

# "Finding God in All Things": A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects

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What is it that makes Catholicism Catholic? There are, after all, many ways of being Christian: the rich Orthodox traditions, the Anglican tradition, the Lutheran tradition, the Reformed traditions, and the Evangelical traditions, to name the most obvious. All of these traditions have wonderfully wise, insightful, powerful, things to tell us about Christianity. And there is the Catholic tradition.

What has Catholicism to tell about Christianity? What makes Catholicism Catholic? I suggest that the most important answer to these questions is the *sacramental principle*. I must offer a provisional statement of the sacramental principle, one which will, I hope, become clearer as we go on. The *sacramental principle* means that what is always and everywhere the case must be noticed, accepted, and celebrated somewhere sometime. What is always and everywhere true must be brought to our attention and be embraced (or rejected) in some concrete experience at some particular time and place.

## Talking about God

To explain why I think that this sacramental principle is so important, I must ask your indulgence while I lay some deep foundations. Consider the word *God*. "God" is the theological shorthand that we use to designate the Mystery which grounds and undergirds all that exists. One could call it something else, perhaps, but "God" is handy. It is short, three letters, one syllable, it has been around for a good while, and it has the advantage of familiarity, so let us use it. If we are talking about God, the ultimate Mystery, that which grounds all that exists, then we are speaking about that which is itself not grounded on or in anything else. The ultimate Mystery is ultimate, not itself dependent on another. Everything that exists and is not that ultimate Mystery is the universe. Thus, we cannot account for the universe's existence in such a way that it is understood as giving something necessary to God.

I teach at Boston College, a Jesuit university. Perhaps for that reason, I think in this context of the familiar Jesuit motto, *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*: "For the greater glory of God." As a description of the motive of our actions,

that motto is very powerful and very challenging, indeed. But it ought not be taken as a theological statement, i.e., a statement that tells us something about God. God does not need greater glory; God has tons of glory. God is never going to use up all the glory God has. God has closets full of it. God does not require creatures to tell God that God is great. Presumably, God has noticed. God does not need us to glorify God. Why does anything other than God, i.e., the universe, exist? Not so that it can give something to God but so that God can give something to it. The universe (or, as we more often call it in religious language, *creation*) exists as the recipient of a gift.

What is it that God, the ultimate Mystery, gives to creation, the universe whose being is grounded in that Mystery? There are only two possibilities: either God gives something other than God, which would simply be more of the universe, another creature; or God gives God. Here is the great Christian claim about the universe's origin in Mystery: creation exists so that God can give God's self to it. Creation exists so that God can communicate God's self to creation. That gift of self is what is meant by *agape*, love. Creation exists because it is the object of love. Love, *agape*, is the only ground for its existence. So deep is this claim in the Christian tradition that Christianity actually insists that it is the least wrong way to understand what we mean by the Mystery that grounds and surrounds all that exists.

I tell beginning students in theology that theology, certainly Christian theology, is always done between two poles. One pole is probably best summed up by Ludwig Wittgenstein. The final proposition in the only book published by Wittgenstein during his lifetime, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (you may have seen the film), is arguably the most famous single sentence in twentieth-century philosophy: "Of that about which we can say nothing, let us be silent." If I may paraphrase less elegantly, "If you don't know what you're talking about, shut up." That is an enormously important religious counsel. If God is Mystery, then let us not natter on about God like we know what we're talking about.

A great problem of religious language and imagery is that we use it too confidently. We speak as if what we are talking about—God—is perfectly clear and fully intelligible. Any language about God that is perfectly clear is certainly wrong. We are, after all, daring to speak about ultimate Mystery, and whatever we say, we must not, under pain of blasphemy, lose a profound sense of awe before the Mystery which undergirds all that exists. The first commandment of the Decalogue in both Exodus and Deuteronomy is not to fabricate any image of God: "I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me; you shall not make for yourself a graven image . . . you shall not bow down to them or serve them (Deuteronomy 5:6–8; Exodus 20:2–4; RSV) of me." That is a commandment to be taken to heart by all religiously interested people, because it counsels against the too easy idolatry of religious language. For we all make images of God.

