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I Want to Be in That Number: Desire, Inclusivity and the Church

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“I WANT TO BE IN THAT NUMBER” DESIRE, INCLUSIVITY, AND THE CHURCH

When people ask me what I do for a living and want to know more than the mere fact that I teach, I often say that I am that most unfortunate of human beings, a Roman Catholic ecclesiologist. I jest, of course. It should be balanced against what I tell my students who ask me why they should study the Church. It may not always be pleasant, I reply, but it is never dull. And truly, the life of an ecclesiologist today is usually lively, maybe too lively. One never knows quite what tomorrow will bring. I imagine it a bit like surfing a huge wave with sharks lurking in the waters beneath, or maybe negotiating an Olympic-standard slalom while being shot at by snipers in foxholes on either side. One of the reasons that these images come to mind is that we ecclesiologists today are the second most suspect form of theologian in Roman circles (first, of course, come moral theologians). Our largely contextual and inductive approach runs substantially counter to the institutional face of Roman Catholicism, which continues to be wedded to a deductive method reflecting its ongoing commitment to the priority of the global over the local Church. But if there is something of an impasse between ecclesiology and officialdom, it is not going to be overcome in a knock-down, drag-out, head-to-head confrontation on some or all of the hot-button issues in Church life today. Instead, I think that what we need today is a large dose of humility, both towards one another in the increasingly polarized community of faith and also in our relations with the wider world beyond the Church. The two are connected, but here I will primarily focus on the need for ecclesial humility in face of the world beyond the Church.

Why should we focus on the virtue of humility in a presentation on the conference theme of “all the saints”? One good reason is that humility is a defining virtue of holiness. The saint’s humility could not be further from the creepy and strategic self-abasement of Uriah Heep, cringing simply in order to gain advantage. The saint’s humble awareness of sinfulness is the consequence of becoming alive to the holiness of God, and never a matter of comparison with others. Absent the sense of God’s holiness, humility is often pride in sheep’s clothing. But the more important ecclesiological reason for attention to humility is that without it any examination of “all the saints” will inevitably gravitate towards the vice of exclusion. Indeed, I feel comfortable saying that many of our ecclesial ills today are products of the sin of exclusion and can be addressed by attention to the virtue of humility. Whether we are engaged in invidious and often ignorant comparisons between the holy church and the sinful world or spiritually empty comparisons between the fullness of truth in “our” tradition and the defects of others, we are

about the business of exclusion, sweeping aside God's holy mystery to impose our fallible human considerations about where saints can be found. Inside the church similar crimes are being committed when a sub-group of the community, in the name of its convictions of what purity looks like and persuaded that it can speak for God, marginalizes others, whether they are the divorced, or gays and lesbians, or religious sisters going about their jobs, whether they are working in Catholic hospitals or in Congress, or, indeed, even if they are just theologians.

In pursuit of a church of "all the saints" that does not practice exclusion, this presentation will explore several facets of the ecclesial virtue of humility. For the most part, it will not take up this or that concrete example, though most of you here will be able to fill these in for yourselves. The stages of this presentation are fourfold. We will begin with an example, drawn from the writings of Flannery O'Connor, of how God teaches the lesson of true humility to a person who exemplifies the sin of self-righteousness and the practice of exclusion. We will follow this with a series of three considerations of the parable of the Good Samaritan, each corresponding to one of Rowan Williams' tripartite divisions of theological reflection into a moment of celebration, of communication, and of critique.¹ In the end we seek a vision of a Church of all the saints that is a whole lot less sure of itself than, at least on the surface, our Roman Catholic Church purports to be. As my title suggests, if indeed "I want to be in that number," my desires must be tempered by the needs of others and my understanding of where I might find "all the saints" must be refined by attending to what these others have to teach me.

THE LOOK OF SURPRISE ON THE FACE OF THE SAINTS

Because the grace of God is present in the world in ways that it is not present in the church, an ecclesiology that takes seriously our convention theme of "all the saints" will inevitably be a theology of the world, if only because the question "who are the saints?" is a courteous theological version of the more direct but less polite, "so, who is in and who is out?" Elizabeth Johnson, in whose shadow anyone writing on this topic stands, has written that because "the communion of saints does not limit divine blessing to its own circle. . . it comprises all living persons of truth and love."² "Saints" populate the reign of God, not merely the Church. Indeed, the emerging reign of God is as wide as the world, if not the cosmos, and to consider "the saints" is immediately to engage the topic of Church and world or Church and reign of God. Most, if not all of us are confident that salvation is offered to all, not merely to the baptized, or theists, or believers in "the transcendent." Most know that saints and sinners are present in Church and world alike. Even Augustine had this down, writing, "There are some whom God has

¹These distinctions can be found in the prologue to Williams' collection, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xii-xvi.

