsels inaugurates a Christian state of life and the total commitment that this state implies. Since Christ's and Mary's virginity take up and hand over "all flesh" to the Father, it offers the condition for the possibility of marriage's constituting a sacramental state of life—that is to say, an ecclesial reality in the fullest sense—and therefore as a "self"-offering through the mediation of another. This mediation means that the "self"-offering is transformed into a "we"-offering to God and to all others. Hence, this crucially important state of life—the state to which the vast majority of the faithful are called—finds its source and foundation in the virginal nuptiality of Christ and Mary. The same point could be made, analogously, regarding each of the sacraments and, indeed, every commitment and activity of Christian life.

Our second point follows from the first. In taking into their scope all of “human reality,” the “all flesh” and “*locū totius*” of Christ’s and Mary’s yeses also take up and disclose, in their own “activity,” the final significance of all human action. As an initial matter, we might ask in what sense the poverty, virginity, and obedience of Christ’s and Mary’s yeses are a form of “activity.” The three counsels are usually, and rightly, associated with contemplation. Contemplation, however, is more than simple passivity before God. Indeed, the contemplative life of its very nature contains the most profound and fruitful activity, although this activity is contained within and subordinated to the pure disponibility entailed in the nature of the counsels. Just as surely as Mary’s Immaculate Conception and fiat are both hers and a gift (she *is* sinless and her yes *is* an act of her “autonomous” freedom) and a proleptic participation in the graces of her Son’s death on the Cross, so also the relationship between action and contemplation is a polarity of such profound integrity that each pole points to and offers the deepest meaning of the other.¹⁵ For this reason, Christ’s and Mary’s yeses entail both contemplative waiting and also their activity. Poverty, virginity, and obedience are therefore activity in the sense that they constitute an embodied “yes,” an offering of one’s entire being and bodily existence, to God. Christ’s and Mary’s responses, precisely as virginal, poor, and obedient, are therefore “action” in the truest and most penetrating sense.¹⁶

The yeses of Christ and Mary, then, disclose the final meaning of human action precisely because they are its fullness. Whatever

¹⁵Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 182, a. 4. Balthasar offers a friendly criticism and deepening of Thomas’ argument: “The Christian is, in the first place, Mary, who in contrast with Christ as God and man, represents the unity of action and contemplation in a pure creature. . . . Both as a woman and as a creature, and also (as Scheeben says) as the archetype of the Church, contemplation is her chief concern; her cooperation consists in acceptance, holding herself in readiness as the vessel of the Word. Her action, therefore, itself has a pronounced contemplative character. Over and above this, she completes, as a woman and helper, the work of her Son as man. During the time of her contemplation, she is intensely active, in order to foster her contemplation; during the time of her action, she is intent on contemplation, so that prayer may accompany her action. Only in the Passion, when all distinction and priority as to action and contemplation finally disappear, does her hour and that of the Son coincide perfectly” (“Action and Contemplation,” in *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989], 227–240, at 237).

¹⁶Balthasar, “Action and Contemplation,” 238.

humanity may do outside of their action is, in fact, for all that but a shadow of this fullness. In constituting the fundamental response of human nature, they take into themselves, as it were, all the possibilities for an adequate response to God's "gratuitous initiatives." They therefore ask to be recapitulated in every human life, in every freedom, in every action. As such, they offer the inner form of every yes, precisely as it is manifested in human activity, in all of its individual and personal character.¹⁷ Indeed, we might say that this "offering" of the inner form of an adequate human response is in fact an invitation to men and women to give their consent to being formed by the yeses of Christ and Mary. In particular, the consecrated state exhibits the consent to having one's freedom and activity determined "by"—or better, "within"—the form of life inaugurated by these yeses.

Third, these yeses, particularly as virginal,¹⁸ are *embodied* yeses

¹⁷As Balthasar puts it: "All Christian activity is the incarnation of the invisible grace in the visibility of the world: the activity of parents for their children; of the educators who have to give form to the noblest material; of the doctors, lawyers and judges, thinkers and planners, authors, publishers, and booksellers" ("The Layman and the Church," 315).