For two pages now I have been referring to *God*, yet I suspect that no one reading this has stopped to ask, "Who is he talking about?" We automatically begin with some idea of what the word means or might mean. When I say the

word *God*, something goes on in your mind. Now, however wonderful, however deep, rich, powerful, consoling, however philosophically informed, however metaphysically precise, however traditionally grounded, however scripturally sound, however magisterially orthodox, whatever that idea in your mind is, it is not God. And that is the most important thing to know about God: that what you have in your mind when you hear or speak the word *God* is an image of God, and the First Commandment is against the making of images of God. So we must be very cautious not to confuse what we think when we hear or speak the word *God* with God.

The Second Commandment of the Decalogue, of course, flows directly from the first. The Second Commandment, as you recall, is, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11; RSV). We have done terrible things to this. We have diminished it into a commandment against profanity: "Don't use bad language." (Should you be asked what Himes's position is on profanity, you can answer that he is against it. But I strongly suspect that Moses had more on his mind at Sinai than how colorfully the Israelites were swearing at the foot of the mountain.) The Second Commandment is not about profanity. Rather, it states the obvious consequence of the First Commandment: do not take the name of God in vain. Do not talk about God like you know what you're talking about. Far from a commandment against profanity, it is a warning against overconfident theology and too-simple preaching. We must be very, very, cautious about how we use the word *God* because, more often than not, we use it in vain. If we speak of Mystery, we must acknowledge that ultimately we do not know what we are talking about. Wittgenstein's caution is immensely important.

However, this insight must be balanced by another pole—and the statement of that other pole I borrow from T. S. Eliot. (Eliot was talking about poetry, but I think I can borrow the statement and apply it to religious language without distorting it too much.) Eliot wrote that there are some things about which we can say nothing and before which we dare not keep silent. There are some subjects about which we know in advance that anything we say will be inadequate. But these issues that are so important, so crucial, that we dare not say nothing.

Let me offer an image taken from a Woody Allen film. (I am a New Yorker, indeed, a Brooklynite, by origin. All New Yorkers have an immediate affinity with Woody Allen films. Elsewhere, people think Woody Allen makes comedies; New Yorkers know Woody Allen makes documentaries. He sets up a camera on the Upper West Side and films what is going on. The rest of the world thinks it is funny; New Yorkers know it is life.) In one of his films, *Manhattan*, he plays a man who is deeply in love with a younger woman who has no idea that he is romantically attracted to her. She thinks of him as merely a good friend and is utterly unaware that he is pining for her. Throughout the film, Allen tries to work up the nerve to tell the woman how he feels, and finally two-thirds or three-quarters of the way through the film, in the middle of a conversation about something else entirely, he simply can stand it no longer and blurts out, "I love you." Immediately he catches himself and says, "No, no, no, I don't. I llllllove you. No, no. I loooooove you." He

continues to go through a dozen different ways of saying precisely the same three words. Why? The point of the scene is, I think, that the moment he says those three words, "I love you," he knows how hopelessly inadequate they are. They are such a cliché, so banal. They've been so used and misused and overused in the English language that to say "I love you" does not begin to convey what this man wants to say to that woman.

Were Wittgenstein looking over Allen's script, he would have advised him to end the film at that point. If it cannot be said, be silent. If you do not know how something can be said correctly, do not say it. But Eliot wisely knows that there are some things that are so important you dare not keep silent. You know that you cannot say "I love you" in any way that is adequate, but you also know that you cannot simply be silent, that you have to try to say something, however badly. There are those things so important that one simply cannot be silent about them. This is preeminently true when we speak of God.