²*Friends of God and Prophets* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 220.

whom the Church does not have, and some the Church has whom God does not have.”³ Such a perspective is in itself a strong check on ecclesial hubris of a more obvious kind; especially if we do not go on to make the mistake of thinking that we have a good idea who is in which group. We should all daily be chastened by the warning in Matthew 25 that the Last Judgment will be a day of great surprises.

One memorable version of an ecclesiology of eschatological surprise can be found in Flannery O’Connor’s late, great story *Revelation*.⁴ Though this is undoubtedly well-known to many of you I will not make the assumption that there is no one unfamiliar with it, nor that everyone has perfect recall of something they probably first met in college English class. The outline is simple. Most of the story takes place in a rural doctor’s waiting room where Mrs. Turpin, a farmer’s wife, ruminates on the varieties of humankind around her and the good fortune that has placed her in a superior condition to all of them. Decent in a way, even generous, Mrs. Turpin is also narrow-minded and possessed of the casual bigotry whose modulations O’Connor captures perfectly. Her world is divided between the decent and respectable people who are remarkably like her and her kind, and everyone else. Her conversion, not too strong a word, is initiated when she is hit by a book entitled *Human Development* thrown by a young epileptic named Mary Grace. Even Flannery O’Connor can be too obvious at times. Mrs. Turpin goes home pondering in her heart the attack and the words that followed it as Mary Grace says to her, “Go back to the hell you came from, you old warthog!” Why was the book thrown at her and not at the white trash or the black people in the doctor’s waiting room? How, she wonders, can she be both a warthog and yet saved? God answers her with a vision in the fields at sundown. She sees a host of individuals, “the saints,” on the march towards heaven. But she is astonished by the fact that “her sort” of people are preceded by dancing bands of black folk, white trash, lunatics and others who cannot be classed as respectable. The “decent people” form the rear of the procession, “marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior.” They were the only ones who could sing on key, but “she could see by their shocked and altered faces even their virtues were being burned away.” As the vision fades, she returns to her house. “In the woods around her,” concludes O’Connor, “the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”

O’Connor’s evidently purgatorial vision nicely combines the joy and the anguish that mark those on their way to heaven. The cleansing of their souls is a necessary step from the insecure possession of grace and truth that marks what

³On Baptism, Bk. V, chap. xxvii, no. 38.

⁴Included in her collection of stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1965).

tradition calls the church militant to the pure joy and celebration of the church triumphant. The proleptic joy of Purgatory comes from the confidence of final possession of the vision of God, the anguish from “the refiner’s fire” wielded by the messenger of the covenant in the Book of the Prophet Malachi (3:2). Malachi may not have been familiar with Purgatory but he hits the theological nail on the head; the cleansing is not some chronological stage of being prepared to meet God so much as the effect of encountering God as sinful people. The catalogue of social sins that Malachi lists as the subjects of judgment recalls us both to Matthew 25 and to Mrs. Turpin:

I will draw near to you for judgment and I will be swift to bear witness
Against the sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers,
Those who defraud the hired man of his wages,
Against those who turn aside the stranger,
And those who do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. (3:5)

We could reflect on this fairly standard list of prophetic denunciations to challenge the Church one more time to greater efforts on behalf of social justice, but in this year when we are thinking about “all the saints” we will tread this well-worn path a little less directly and focus instead on the challenge to those “who turn aside the stranger.” Any failure in humility leads to an act of exclusion. This was Mrs. Turpin’s sin, and it may more commonly be that of our Church. The “virtues” of the respectable people that were to their amazement being burned away were those built upon a world marked by a deep distinction between “us” and “them,” like the unthinkingly self-righteous publican who stood up front in the synagogue and prayed in thanks to God for his difference from other people. His sin was not his faithfulness to the law but his failure in solidarity, just as the poor man with whom he is unfavorably compared finds his salvation not in his virtue—which may in any case have been less than that of the publican—but in the absence of invidious comparisons with the other. Behind O’Connor’s story, shadowing it so to speak is another well-known and well-worn parable, the tale of the Good Samaritan. Mrs. Turpin is learning the hard way the answer to the question with which that parable is introduced, one that is central to an ecclesiology of all the saints, “Who then is my neighbor?” How can we answer this question without ending up in an “us/them” kind of position where humility is all but pre-empted? Let us turn to our three theological moments.