¹⁸While an argument may be made for the priority of each of the counsels, there is reason to focus on virginity, at least for present purposes. As John Paul II argues in his 1984 Apostolic Exhortation on the religious life, *Redemptiois donum*, the key to an adequate understanding of the consecrated life is that it makes Christ one's "only spouse"; its very significance lies in bringing about an "exclusive" and nuptial belonging (cf. RD, 3, 5, 8, 11). He then goes on to say that virginity "is addressed in a particular way to the love of the human heart. It places greater emphasis on the spousal character of this love, while poverty and still more obedience seem to emphasize primarily the aspect of redemptive love contained in religious consecration" (RD, 11). Thus, for the pope, it would seem that consecrated virginity most completely and clearly signifies the fundamental meaning of the consecration's "exclusive belonging" or "being set aside for God." He states this priority in even more explicit terms in his 1996 Apostolic Exhortation on the consecrated life, *Vita consecrata*. There he tells us: "The Church has always taught the pre-eminence of perfect chastity for the sake of the Kingdom, and rightly considers it the 'door' of the whole consecrated life" (VC, 32, citations omitted). Or again, he tells us that the consecrated life as a whole is a development of "baptismal consecration" into a "radical response in the following of Christ through acceptance of the evangelical counsels, the first and essential of which is the sacred bond of chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" (VC, 14). He later tells us that consecration "foretells" the resurrected state "above all by means of *the vow of virginity*, which tradition has

in the fullest sense of the term. Christ's yes begins by taking on all human nature, "all flesh." Mary's yes takes the form of receiving the Son of God into her womb, to being *Theotokos* in all of its corporeal-spiritual significance. Indeed, the inner meaning of Mary's virginity is that it constitutes an exclusive belonging to the one Bridegroom in order to bear the Incarnate Son. Mary's virginity is the handing over of her entire person precisely in her full bodily reality, with its "nuptial meaning,"¹⁹ to the Lord. In this way, virginity shows us that the body is not a sub-rational limit imposed on human nature and individual freedom.²⁰ It is the ground of human giving. Virginity is essential to Mary's pure disponibility, and is therefore essential to her role in the Incarnation of God. In disclosing for us the character—the inner form—of an adequate response to God's call, Mary's embodied yes shows us that this response is necessarily an offering of every particularity, every action or commitment of what is seemingly locked irretrievably in the passing in and out of existence of the temporal, spatial, and material world.

2. Vicariousness and human action

a. *Moral action as response.* While it is very clear that the moral life is at least tacitly a response to God's initiatives (how else could the tradition relate it to salvation?), moral theologians have not typically focused on this starting point. They are instead accustomed to highlighting the fact that action gives the human person his moral character, that his moral choices qualify him as good or bad in absolute terms. In a noted passage from *Veritatis splendor*, John Paul II quotes a telling statement of Gregory of Nyssa, according to whom "we are in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decisions" (VS, 71). Certainly this self-determining character of human action cannot be gainsaid. Without it, human action would not be

always understood as *an anticipation of the world to come*, already at work for the total transformation of man" (VC, 26, emphasis original).

¹⁹John Paul II, General Audience (9 January 1980), in *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline, 1997), 60–63.

²⁰See generally, David L. Schindler, "The Significance of World and Culture for Moral Theology: *Veritatis Splendor* and the 'Nuptial-Sacramental' Nature of the Body," *Communio* 31 (Spring 2004): 111–142.

“moral” in the proper sense of the term. An exclusive emphasis on this self-determining or self-creational aspect, however, seems to capture only part of moral action’s full significance. For one thing, it tends to obscure the basic anthropological starting point implied by fundamental Christian teachings such as those concerning the gift-character of both human existence and human destiny.²¹ It tends to obscure the significance of the fact that the exercise of human freedom both belongs to the creature and yet depends on the gift of God’s invitation to attain fulfillment in its end. While, as we have already noted, *Veritatis splendor* emphasizes the fundamental character of God’s call and the human response (e.g., VS, 10, 19), moral theologians sometimes treat moral action as though it were the pure possession and exclusive activity of the human actor in abstraction from human destiny and the concrete human end in the perfection of love.

What is often neglected, therefore, is the significance of the fact that the moral life itself is a response to the human vocation, given concretely in the person of Christ and through his Bride the Church. This neglect sometimes results in a kind of temporal nominalism, according to which individual actions are viewed separately from the meaning of life as a whole, severed from their roots in the classical

²¹*Veritatis splendor*, for example, criticizes the tendency of transcendental fundamental option theory to effect an extrinsicism between everyday actions in time and space (categorical freedom of choice) and basic freedom (transcendental freedom) in which the relationship with God resides (VS, 65–67). Similarly, the encyclical criticizes proportionalist theories of moral action, which tend to reduce the object of choice to a mere “happening.” In doing so, the encyclical argues that proportionalists have effectively given the object meaning only in view of a moral actor’s intention, reducing its fully human character and detaching its goodness from the Good (VS, 78–79). Likewise, the encyclical responds to the tendency to render moral reasoning (*recta ratio*) and moral knowledge (conscience) “autonomous,” in the sense that they would be abstracted from faith and salvation. Thus, the Church’s moral magisterium would have no particular authority, except as one member of society as a whole (VS, 37). Each of these developments in contemporary moral theology, the pope tells us, has the tendency of abstracting moral action from man’s destiny in God’s eternal love. The upshot is that moral behavior is confined to the events of this world, while salvation and the working out of human destiny is a question for faith alone. Cf. Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. William May (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 92–114.