At this point, I should add a caution. When the Christian tradition speaks of God, it does not mean a great big person out there somewhere, older, wiser, stronger, than you and I. That is Zeus, not God. One can baptize Zeus, but Zeus always remains Zeus. A baptized Zeus is not what Christians mean when we talk about God. I often tell students that the Christian statements about God are ways of answering the question, "Do you think that there are meaning, purpose, and direction to your life, and do you think that you are not the one who decides that meaning, purpose, and direction?" That question, however it is answered, is the question of God. Does my life have meaning and, if so, do I create and impose that meaning or do I discover it? How we answer that question is how we answer the God question. It is an unavoidable question. We cannot dismiss it as too difficult or impossible of final and sufficient resolution and so decline to ask it. We cannot *not* ask that question, implicitly or explicitly. It cannot be answered finally, but it is too impossible not to answer it in some way. That is where we find ourselves in religious language, language about Mystery. Theology, like all religious language, is caught between Wittgenstein's caution and Eliot's insight.

How, then, do we talk about God, recognizing that we cannot speak of God adequately but must say something? We do what the great users of language—poets—do when trying to say the unsayable: we pile up metaphors. Let me use my favorite example of this from Shakespeare, certainly by anyone's standard a great user of language. I call to your recollection act 5, scene 5 of *Macbeth*. Macbeth's world is falling apart. The English and the Scottish rebels are drawing closer to Dunsinane. As Macbeth gives his frantic orders for defending the castle, there comes a scream from off-stage. To learn the cause of the cry he sends his servant who shortly returns and announces, "The queen, my lord, is dead." Then Shakespeare does what he often does at such moments in the plays: he has a character say that he cannot speak about the crisis. Hamlet dies saying that "the rest is silence." Othello kills himself while talking about an irrelevant action long ago in Aleppo. King Lear's last words dissolve into sound and rhythm. And Macbeth says, more to himself than to his servant, "She should have died hereafter:/ There would have been a time for such a word."

There are no words for Lady Macbeth's death, at least not at that moment. Macbeth cannot talk about it—but, of course, he does. He launches into his great soliloquy: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow/ Creeps in this petty pace from day to day . . ." And we come to the extraordinary moment when Macbeth says, "Life is . . ." Realize what the death of this woman means to this man. She was not only his wife; she was the only other human being who shares the guilt, the only other person who knows all the horror—and she is gone. Macbeth is now utterly alone, alone as few, if any, are ever alone. So the loneliest human being in the world is about to tell us what life is like for him.

And how does he do it? He gives us three metaphors. "Life's but a walking shadow." A shadow, nothing, merely the absence of light. But a walking shadow—animated nothingness. Now hold that image in mind, but shift your angle of vision, as it were. Life is also "a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more." A bad actor—Shakespeare had probably known many. An actor who gets on stage and flubs his lines and muffs his gestures and bumps into props. The audience wants him to get off so that the play can go on; when he does exits, the audience immediately forgets him. Now, hold that image in mind, too, and shift your perspective to still another angle. Life is "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." I suspect that most of us, if not all, have had the experience of being harangued by someone who was overwrought and out of control, who spluttered on about—what? Something, nothing; whatever it was, we did not understand it. A moment of pure frustration. A tale full of sound and fury told by an idiot. (Teachers have probably had such experiences. Believe me, anyone who has spent any time in ministry knows what it is like to be buttonholed by someone who carries on at length about something that apparently means a great deal to him or her and that remains thoroughly impenetrable to the captive listener.) Three images. Draw out the lines of those three perspectives and, where they intersect, that is how life looks to the loneliest human being on earth. When trying to say the unsayable, we pile metaphor on metaphor on metaphor. Shakespeare, of course, does it better than the rest of us.