CELEBRATION: WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN

“Celebration,” the first of Rowan Williams’ three theological modes, occurs in theological reflection employed by the Church as it attends to the internal coherence of the tradition. Of its nature, it is upbeat and occasionally even self-congratulatory. From this perspective, whether it is the covenant community of Israel, communion in the blood of the Lord, communion in the body and blood of Christ on the altar,

or communion in mission and witness to the Gospel, the implication is clear. We are a band of sisters and brothers united in faith and love. In the book of Leviticus God calls the whole community to holiness: “For I, the LORD, am your God; and you shall make and keep yourselves holy, because I am holy” (11:44). The New Testament takes up the same theme, “As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written, ‘be holy because I (am) holy’” (1 Peter 1:15). God calls the covenant people of Israel, Jesus calls together his disciples, and from them the faithful people who will constitute the Church are called out from the multitude and called together for an apostolic purpose. The imperative to *be* holy is often overlooked, with the result that the Church’s holiness can come to seem ontological.

In both Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament, the holiness is in the calling, but the calling together as the people of God is for a purpose larger than the mere existence of the community itself.⁵ Israel is called to be a light to the nations, as in Isaiah’s words, “It is too light a thing for you to be my servant, to establish the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the scions of Israel, and I shall submit you as a light unto the nations, to be my salvation until the end of the earth” (49:6). And the Christian community of faith is described in the Gospels as like a lamp on the lampstand, indeed “the light of the world” (Mt 5:14-15, Mk 4:21, Lk 8:16). The image of “light” is particularly helpful because it possesses both a centripetal and a centrifugal dimension. Light attracts, like moths to a flame, and light gives light to those who are in darkness. Both the mission of Israel and that of the Christian Church include drawing people to the covenant community or the communion of saints and going out into the world to shed the light. But none of these statements on its own collapses the distinction between Church and world. The lamp gives light to those in darkness, the yeast— to use the other familiar analogy— raises the dough, but it is not identical to the dough. The salt enhances the food but is not itself the food. And, of course, all three images remind us that the purpose to which the community is called is God’s purpose, not ours. Light, yeast, and salt have themselves no inherent intentionality. God places the light; God adds yeast or salt to the recipe. The light is valueless unless there is something to which to give light, and yeast and salt alone are quite inedible.

When we see the Church as light, yeast, or salt, we see the Church as the community of saints, in relationship to the world as needing light, leaven, or savor. Yves Congar once wrote that Church and world are not to be imagined “like two crowned sovereigns looking sideways at one another as they sit on the same dais” but “much more like the Good Samaritan holding in his arms the half-dead man,

⁵On mission in the Hebrew scriptures see *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*, by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) and James Chukwuma Okoye, *Israel and the Nations: A Mission Theology of the Old Testament* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006).

whom he will not leave because he has been sent to help him.”⁶ In the theological moment of celebration, the identification of the Church with the Good Samaritan reaching out to the wounded victim is an important assertion of the priority of mission that draws attention to the fact that the Church throughout history has been a source of succor and consolation to suffering people, Catholic or not. In the Catholic tradition in particular, the many orders of religious women have always made an enormous contribution in the fields of nursing and education. Religious, both men and women exercised a preferential option for the poor many centuries before the phrase was coined. Even today, Catholic Charities is the largest private network of social service organizations in the U.S., much of their work being direct aid to the needy, Christian or not. Whether one calls this work humanization, pre-evangelization, or preparation for the Gospel, it is an integral component of mission and witness without which the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ is incomplete. The underlying vision of the Church that supports this strong claim is evident in scripture and tradition and, to refer us to Matthew again, evidently matters on the Day of Judgment.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is appropriately used in this celebratory mode of reflection, but it must be employed with caution. It is quite pertinent to see the action of the Samaritan responding to the needs of the victim as an image of the ideal relationship of the Church to the world, provided we do not blind ourselves to other elements in the story. Above all, what are the ramifications of the fact that the Samaritan is an outcast from the people of Israel? And what exactly is implied by the evidently greater virtues he demonstrates than that of the two examples of Mrs. Turpin’s respectable people, the priest and the Levite, who “pass by on the other side”? Moreover, has anyone considered the role played by the victim, especially as he begins his return to health and can reflect upon all that happened to him? The Church as Good Samaritan embracing the world as the wounded victim must always bear in mind three disquieting questions: who is my neighbor, who is holy, and who is “the saint”? In the Gospel parable, Jesus is most definitely not reassuring his listeners about their own role but rather encouraging them to use their imaginations to discompose their own religious universe.