question of the good life.²² One result is a dualism between morality and spirituality, a dualism that effectively impoverishes our understanding of both.²³ Even more fundamentally, however, a focus on moral action's movement toward human fulfillment or goods, in isolation from its inner form as response, tends toward a falsely "self-centered" understanding of human freedom and action. In the deepest sense, the vocation of human nature itself is constituted by a call to what is utterly beyond the horizon of its expectations or powers. In the language of Thomas, the significance of human action is that it constitutes the content of the *motus creaturae rationalis in Deo*.²⁴ Most fundamentally, then, human action concerns "movement" in response to God's call.

The human response is therefore the interaction between what the pope refers to variously as "aspiration," "longing," "yearning," "desire" (cf., e.g., VS, 1, 7, 16, 17), and the loving gift of another that reveals this aspiration or longing and calls it beyond itself to the fullness of love. It is a "quiet searching and interior prompting" that "sets freedom in motion." Pursuit of the "full meaning of life" constitutes a search for "the absolute Good which attracts us and beckons us; it is the echo of a call from God who is the origin and goal of man's life" (VS, 7). It is important to keep in mind that this "aspiration" cannot be a superficial aspect of the person's emotional or willed desires. Rather, it indicates the very structure of the human creature itself. Hence, the disclosure of this "longing" in Christ constitutes a revelation of the depths of man, of his living mystery.²⁵ The human creature, as *imago Dei*, is apt to receive and respond to this call (he is *capax Dei*), and therefore, in some sense everything that we

²²Cf. Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), esp. 327–353.

²³That the "high end" of morality, the *sequela Christi*, discloses the inner ordination of human morality as such would seem to follow from the teaching in *Gaudium et spes*, 22, that the revelation of Christ reveals man to himself. The consequence of denying this would be the classic dualisms between "spirituality" and "morality," "Christian morality" and "human morality," the "state of perfection" and the "lay state," and so forth. Cf. Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 257.

²⁴ST I, q. 2, prologue; cf. Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues*, 48.

²⁵*Gaudium et spes*, 22.

can say about the creature in his basic structure and in the structure of his action is shaped by this “aptness.”

Moral action necessarily possesses, therefore, what we might call a “bi-polarity.” From its very beginnings, human action is always a tacit attempt to “determine” oneself, to find in lived reality and to possess for oneself some fullness of life, some meaning and lasting significance in personal existence. With the “hindsight” of revelation, we can see that this “tacit attempt” represents, from its beginnings throughout man’s historical existence, a search for eternal life and salvation. This perennial striving constitutes the foundation of human action, although the attempt is normally tacit and plays itself out in infinitely diverse ways, remaining hidden prior to Christ’s disclosure of man’s “most high calling.”²⁶ In all of the particular goods after which the human person strives, and in which he possesses genuine fulfillment, there is nevertheless a perceived insufficiency. They therefore point human striving beyond themselves in its quest for the fullness of life. Action necessarily takes its shape and meaning, therefore, within the necessary tension inscribed in this movement from aspiration to destiny, within the structure of call and response. Thus, moral action and the “aspiration” at its heart not only constitute movement towards fulfillment or the unfolding of nature’s innate tendencies. Moral action and human aspiration are first a gift and a capacity for participation in

²⁶Ibid. As Henri de Lubac puts it, revelation, “by setting the notion of the infinite being and our relationship with him at the center of the whole revealed idea of God, makes us understand our nature, our destiny, the nature of the material world, of morality, and of the history of mankind” (*The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed [New York: Crossroad Herder, 1998, reprint from 1967], 224–225). According to de Lubac, this does not mean that the *desiderium naturale* and God’s call have no effect on man until he encounters Christian revelation. Until the existence and meaning of this “desire” are revealed to man, it is experienced (to the extent it is experienced) as an unspecified, wandering “need” or emptiness. Therefore, history exhibits all of the signs of human seeking for a fulfillment that in reality is beyond the horizon of human powers. The ancients “may well have felt some effect” from “that fundamental aptitude, that call within nature, that hidden but active reality.” However, “they did not as yet have the means of interpreting correctly what they felt. They knew neither what it was they were looking for, nor how to look. They were quite unable to distinguish the real meaning of ‘that organic spark of uncertainty, of longing and of discontent which lies at the depths of mankind’s inmost being’” (*Mystery of the Supernatural*, 131).

and “consent”²⁷ to the gratuitous invitation that is held out in the call and which takes its concrete and historical form in the *sequela Christi*.