That is precisely what we do in religious language when we try to speak about God. And so we say that God is creator, judge, parent, spouse, shepherd, king, lawgiver, rock, leader in battle, savior, and on and on. We pile image on image on image on image, metaphor after metaphor after metaphor. But there must be some control on these metaphors. After all, some ways of describing God are simply abhorrent to the Christian tradition, e.g., God is evil or God is hatred. So we ask: Is there some fundamental metaphor for God according to the Christian tradition which can provide a guideline for talking about God, a metaphor with which all other metaphors must be in accord in order to be deemed acceptable? Granted that no way of talking about God is the right and fully adequate way, is there some way of talking about God that is less hopelessly inadequate than other ways?

The Christian tradition says yes. There is a fundamental metaphor for talking about God with which all the other metaphors we use for God must

fit. (I suspect, by the way, that this idea of a fundamental metaphor for ultimate Mystery is applicable to all great religious traditions, but at this moment we are interested in Christianity, especially in its Catholic form.) The fundamental metaphor for God in the Christian tradition is suggested over and over again in the New Testament but finds its clearest, sharpest, most succinct statement in one of the last documents of the New Testament collection written, what we call the First Letter of John, at 4:8 and again at 16: "God is love" (NRSV).

## A Fundamental Metaphor for God

But this love which is offered as the fundamental metaphor for God is a peculiar kind of love: *agape*. This is not the usual Greek word for "love" in the New Testament era. That would be *eros*, a perfectly fine word and a marvelous concept, but not the one early Christians chose as the metaphor for the ultimate Mystery. *Eros* is a love that seeks satisfaction from the person or thing loved. Thus, it clearly includes what most of us think of first when we hear of erotic love, i.e., sexual love. But it also means what we refer to in English when we say, "I love that movie" or "I love playing tennis." These are instances of what the Greek-speaking world called "erotic" love, because the lover finds satisfaction and pleasure in that which is loved. There is certainly nothing wrong with *eros*; it is simply something other than *agape*. *Agape* is love to which satisfaction is irrelevant. The lover seeks nothing from the beloved, not even gratitude. The lover simply gives the lover's self to the beloved. Rather than "love," which has become a word with so many (probably too many) uses in English, I prefer to translate *agape* as "self-gift," the gift of the self to the other asking nothing in response. *Agape* is pure gift of self to the other. This is what the Christian tradition claims is the least wrong metaphor for God.

The whole Christian doctrinal tradition is an expansion of this fundamental claim, that God, the Ultimate Mystery which undergirds the existence of all that is, is least wrongly thought of as pure and perfect self-gift. I might exemplify this at great length, but you will be thrilled to know I shall not. But we should note that, while the fundamental Christian metaphor for God is *agape*, pure other-directed love, "love" is not the name of a person but rather of a relationship among persons. So we are saying that the least wrong way to think about God, the foundational Mystery that grounds and surrounds all that exists, is not first and foremost as a person but as a relationship. You may well think that this is a bizarre claim, and in many ways it is. But I am sure that it is scarcely a claim that you have not heard before, although perhaps not in quite these words. In fact among Christians, certainly Catholic Christians, we make this claim all the time. We often affirm that we do or say something "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." When we do so, we assert that God is to be thought of first not as "the One," but as the relatedness of "the Three." The central point of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God is least wrongly understood as a relationship, as an eternal explosion of love.

When he wrote *De Trinitate*, St. Augustine acknowledged that the Church had language for the Trinity from the New Testament itself. At the end of the Gospel of St. Matthew (28:19), we find the command to go out and baptize all nations “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (NRSV). But, Augustine suggested, however biblically rooted such language may be, it is not especially helpful in trying to show the meaning of the Trinity for people’s lives. After all, he reasoned, if we are created in the image and likeness of God and God is Triune, then ought we not be able to see traces of the Trinity in our own experience? So he set out to find alternate terminology that might better convey the meaning of the Trinity, coming up with two sets of terms that he seems to have particularly liked—and I must confess that I like them, too. Augustine suggested that perhaps “Giver, Recipient, and Gift given” might be more useful for teaching and preaching, rather than “Father, Son, Spirit”; or as yet another alternative, “Lover, Beloved, and the Love between them.” This is what Christians mean when they talk about God: from all eternity the Mystery at the root of all that exists is endless self-gift, endless outpouring of self; for all eternity the Mystery is endless acceptance of the gift of that outpouring and rejoicing in it; and for all eternity the Mystery is the outpouring, God is the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love between them; the Giver, the Recipient, and the Gift given. When we use the word *God*, the Mystery that grounds and surrounds all that exists, we speak of the infinite and eternal explosion of self-gift.