The problem with celebration is that it suffers from being undialectically centripetal. When we set out to take the lessons of the Good Samaritan to heart and see the Church as Congar suggested, even when we in some measure succeed in being that Church of compassion and service, we may be too focused on being the star of the soteriological show. Rowan Williams was thinking something like this when he pointed out that the theological language of celebration, though disciplined, is also vulnerable. Its weakness is that it becomes “sealed in on itself,” writes Williams, so that the reflective process suffers “freezing” and the possibility

⁶From *The Wide World My Parish*, quoted in *Yves Congar: Essential Writings*, selected with an introduction by Paul Lakeland (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 64.

of illuminating or modifying concrete historical situations is denied.⁷ It is not that the celebratory language of intra-church theological reflection is inappropriate in itself so much as that it can become locked in its own world, possessed of an essentially self-referential hermeneutic that at worst is triumphalist and at best a sort of paternalistic vision in which the wisdom and the folly of the world alike are both subsumed in the totalizing explanation of faith. At this point, some form of integrism threatens to emerge. Internally, this tendency towards the subsumption of the world under the umbrella of the ecclesial vision can be countered by greater attention to the Church's need for repentance, not only repentance before God as the sinners we are, but historical repentance before the world for all that we the Church have done in history to harm it, and all that we have failed to do to help heal it. But beware, for even when the theological language of celebration stresses its own need for repentance, it can still remain centripetal, seeking the resources for repentance solely within the tradition, like a corrupt police force investigating itself. Too often, the institutional response to the scandal of sex abuse has taken this form. In repentance, we bow down before God, but not only the God who comes to us in sacramental life and grace-filled moments of Church life. Repentance also requires us to be open to the Spirit of God at work in the world. The world itself has wisdom and grace that we do not possess in the Church, and when in our sinfulness as a community of faith we can also be open to that grace and wisdom, theology will move into the second of Rowan Williams's three moments, that of communication, as we shall very shortly see.

The self-referentiality or centripetal tendencies of the Church are evident in ecclesial life today. They are the shadow side of the good that we do and the holy community that we are, but they follow clearly from an undialectical emphasis on celebration. In terms of the parable of the Good Samaritan, they are what will happen when we rejoice in our identification with the model of concern for others and forget the disquieting context in which the parable is told. If we are the Good Samaritan who comes to the aid of the victim, then we are also the priest and Levite who is too busy about the "things of God" to be aware of the cries of the victim. And is it not just possible that some of our most loudly proclaimed teaching might suffer from that "freezing" which Rowan Williams mentions, as a consequence of which "the possibility of illuminating or modifying concrete historical situations is denied"? Of course, what might seem to be frozen teaching to one person is someone else's eternal truth, though the test has to be to determine if the teaching singularly fails to illuminate or modify concrete historical situations. The parable of the Good Samaritan is less a story about doing good than it is about breaking boundaries. The traditional orthodoxies of Judaism are challenged by the choice of a heretic, an unbeliever, an outcast from the covenant community as a model for emulation. Even more, the story insists that there *are* no boundaries to neighborliness. Love your neighbor as yourself is not about limits ("who is my neighbor?")

⁷Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xiii.

but about the absence of limits (“Everyone!”). The lawyer, the priest, and the Levite work within the Law and want to know what it requires. Jesus teaches them to abandon it. The consequences of this parable for construing the right relationship between Church and world are thus considerable, and they are not exhausted by Congar’s image of the Church as Samaritan embracing the victim.