What is important about the moral character generated through my free choice, then, is not most fundamentally what it makes me to be as a moral actor, but what it makes me to be in relation to God and in God to all others. What is most important about moral action is that it serves as the “content” of the response to God’s invitation. To the extent, therefore, that human action can be qualified as good or evil—which is fundamental to its being human action properly speaking—it always constitutes a kind of “commitment.” Indeed, the word “response” already suggests, through its Latin root, the idea of commitment or “pledge.” A “response” is a “pledge-in-return.”²⁸

Furthermore, entailed implicitly in this “commitment” or “pledge” is a taking up of the person in his entirety. At a time when there is a tendency to disembodify our understanding of human action and the response to God’s call, virginity in particular discloses the significance of the body for the human response.²⁹ The *yeses* of Mary and Christ show that this response cannot simply be an “interior” or transcendental assent whose relationship with everyday or categorical activity can be attenuated (cf. VS 65). Rather, the *yes* of the individual believer must be an embodied *yes*, an embodied giving and having-been-given away. Hence, every action of the human person constitutes a reaffirmation, a living out of the act of faith that constitutes this *yes* in time and space. Each concrete action is “self-determining” precisely in relation to human destiny. Each is decisive as a concrete response to God’s invitation in all of its implications for what it is to be human,

²⁷Cf. D.C. Schindler, “Freedom Beyond Our Choosing: Augustine on the Will and Its Objects,” *Communio* 29 (Winter 2002): 618–653, discussing the inner form of freedom as consent.

²⁸The Latin *respondere* is related to *spondere*, which is to pledge, promise, or vow. The idea of “response” therefore suggests an answering “promise,” “pledge,” or “vow.” Perhaps it is not too great a stretch to say that the idea of “response” also possesses echoes of nuptiality. We can see this when we consider the English words “spouse” or “spousal” or “sponsality,” which likewise come from *spondere*. The “response” of the moral life is to follow and cling to God in a way that is analogous to the spousal relationship.

²⁹*Veritatis splendor* criticizes both “transcendental” fundamental option theory and proportionalist theories as disembodiments of moral action (VS, 48). See also D. L. Schindler, “The Significance of World and Culture for Moral Theology,” 111–142.

precisely in the quotidian existence as *corpore et anima unus* (VS, 48). When we understand moral action in this way, we can then see it in its totality and in each of its particularities—as action here and now—qualifying a life as good or bad. Each action possesses an eternal significance because each action is a response to the invitation held out by God to the “time” of moral action, granting it eternal significance precisely in its embodied character.

b. *The structure of moral action.* Now, if moral action is most fundamentally an embodied response to God’s gratuitous initiatives, a tacit pledge of one’s whole being, it is also dependent on God’s initiating activity. Again, consecration discloses to us the meaning of any adequate response. In its proper sense, consecration cannot exist outside of the call given to humanity in Christ. It is not simply a chosen lifestyle, adopted for the “goods” it might offer. It cannot be weighed against the potential “goods” of another state of life. It cannot be “chosen”—strictly speaking—as a means for achieving individual aims, however lofty or “religious” those aims might be.³⁰ It is, rather, an eschatological waiting.

When we speak of someone “choosing” consecration, we need to keep in mind that, while this manner of speaking may have its validity, it is in fact truer to say that this “choosing” is a consent (again, it genuinely does entail the activity of the person) “to” having been chosen (it is even more deeply and originally a gift). By its very nature, then, consecration is dependent on the call and “gratuitous initiative” of God. Consecration is only possible, at its deepest level, given this initiative. Accordingly, it is constituted within the basic structure of an initial call, which in the order of God’s intention has already constituted the interior meaning and élan of human action. In short, it entails the very idea of the presence and activity of God and concretely mediates the meaning of the response to God’s initiatives, as that meaning is disclosed in the *yeses* of Christ and Mary. Again, Mary’s fiat is the clearest example of this gratuity in self-possession. Her fiat is both her own and proleptically given to her by the graces of the Cross. But this movement is evident in Christ’s action as well, which is a disclosure of the Father (Jn 14:8–11).