That allows me to pose another question: Why does God create? Think with me for a moment about the question that Martin Heidegger maintained was the beginning of all metaphysics, i.e., of all accounts of how things finally fit together: Why is there being rather than nothing? There are many ways in which that question has been answered, many metaphysics. The Christian tradition’s answer, as I understand it, is, “Because it is loved.” The reason that anything exists is that it is the object of love. All things that are, are loved into being. The fundamental ground for anything is that it is called into being because God loves it. As I noted earlier, the universe gives nothing to God; rather, God gives something to it, namely God’s self. Why? Because God gets a kick out of it. Because that’s what God’s like: overflowing love. Please notice: I am speaking about the reason *anything* exists, not only *anyone*. This overflowing love is the reason for not only your existence and mine, but for the existence of the chair on which you are sitting and the pen you are holding, the existence of the leaves on the trees and your pet cat and your favorite rhododendron and the furthest supernova. It is the ground of the existence of the universe, everything that ever has, ever will, or ever can exist. Why does anything exist rather than nothing, in Heidegger’s question? The Christian tradition’s answer is because it is loved.

What makes us unique as human beings (at least, as far as we know) is that we are the point in creation that can acknowledge that we are infinitely loved and either accept or reject it. We can embrace being loved or deny and turn away from it. The desk at which I am writing cannot know that it is loved; it cannot accept or refuse being loved. It is, however, as truly and perfectly loved as I am. Please notice: everything is loved perfectly because

God, being God, does nothing imperfectly. God is God and therefore always acts in a God-like way, which is to say, God does everything perfectly. God does not love a little today and a bit more tomorrow and perhaps a bit less the day after. God loved you on Tuesday, but then Wednesday you sinned, so God loved you less; then on Thursday you repented, so God loves you again: that is pure mythology in which God is reduced to Zeus or Odin. Rather, God loves everything in a God-like way, perfectly, completely, one hundred percent. Not every creature can know and accept this love, of course. The desk is loved perfectly, and so is Himes. The difference is that Himes knows it and the desk does not. Sometimes Himes accepts it, and sometimes, tragically, he refuses it. But God remains God.

Nothing you can do can make God not love you. If there were, then you would be more powerful than God, in that you could cause God to change. I sometimes use this image when I preach, and it ruffles some feathers, but feather-ruffling is by no means a bad thing to do in the pulpit. Let me dare to make a claim about how things look from God’s perspective: from God’s point of view, there is no difference between Mary and Satan; God loves them both perfectly. The difference is on the side of the two creatures: Mary is thrilled and Satan hates it. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas Aquinas raises a question: If God is everywhere, is God in hell? His answer is that, indeed, God is in hell. Of course, his next question is: And what is God doing there? And Thomas’s answer is that God is in hell loving the damned. The damned may not love God, but the damned cannot make God not love them. Since the perfect love which is the least wrong metaphor for God is the reason for our being, the opposite of being loved by God is not damnation, but non-being. Not to be loved by God is not to exist. Everything that is, to the extent that it is, is loved.

## The Sacramental Principle

Let me introduce another piece of theological shorthand: *grace*. *Grace* is the word by which we traditionally designate the *agape* of God outside the Trinity, the *agape* of God calling all things into being. In Christian theology, *grace* is the self-giving of God outside the Trinity bringing all things into being.