COMMUNICATION: IN SEARCH OF INTEGRITY

While the language of celebration can eschew the tendency towards a totalizing hermeneutic, its inevitably centripetal orientation means that it must be balanced by a more centrifugal consideration of its relationship to and its role in the world. This is the mode of communication. Theology as communication is close to but not identical with what is often described as “mediating theology.” For Rowan Williams, the communicative moment reveals a theology that seeks “to persuade or commend, to witness to the gospel’s capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment, and to display enough confidence to believe that this gospel can be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour through strange idioms and structures of thought.” This kind of dialogue with an unfamiliar idiom is an act of confidence, assuming that it can help to “uncover aspects of the deposit of belief hitherto unexamined” and it must trust that the fundamental categories of belief are “robust enough to survive” this kind of treatment.⁸ Its difference from mediating theology, it would seem, lies in its objective. Mediation is a species of apologetics whose objective is to speak to the other in words that can be understood, while communication is reciprocal, equally about learning from the other’s difference ways in which the doctrinal tradition itself can be enriched by the encounter. Mediation is frequently accused of adulterating the Gospel message in order to gain wider acceptance; communication in the sense we use it here is the opposite, namely, drawing upon the other in order to strengthen the Church’s grasp of its own beliefs.

In her “Hesitations Concerning Baptism,” Simone Weil presents a challenging set of reflections on the presence of the Church in the world cast in the form of an explanation of why belief in God does not mean that she will necessarily seek to enter the Church. Weil writes that the fear she has for the Church is that it can too easily become an “us” over against the “them” of the world. “What frightens me,” she wrote in January of 1942, “is the Church as a social structure.” She is “afraid of the Church patriotism which exists in Catholic circles” and which had led some saints wrongly to approve of the Crusades or the Inquisition. These saints “were blinded by something very powerful,” namely “the Church seen as a social structure,” though Weil adds that she is only critical of “collective emotions.” But of these emotions, she writes very harshly, arguing that “the social is irremediably the domain of the devil. . . . The flesh impels us to say *me* and the

⁸Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xiv.

devil impels us to say *us*.” Of course, she knows that the Church would not exist if it were not a social structure, but “in so far as it is a social structure, it belongs to the Prince of this World.”⁹

Weil’s challenge points to the dangers of the kind of ecclesial xenophobia that dogged the Church in the past, particularly in the period stretching from the French Revolution to the eve of Vatican II, which John O’Malley calls the “long nineteenth century.”¹⁰ There will be those of us who may think that she overstates the connection between the social and the demonic. Yet, there is something chillingly accurate in her analysis of the way in which the language of “me” or “us” is almost inevitably exclusionary. It is hard not to see something like the *Syllabus of Errors* or the definition of papal infallibility at Vatican I, however formally correct they may have been in their times, as driven by a determination to assert the rightness of the Church over against the wrongness of the world. Where, indeed, in that whole long century is there any ecclesiastical humility in face of the world? And if after Vatican II we have largely got beyond the demonization of the religious other, it still remains true that when the Church uses language like that in *Dominus Iesus*, or creates an “ordinariate” for conservative Anglicans fleeing their Church, however formally correct these may be, they do nothing whatsoever to draw the Church and the world closer together and we need to recognize that if no lasting damage is done it is due to the forbearance of those who are not part of the Church, and not the generosity of those who are.

Simone Weil was a secular Jewish intellectual deeply imbued with classical learning beside which her grasp of Christianity seems quite deficient. For this reason, if for no other, she is an exemplar of how a “long and exotic” detour through the classics helps to enlighten the Christian tradition’s grasp of its own story, particularly in her essay on “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” where she leans heavily on the parable of the Good Samaritan. The story, she points out, tells us nothing about the life circumstances of either principal. We are consequently forced to attend only to their actions, to what Simone Weil calls the supernatural virtue of the Samaritan and the capacity for supernatural virtue that the encounter with him has rendered possible for the victim.¹¹ She characterizes justice in the classical tradition as “the even balance, an image of equal relations of strength,” as a *supernatural* virtue justice “consists of behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship,” and for the weaker one, “not believing that there really is equality of strength” and “recognizing that his [sic] treatment is due solely to the generosity of the other party.”¹² The dialectic of generosity and gratitude in the story of the Good Samaritan mirrors the

⁹*Waiting on God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 53-54.

¹⁰See *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2008), 53-92.