As an initial matter, then, we might ask how this “commitment” or “pledge,” understood as a gift of one’s whole (embodied) being to God and to neighbor, represented paradigmatically in

³⁰Cf. Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 235.

consecration, is possible at all. It is easy to see how a mother could give her child a “gift” which, at least at first glance, is merely exterior to the being of the two of them. But it is not so easy to understand (although we habitually employ the language of “self-gift”) how that same mother is able to give herself away to her child.³¹ To find oneself in giving oneself, “to make a sincere gift of oneself,” as *Gaudium et spes*, 24, puts it, if we are to understand it in more than a purely metaphorical and reductive sense, must entail the ability to do so. But this implies that I possess some standing point “beyond” myself. It implies that I am able to take up all that I am so that this “all” might be handed over to another.

Now, on a moment’s reflection, I realize that this taking up of my entire self is precisely what I cannot do. First of all, I realize I am really in charge of very little of what constitutes the deepest and most decisive elements of my life, my origin and destiny. I want to give the entirety of my life, but I do not have possession of my past, and my future is entirely indeterminate in terms of its content and length. Indeed, my person and freedom are a mystery, paradoxically deeper and bigger than I am, as the Psalmist affirms in his proclamation: *abyssus abyssum invocat* (Ps 42:7 [41:8]).³² The problem therefore is how

³¹Henri de Lubac uses the analogy of a gift given by one person to another (such as that between a mother and her child), to help describe the analogous situation of God’s twofold gift to man of creaturely existence and the call to supernatural fulfillment. De Lubac’s point is that the analogy of gift-giving is very limited, albeit necessary, in its ability to clarify God’s twofold gift to man, since it fails to convey the radically inward and constitutive character of God’s gifts. My use of this image is analogous to—and indeed depends on—de Lubac’s point. Like de Lubac, I am arguing that God’s (creative) action is radically inward and constitutive of the human person. My use of the image of gift-giving, which like de Lubac’s highlights the final insufficiency of the analogy, is intended to show the “inward” and “constitutive” character of God’s “gratuitous initiatives” with respect to human action, which is consequent upon the inward and constitutive relation of God’s creative act to the nature and structures of human being as such featured in de Lubac’s argument. See *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 75, *et seq.*

³²Cf. *ibid.*, 214: “Certain depths of our nature can be opened only by the shock of revelation. Then with a new clarity, deep calls upon deep [*abyssus abyssum invocat*]. By revealing himself to us, Bérulle used to say, God ‘has revealed us to ourselves.’ Every light cast on God is at the same time, by a return shock, a light on man.” Cf. also, *Gaudium et spes*, 22, which emphasizes that “it is in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the *mystery of man* truly becomes clear” (emphasis added).

I can ever really give my life when what I am giving is in fact incommensurable with anything I could actually lay hold of. To do so implies, somehow, in some way, the ability to stand outside of myself, as it were, as though I were someone else who had a view of the whole of my life. In order to take hold of myself in this way, I need some point of “transcendence” that precedes the outward movement of the gift itself.³³

The capacity to give myself away, then, implies that my own freedom and activity are in fact a leveraging of God’s all-encompassing and limitless freedom, which can indeed take up the whole of my life. In my giving myself, my own freedom and action are in fact taken up and given their transcendent platform in God’s own infinite freedom and action. As a response, and as a pledge, therefore, consecration necessarily entails not only my own freedom and action, but the reciprocity represented in its relation to God, who is both the origin and end of the belonging toward which all human activity ultimately tends.

If the moral life, and by implication all of human action in its embodied particularity, is tacitly a response as the pope claims, then it is inconceivable that it could be viewed in isolation from the prior initiating action of God’s freedom and action. The possibility of the fullness of human action, then, turns *mutatis mutandis* on the fundamental paradox made visible by consecration. Insofar as human action is a response whose inner meaning and final perfection is disclosed by consecration, it is also not ordered simply toward achieving fulfillment in “personal goods.” Rather, fulfillment occurs not only in these goods, but in what the pope calls the “good of the person,” which both contains and transcends these goods, is both the good that I am and the good I am called to become.³⁴

³³Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* VII, 1, 241b25–242a16, arguing that no self-mover can move itself as a whole (cited in D.C. Schindler, “Freedom Beyond Our Choosing,” 645, n. 71).

³⁴The pope defines “the good of the person” as “the good which is the person himself and his perfection,” while the “personal goods” are those goods that are “safeguarded by the commandments, which, according to St. Thomas, contain the whole natural law [ST I-II, q. 100, a. 1]” (VS, 79; cf. also VS, 13). Hence, the “good of the person” is most especially related to human goodness *simpliciter*, viz. a person’s *moral goodness or perfection*, which in turn must be finally understood in terms of the human vocation in Christ. As *Veritatis splendor* tells us: “Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are in conformity with