With the introduction of the word *grace*, I want to turn our attention to a difficulty. Consideration of the difficulty for a moment will lead us back to the sacramental principle. If the agapic love of God or *grace* is omnipresent, if everything is loved or engraced, if everything we are and everything we encounter is rooted in *grace*, *grace* may go unnoticed. What is omnipresent is more often than not unnoticed. For example, the whole time you have been reading this, you have been blinking. Now, unless this paper has been preternaturally boring, you have not been counting your blinks. After all, who thinks about blinking? This example struck me a few years ago because I was hit with a bout of Bell’s palsy. The left side of my face froze, and one of the consequences was that my left eye could not blink. Throughout the day I periodically had to hold my left eyelid down, and at night I taped the eye

shut. One becomes very conscious of blinking when one cannot do it, yet I never thought about it until Bell's palsy called my attention to it.

What we do all the time we seldom, if ever, think about. What is always there gets little or no attention. For example, we never think about the oxygen in a room until the air starts to become stale. We do not think about our heart beating, although if it stopped, we would notice as we slumped to the floor. So if grace is omnipresent, grace is likely to go unnoticed. We require occasions when grace is called to our attention, when it is made concrete for us, when that which is always the case is made present in such a way that we cannot help but notice it and may either accept or reject it and, if we accept it, celebrate it. I remind you of my preliminary description of what I called the *sacramental principle*: that which is always and everywhere the case must be noticed, accepted, and celebrated somewhere sometime.

In the Catholic tradition, we call the occasions when grace is made effectively present for us *sacraments*. I am not referring here primarily to the seven great public rituals that Catholics celebrate (although I am by no means excluding them). By *sacrament* I mean any person, place, thing, or event, any sight, sound, taste, touch, or smell, that causes us to notice the love which supports all that exists, that undergirds your being and mine and the being of everything about us. How many such sacraments are there? The number is virtually infinite, as many as there are things in the universe. There is nothing that cannot be a sacrament, absolutely nothing—even, as St. Augustine observed, sin. Within the context of repentance, sin can become an occasion when we discover how deeply loved we are. This is what he meant when he called the sin of Adam and Eve *felix culpa*, a happy fault, a phrase the Church still sings in the Easter Proclamation every Holy Saturday. There is nothing that cannot become a sacrament for someone, absolutely nothing.

We all have our personal sacraments. For all of you who are married, I hope that one of the deepest, richest, most profound experiences of the fundamental love that undergirds being is your spouse. For those who are parents, I hope your children are such experiences. To your neighbors, they may be the little pests who live next door, but to you they are sacraments. We all have our own array of sacraments that are absolutely necessary for us.

This, by the way, is an important element in Catholic liturgy. The fundamental principle of Catholic liturgy is that everything and the kitchen sink have a place within it. Why? Because everything is potentially sacred. Everything is engraced. So everything is fair game for liturgy. So we sing, dance, parade, wave banners, ring bells, play organs, blow horns, sound trumpets—and sometimes we are still and silent. We eat, drink, bathe one another in water, pour oil on one another, put one another to bed when we get married and into the earth when we die. We waft incense, hang paintings, put up mosaics, erect statues, construct extraordinary buildings and illumine them through stained glass. We appeal to sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. Historically, the principle on which the liturgy operated was, "If it works, throw it in." The reason for such inclusiveness is the deep Catholic conviction that nothing is by definition profane. Everything is potentially sacramental.