¹¹What follows here draws upon Weil’s analysis of “the love of our neighbor” in her long essay, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” contained in *Waiting on God*, 137-215.

¹²*Waiting on God*, 143.

self-redemption of God in creation. The love of neighbor begins in creative attention to “a little piece of flesh, naked, inert, and bleeding beside a ditch,” but the attention is itself “a renunciation.” When someone devotes her energy to giving life to another who will exist independently, she accepts diminishment.¹³ The gift of life the Samaritan makes is a reenactment of God’s act of creation and of Christ’s Passion, and as is surely evident from the language I just used, of the woman who gives birth to a child.

The picture Weil draws here has significant consequences for how we understand concupiscence and desire, and gives definition to the embrace of the other in which Congar sees the paradigm for the relationship between Church and world. While the natural justice of the Greeks in Weil’s account undoubtedly disciplines desires, its assumption is that power is to be exercised to the “extreme limit of possibility.” What we find in the Christian vision, among other religions, is the *restraint* of desire through which the human subject becomes a collaborator, a pro-creator in God’s self-dispossessing work of creation. St. Paul in Philippians picks up this theme, for “though he was in the form of God,” Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (2:6-8). When the Samaritan embraces the victim he really loses something, just as the victim gains, and in the act of giving as losing the Samaritan is divinized and the victim humanized. “In denying oneself,” says Weil, “one becomes capable under God of establishing someone else by a creative affirmation,” and this is “a redemptive act.”¹⁴

The supernatural virtue of love of neighbor, moreover, is the totally selfless act, only possible because it is God loving through us. To serve the other out of love for God is “misleading and equivocal,” says Weil, and “the love of our neighbor is the love which comes down from God to man. It precedes that which rises from men to God.”¹⁵ There is only so much that a human being can do. When we face a suffering victim and respond in love, there can be no mediation, not even the love of God. We the Church *are* the love of God for the world; we do not love the world because we love God. In other words, in reaching out to the world there is a kind of forgetfulness of God. Indeed, in being the love of God for the world perhaps, in a way, we become God in God’s moment of self-emptying. Or we follow Jesus in the way of the cross, which amounts to much the same thing. God is the background that forms our humanity, we might say, not the foreground that gives shape to our praxis. For this reason if for no other, human solidarity in the praxis of justice takes priority over the adjudication of differences between faith claims. The last thing the suffering victim needs to know about the Samaritan is where he goes to Church.

This picture has significant consequences for how we think of the Church’s mission, not least because it suggests that we are most faithful to that mission

¹³*Waiting on God*, 146.

¹⁴*Waiting on God*, 147-48.

¹⁵*Waiting on God*, 150.

when we are most forgetful of the reasons why we reach out to embrace the stranger, other than our common humanity. Our ecclesiology may suffer from the failure to see that our love of the world *is* our love of God and that our love of God *is* our love of the world.

And yet there must be a difference, if Yves Congar is right that the Church and the world are related to each another “not like two crowned sovereigns looking sideways at one another as they sit on the same dais,” but “much more like the Good Samaritan holding in his arms the half-dead man, whom he will not leave because he has been sent to help him.” On the other hand and lest we think Congar is suggesting a smothering kind of embrace, there is also his warning that “final salvation will be achieved by a wonderful refloating of our earthly vessel, rather than by a transfer of the survivors to another ship wholly built by God.”¹⁶ The Church and the world, then, are engaged in a collaborative venture in which the world, “our earthly vessel” will be “wonderfully refloated.” They are not at loggerheads with one another, they are not enemies. They are not casting sidelong glances at one another, but locked in the embrace of Samaritan and victim.

CRITIQUE: “NAGGING AT FUNDAMENTAL MEANINGS”

As important as the language of celebration and the role of communication with other ways of thinking, says Rowan Williams, is the moment of critique, where we engage in “nagging at fundamental meanings.” How best can we nag at the fundamental meaning of “Church” or “all the saints”? And in the last analysis, does it not critically depend on what we mean by “all”? Perhaps it would be best to attend to the voices of at least some of those who have had to work harder to be included in the “all” that are “all the saints,” people to whom our attention is drawn by the likes of Beth Johnson, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Peter Phan, Shawn Copeland and Brian Massingale, and the many voices of liberation theology from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Best of all for me is a secular source—Gloria Naylor in her unforgettable novel of sin and grace, *Bailey’s Café*.¹⁷ Collectively, they have a lot to tell us about how “fundamental meanings” can be ways of locking people out.