In striving for such goods, the human actor is striving for an end that finally entails a sacrifice. Whatever particular goods I strive for in “discrete” actions, those goods can finally only be good for me insofar as they are part of, or are ordered within, a larger sacrifice or abasement. Indeed, they are only goods for me—concretely and in the particularity of daily life, in the perennial toil of flesh and blood—insofar as they are received in the irreducible tension inscribed in the passage from “aspiration” to fulfillment-in-self-emptying. In the end, consecration shows us in its mediation of the *yeses* of Christ and Mary that the particular goods of human striving must finally become aspects, the pieces and parts, precisely in their goodness and worthiness for human striving, of this necessary sacrifice, which in itself is the good that I am called to become. It is with respect to this latter good—a good that I could never simply give to myself—that my “self-determination” occurs. Hence, as the pope tells us, the goods protected by the commandments give way to their fullness in the Beatitudes, the “self-portrait of Christ” (VS, 16).

Jesus shows that the commandments must not be understood as a minimum limit not to be gone beyond, but rather as a path involving a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection, at the heart of which is love (cf. Col 3:14). Thus the commandment “You shall not murder” becomes a call to an attentive love which protects and promotes the life of one’s neighbor. The precept prohibiting adultery becomes an invitation to a pure way of looking at others, capable of respecting the spousal meaning of the body [VS, 15]

The *yeses* of Christ and Mary, in other words, show us that even in the personal goods which hold out fulfillment of our being, there is inscribed a “beyond.” Hence, for example, they show us the inner meaning of “natural inclinations,” such as that directed toward the

man’s true good and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person towards his ultimate end: God himself is the supreme good in whom man finds his full and perfect happiness. The first question in the young man’s conversation with Jesus: “What good must I do to have eternal life?” (Mt 19:6) immediately brings out *the essential connection between the moral value of an act and man’s final end* (VS, 72, emphasis in original). The encyclical later tells us: “The primary and decisive element for moral judgment is the object of the human act, which establishes whether it is *capable of being ordered to the good and to the ultimate end which is God*” (VS, 79, emphasis in original). Cf. Melina, *Sharing in Christ’s Virtues*, 72–81.

human good of procreation,³⁵ which finds its fullness in the “sacrifice” necessarily implied in conjugal love.³⁶

This means that at the heart of moral action is a paradox, the paradox between the limited ability of the human person and the limitless destiny to which he is called. On the one hand, then, human freedom and activity, as essential to the *imago Dei*, are part of the “vocation” within and for which we were made, in which our very being is “constituted.” They are the foundation of “self-possession” and “self-determination.” On the other hand, freedom and action only bring about this self-determination in relation to God. They offer the possibility and promise of human *motus*, and this means—paradoxically—that their final significance is achieved in “consent” and the “sacrifice” entailed in the possibility and promise of belonging to Another. Hence, we see the foundational character of *Gaudium et spes*’ statement that “man can only discover his true self in a sincere gift of himself” or in the pope’s repeated teaching that “[p]erfection demands that maturity in self-giving to which human freedom is called” (VS, 17).

Consecration reveals to all human action that self-possession and self-determination are “paradoxical” insofar as they are never simply “self-centered,” but are radically “other-centered” as well, both in their dependence on God’s freedom and action and in the sacrifice for which they are destined. We might put it this way: insofar as moral action is certainly “self-determining” and the concrete realization of “self-possession,” it is always even more radically “other-derived” and “other-directed” in its very structure and meaning. In pursuing the “aspiration” for fulfillment, moral action is necessarily drawn into the sacrifice entailed in the “exclusive belonging” to which it is invited (the good that I am called to become).

Human action is therefore fundamentally structured within abiding relation. Virginity, as paradigmatic response, discloses to all action that it relies on a prior reciprocity, that it entails the prior gift of another, a gift that not only draws my action outward, but indeed structures it from the beginning. Hence, the presence of my action “in” Another’s action is a presupposition of my ability to give myself away. The mother who “gives herself” to her child can only do so

³⁵ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

³⁶Cf. David Crawford, “Christian Community and the States of Life: A Reflection on the Anthropological Significance of Virginity and Marriage,” *Communio* 29 (Summer 2002): 337–365.

because her freedom is taken up into God's own freedom. That action is grounded in the relationship with another means in the first instance that it is only "mine" insofar as it is received from Another and is, therefore, structured from its very beginning back towards its origin.

c. *Vicariousness*. The foregoing considerations enable us to gain a more adequate sense of the meaning of the "vicariousness" of Christ's and Mary's yeses and its relationship to the individual "activity" of the faithful and of all humanity. As we have seen, to say that Christ's and Mary's virginity offers the inner and concrete form of all human action is to say that Christ's Incarnation and Mary's fiat are both the response given on behalf of "all flesh," all "human reality," and the condition for the possibility of the response of each individual, embodied person. They constitute the primordial "response" to God's invitation of all time and space into his eternal triune life. This response constitutes the ground which offers itself (*ex opere operato*) to all of humanity and in which every response must be rooted (*ex opere operantis*).