The great nineteenth-century English Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins has an especially beautiful phrase for this. It is a line in one of his best-known and most frequently anthologized poems, "Hurrahing in Harvest." At the time he wrote the poem, Hopkins was teaching at a Jesuit boys' school in Wales. At the opening of the poem it is the fall and Hopkins is disheartened by the disappearance of the summer's beauty and the coming onset of winter. But he begins to consider the clouds scudding across the sky, the way the wind blows off the Irish Sea at that time of year in Wales, the joy of people bringing in the harvest, and the changing color of the leaves. How beautiful it all is, yet he does not notice it while he worries about what is gone and dreads what has not come. All the while, he fails to notice what is here at the moment. In what is, in my opinion, the single most beautiful statement in English of the Catholic sacramental principle—and Hopkins was Catholic to the tips of his fingers—the poet wrote, "These things, these things were here and but the beholder / Wanting." The leaves have not suddenly changed their colors at that moment, nor has the sky been transformed. All that beauty was already there. What changed? Hopkins. The splendor was there, but he did not notice it. Then he becomes a beholder and sees what is there to be seen. The whole Catholic sacramental life is a training to be beholders. Catholic liturgy is a lifelong pedagogy to bring us to see what is there, to behold what is always present, in the conviction that if we truly see and fully appreciate what is there, whether we use the language or not, we will be encountering grace. We will see the love which undergirds all that exists.

Those who have been fortunate to have seen the film *Babette's Feast* might recall how the little band of Lutheran sectarians learn to appreciate what has been placed there before them by the French chef, Babette. They learn to savor the taste, the aroma, the color of the food and drink and, in discovering the goodness of the physical world, are led to reconciliation with one another. At the end of the extraordinary meal, they go outside into the little square of the village where they have stood countless times, look up at the stars, join hands, and begin to sing. At one marvelous, closing moment, one of the two elderly sisters says to the other, "The stars look very close tonight," and the other replies, "Maybe they are every night." That night they could see what was there every night because Babette's feast had made them beholders. That is what sacramentality does.

But what has all this to do with education and the intellectual's vocation? As a Catholic and an educator, I think that it may suggest a very important perspective on education. If we accept what I have said about the sacramental principle, then anything that awakens, enlivens, and expands the imagination, opens the vision, and enriches the sensitivity of any human being is a religious act. Although we may not use this language, education is or can be training in sacramental beholding.

At the very beginning of the twentieth century, Baron Friedrich von Hügel, one of the most profoundly Catholic people of that century, was invited to give a talk to a Christian students' association at Oxford. (Despite the Austrian name, he was, in fact, an Englishman. His father had been an Austrian and a baron of the Holy Roman Empire, but his mother was a Scot.

He was brought up in England and English was his first language.) In his lecture to this group of presumably earnest Christian students, von Hügel spoke of asceticism, self-discipline, as a traditionally important part of the Christian life. He asked a rhetorical question: Who is the most striking example of asceticism in the nineteenth century that had just ended? I suspect that his answer must have shocked those sober young Christian gentlemen in Oxford, for he said that he thought, beyond doubt, that the great example of asceticism in the nineteenth century had been Charles Darwin. Darwin, according to von Hügel, had, with immense discipline and over a long period of time, subordinated his extraordinarily keen, powerful intellect and astonishing energy to the painstaking observation of the varieties of barnacles and the shapes of pigeons' bills. With astonishing clarity and intensity, Darwin had forced himself to observe what was there. And that, claimed von Hügel, is what asceticism is all about.

Asceticism is not self-denial in order to please a mildly sadistic deity. Rather, its goal is to discipline oneself sufficiently so that one can move beyond one's hopes, dreams, fears, wants, and expectations to see what is, in fact, there. Asceticism is a training to see reality, not what one expects, hopes, or fears to see. I have often told students that the point of asceticism is to stop looking in the mirror long enough to look out the window, to stop gazing at oneself long enough to see something else. The Catholic conviction is that if one sees what is there to be seen, one will discover grace, the love that undergirds all that exists. The ascetic beholds the omnipresence of grace.

Where do people today learn that kind of self-discipline? There are, I think, many ways in which life teaches us asceticism. Marriage is a splendid school of self-discipline for those who live it well and wisely, as is parenthood. Paying off the mortgage and managing our credit cards can be excellent paths of ascetical training. They are all ways of coming to grips with what is there, not what we would like to be there.