One last look at the Good Samaritan starts us on our way. You will recall that Congar wrote of the Good Samaritan embracing the wounded victim as an image of the Church/world relationship, and we have explored the value and some of the limits of that picture. But we have not so far noted that there is no particular reason to identify the Church with the Good Samaritan and the world with the wounded victim. Isn’t it just as possible to turn things around? Indeed, might this not be an element in the paradoxical style of the parable and a good homiletic impulse on the

¹⁶Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, Donald Attwater, trans. Second revised edition. (Westminster, Md: Newman Press, 1965), 92.

¹⁷(New York: Vintage, 1993).

part of Jesus? The point of the parable after all was not to teach the people to be good, but to show them their narrowness of vision, and while we have perhaps had some success in getting Jesus' point that "neighbor" knows no limits, we have not been anything like as successful in recognizing that *we* may be the wounded person in need of the lesson of humanity provided by the outcast if we are to be restored to the full humanity we have somehow lost. When we move as a Church in grace, we are the Samaritan, but when we are full of sin, we are the wounded victim in need of succor. And when we are the wounded one, who is the Samaritan?

Because the grace of God is at work in the world in ways that the Church does not know and cannot control, our relationship to the world beyond the Church cannot simply be that of the Good Samaritan embracing the wounded victim. We are also the wounded victim silently beseeching the world beyond the Church for saving help. In our embrace of the world, we are not healing the sinner so much as encountering the grace of God in unexpected places. We do not come to a richer humanity unilaterally, but rather in dialogue with other sources of divine grace. When the Council fathers said that there is a real sense in which the Church must learn from the world, they meant that we need its help in order to be more fully the Church of God. As Charles Taylor has written, there are things the Church has learned from the world that it would not have discovered from its own resources.¹⁸ If he is right, there is no reason to think that the process has come to an end, though there seems to be little evidence in our Church today that we recognize even the possibility of worldly wisdom leading us to modify our traditional positions.

There is another outsider in the gospels, the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, whose extraordinary exchange with Jesus supports this understanding of the Good Samaritan parable in surprising fashion. The story, you recall, is of the woman begging Jesus to heal her daughter and Jesus' rebuff to her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She entreats him further and in what must seem a perplexingly brutal response, Jesus says, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Most people would leave at that point, but not her. Instead, she replies in kind, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Jesus is astonished, applauds her faith, and cures her daughter, and countless generations of homilists have preached about the depths of faith of this woman of no account. But if the woman of great faith is one focus of this story, the Jesus who had something to learn from her is undoubtedly another. Jesus is corrected by a non-Jew and a woman. Jesus learns something he did not previously understand. One can only wish that all our ecclesial encounters with the world beyond Christianity, and all the magisterial interventions in intra-church issues, were as open to the wisdom of this unbeliever. A Jesus who has something to learn is a wonderful role model for those who teach in the name of Jesus, be they theologians or bishops.

¹⁸A *Catholic Modernity: Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, edited by James L. Heft (New York: Oxford, 1999), 16-18.

A critical ecclesiology is one that takes seriously the limitations of the Church. That the Church exists not for itself but for the sake of the world, the saving mission which God has entrusted to the Church, is a given of contemporary ecclesiology. What is not always so clear is that in being a sacramental community it is both positive and negative. It is the love of God for the world, and it is also in need of God's love for the world. It is God as present and God as absent. It is graced and sinful. It is the place of ordered desire and of disordered desire. It seeks integrity and falls short. It heals and it needs healing, it is the Good Samaritan embracing the victim and the victim embraced by the Good Samaritan. It is the Church that teaches and the Church that is always in need of being taught. As the sacrament of the love of God for the world in Christ, we bear the marks of the paschal mystery and those of God's redemption in the moment of creation. The Church as sacrament should not be preening itself nor abasing itself, but measuring its proclamation of the Gospel—itsself a message of victory through failure—by the Trinitarian and paschal insight that love costs. Because the world needs the Gospel as much as ever, it needs a Church that doesn't think it has all the answers but that is prepared to work in solidarity with others in the search for the truth that will set us all free, a Church that sees dialogue with our secular world as an encounter of grace with grace and sinners with sinners, and saints with saints.

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