My "activity" embodied in all of the striving in my life for goods that perfect me in relation to the good that I am called to become constitutes my normally tacit response to God's "gratuitous initiatives." Now this "response"—this consent—is not simply my consent to Christ's and Mary's consent on my behalf. Such an understanding is incomplete insofar as it would view human action as fundamentally self-originating in relation to the mediating and supra-sacramental character of Christ's and Mary's yeses. The two aspects of consent—the vicarious consent of Christ and Mary and my personal consent—would remain extrinsic to each other. Such a starting point would suppose that my action encounters the consent of Christ and Mary as a merely external factor, to which I then must conform myself in a decisive act of the will, but to which my action is structurally indifferent. As we have seen, while it clearly reflects part of the truth (my freedom and action are, it is true, mine), this approach fails to take into account the full weight of Christ's and Mary's intervention on my behalf and "in the place of" all human nature (*locō totius humanae naturae*).³⁷

³⁷Moreover, this starting point fails to say very much about the inner structure of human action. Rather, it merely describes the exterior features and conditions of human action without really entering into the "perspective of the acting person," as the pope has called us to do (VS, 78).

Stopping our inquiry at this point would therefore fail to take into account the fact that the consent of Christ and Mary not only offers the possibility of my own consent through their “vicarious” representation and mediation but also offers the sense of what consent to God really means in its reciprocal nature. Leaving the question at this point therefore does not yet fully come to grips with the fact that Christ’s and Mary’s consent not only creates the exterior conditions for the effectiveness of my consent, but also, in disclosing the adequate form or meaning of the human response, enables and grounds my consent inwardly.

This becomes very clear when we consider once again Balthasar’s notion of supra-sacramentality. The idea presupposes that the virginal, poor, and obedient consent of Christ and Mary gives being to the sacramental order, the body of Christ shared among the faithful who then are taken into Christ’s one body, which in turn elevates their activity, since it is Christ who now lives within them (Gal 2:20). In order to capture the inward character of this vicariousness, then, we might say that my consent is contained *in* Christ’s and Mary’s consent on my behalf. The claim that consecration offers the “inner form” of moral action therefore indicates that my yes is contained within, enabled, and engaged from its beginning by their original poor, virginal, and obedient yeses. At the same time, it is also true that my consent, in its reciprocal character, gives further weight or content, indeed offers the humanity of my actions, to their yeses on behalf of the “all flesh” of the world. The result is that the yeses of Christ and Mary are absolutely prior to, and are the condition for the possibility of my own consent, but at the same time rely on my consent (and that of all others), for the content of their offering to the Father.

Thus, vicariousness does not simply mean “in my stead without me.” Rather, it means that my yes (my activity) is contained within a prior yes (a prior activity) and as such takes its final and original form from within that prior yes, insofar as human activity is called to something—a lifetime of actions that constitute in their totality and in each instantiation a response to God’s call. It means that all of my action and all of my striving—or whatever can be salvaged from my sin—has itself been taken up into their consent in the form of their yeses, and offered to the Father. This means that, insofar as my action is called from its beginning to constitute this response, it is ultimately meaningless (formless) outside of the call to and response of human nature as such.

I am called from within this foundation to what is truest in my nature, and therefore to what is truest in human action as a whole. Of course, human action does not possess an interior meaning that is already adequate to the response called for prior to Christ's own intervention. It is not implicitly or "anonymously" an adequate response to God's call prior to or outside of Christ's and Mary's yeses. These yeses do not simply show what human action means "already" or "in any case." To the contrary, the disclosure of the "inner form" means that Christ and Mary make visible the radical inadequacy of all human action from its beginning. At the same time, however, this does not mean that human action is structurally indifferent to Christ's and Mary's vicarious responses. What is absolutely mundane, therefore—our embodied reality in time and space—is taken up and redirected by the virginal yeses of Christ and Mary.