And certainly, one of the most rigorous and effective ways of self-discipline is science. Following von Hügel's claim about Darwin, I suggest that there is a profoundly sacramental dimension to all the sciences because they are all training in intellectual self-discipline. After all, we often call our fields of study *disciplines*. When we study anything, we "discipline" ourselves.

Anything that expands the imagination, enriches the vision, liberates the will, frees the vision, and disciplines the attention is a profoundly religious act. Indeed, so convinced am I of this that I could have come at this same point from an entirely different angle from the way I have done thus far. I could have developed this same conclusion starting from a consideration of what Christians mean by the *Incarnation*. Catholics try to hold this belief radically and so insist that in Christ God does not merely seem to be human or act in a human way, but has become human. In the words of an ancient hymn quoted in Philippians 2:6–11, he has become human as all human beings are human, that he is like us in all things except sin. The Catholic tradition has recognized that, if this radical claim of the Incarnation is true, then you and I and God share humanity in common and so, to become like God, we should be as fully human as we can. Thus, whatever enriches and deepens our

humanity, whatever makes us braver, wiser, more intelligent, more responsible, freer, more loving, makes us holy, i.e., like God. Thus, education, which certainly should aim at making human beings braver, wiser, more intelligent, more responsible, freer, and more loving, is a work of sanctification. This is why the Christian community has always been involved in education and not only in catechetics. A good Catholic university or college is not a place where we allow people to study mathematics or history or literature so that we can get them to sit through a religion course. We do not admit people to the business school so that we can require them to take a minimum number of credits in theology. Rather, any and every field of study is ultimately religious in nature if everything rests on grace and humanity is shared with God in Christ.

This sacramental conviction shapes Catholicism at its best. Of course, Catholicism is not always at its best, and so does not always act in accord with its sacramental vision. But were we all to require ourselves to live up to our best vision all the time, which of us would have gotten out of bed this morning? Still, at its best and wisest, Catholicism is shaped by the conviction that grace lies at the root of all reality. And if that conviction is true, all the humanities as well as all the sciences become religious enterprises.

Let me offer a closing image. In the *Divine Comedy*, you will recall that Dante allots hell, purgatory, and heaven each thirty-three cantos. The whole of the great poem is completed with a hundredth canto in which Dante attempts to do what Wittgenstein would have told him he should not even try: to describe to the reader the vision of God. In the ninety-ninth canto of the poem, the thirty-third of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice has conducted Dante to the highest circle of heaven. She points him toward Bernard of Clairvaux, a symbol of all that was richest and best in the spiritual tradition of the Middle Ages. Looking in awe at Bernard, Dante realizes that Bernard is gazing steadily across at someone else, and he follows Bernard's gaze to Mary. And he is overwhelmed with the sight of Mary until he sees that she has her look fixed steadily upward. Dante follows Mary's glance and beholds at the end of canto ninety-nine the vision of God. In canto one hundred, he tries to do the undoable. Needless to say he fails, but Dante's failures are more interesting than almost anyone else's successes. He says that he was dazzled by a light that initially blinded him. But as the intense light burned his eyes, it healed them so that he began to discern that the light was actually the interaction of three concentric globes of three colors, his image for the Trinity. As his eyes were simultaneously seared and strengthened, he could look into the very depth of the light, and there he saw one exactly like himself. In one of the greatest statements of the Catholic humanist tradition, Dante saw that, as a result of the Incarnation, at the heart of God is one like him and you and me.

And so, in the great final line of the great poem, the line to which the whole *Divine Comedy* has been leading, his recognition of "*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*," "the love that moves the sun and other stars." This is Dante's statement of the sacramental principle: the universe, the sun and all the stars, is grounded and governed by love. It exists because of infinite self-gift. That is what enlivens the Catholic tradition at its best.