3. The specificity of the consecrated state

Our discussion has centered on the human response universally as it takes its shape in human actions. However, the particularity of the consecrated state's relation to the yeses of Christ and Mary has been implicit in the entire discussion. As was stated at the outset, the consecrated state possesses a unique and irreplaceable relation to these supra-sacramental yeses. Balthasar puts it as follows:

There exist in the Christian life—mediated by the sacraments and the ministry but not identical with these—particularly close and central forms of participation in the supraministerial and pansacramental mystery, viz., those forms of life that explicitly make the Marian-ecclesiological law of life their own law, when the whole existence enters the obedience, poverty, and virginity of the Cross and redemption. This is why the vows that give entrance to this form of life that belongs to the entire Church are not an eighth sacrament alongside the others.³⁸

As this passage indicates, to say that virginity is a "particularly close and central" form of "participation" in the "pansacramental mystery" is to say that it is not simply "non-sacramental." Indeed, as Balthasar

³⁸Balthasar, "The Layman in the Church," 319.

carefully points out, the consecrated state, while not itself a sacrament and while constituting special participation in the “supra-ministerial and pansacramental mystery,” is nevertheless mediated by the sacraments—particularly Baptism and the Eucharist. But the real point of highlighting consecration’s supra-sacramental character is to indicate that it participates more directly in the *yeses* of Christ and Mary than marriage or simple membership in the Church does. It therefore participates more directly in the source of the sacramental order, the Church as a whole, and indeed, if our discussion up to now holds, the interior fulfillment of all human striving.

The consecrated life not only shows us a kind of “spiritual” upper limit, offering by way of moral example a height to be approximated (as far as possible) by the rest of human freedom and activity. Surely, the consecrated life does offer such an example of extreme spiritual sacrifice. But this does not capture the entire significance of the three counsels for human destiny as a whole. Indeed, the foregoing suggests that viewing consecration exclusively in this way tends toward a reduction. This starting point would reduce the form of life of Christ and Mary to a discipline, which in the end would fail to give adequate weight to the embodied character of their “*yeses*.” Virginité, for example, signifies not only a discipline but a complete giving over of the body. Were this not true, then virginité would seem to be useful only for sinners. In this case, Christ’s and Mary’s virginité would be reduced to a mere “example” for the rest of humanity, with no further significance for their own missions. This starting point would also tend to view their *yeses* as extrinsic to the implicit “response” of human action as such, since it would fail to see consecration’s anthropological and ontological significance, reducing it to a regimen or mere “moral choice” or “alternative” among many potential instruments in the following of Christ.

Like Balthasar, the pope clearly believes, on the other hand, that the consecrated state possesses profound implications, not only as an external “path” to holiness, but as a disclosure of what is most fundamental to human nature. Contained in the counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, therefore, is a kind of anthropological key:

Yes, the call which you, dear brothers and sisters, accepted when you set out on the way of religious profession touches upon *the very roots of humanity*, the roots of man’s destiny in the temporal world. The evangelical “state of perfection” does not cut you off from these roots. On the contrary, it

enables you to anchor yourselves even more firmly in the elements that make man man, permeating his humanity—which in various ways is burdened by sin—with the divine and human leaven of the mystery of the Redemption. [RD, 4, emphasis in original]

According to the argument of this essay, consecration participates in and discloses anew the initial ground according to which the world is able to “respond” to God’s “many gratuitous initiatives” by offering itself back to its Creator precisely as “flesh” and, indeed, as activity. In its direct participation in Christ’s and Mary’s *yeses*, it also participates in the source and ground of human action insofar as it makes visible the Church’s response on behalf of the world. It makes visible the universal human response from within the solidarity we possess with both the first and second Adams.

The Church has always affirmed the inner meaning of consecration to be that of showing the “primacy of God,” or the Christian ethos “God first.” The precise point of specificity of the consecrated life, then, is its direct participation in and disclosure of the fundamental ground in which any adequate response to God’s initiatives must be analogously rooted. Understood in this way, the significance of consecration is not so much that it shows us that we must commit ourselves to putting God at the center of our personal and moral lives. Rather, the basic meaning of “God first,” is that consecration, rooted in the *yeses* of Christ and Mary, makes the inner form of the human response to God—and therefore of all human action in its final meaning—visible for all to see. It re-lives and re-enacts the *yeses* of Christ and Mary, and as such it also “confesses” the embodied intentionality of human action as response to and movement toward human destiny in God. Sharing in Christ’s and Mary’s response, it discloses what human action must be if it is to be true to its destiny both in its totality and in all of its particularity, which analogously finds its own “beginning and end” in the *yeses* of Christ and Mary.

In the end, the basic ethos “God first” is universal in its scope and implications and all-inclusive in its demands and commitments. It constitutes the standard for every life and every act of freedom without exception. Within its irreducible distinctness as a specific vocation and response, the consecrated state makes explicit, and therefore discloses, what is contained “hiddenly” and analogously within the entire universal movement underlying the human vocation in Christ. It

therefore gives concrete form to Vatican II's "universal call to the perfection of love." In doing so, it discloses to the moral actor that he does not so much want to possess God and all others as to possess only in being possessed in communion.

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