

Christology and the Christian Life

Paul J. Wadell

IN A LANDMARK ESSAY written only months after the close of the Second Vatican Council, Josef Fuchs bluntly noted “that the presentation of moral theology in the past has left much to be desired.”¹ To revitalize the moribund discipline, Fuchs argued that “a moral theology of laws” must be replaced by “a moral theology of our vocation in Christ.”² Instead of reducing moral theology to a deadening code of principles and precepts, Fuchs insisted that “*Christ* and our being-in-Christ are to be its centre and focus.”³ For Fuchs the beauty, promise and unyielding hope of the Christian life were best illumined not through a minutely detailed (and often scrupulously applied) categorization of sins, but when we envision it as the ongoing, ever deepening, and increasingly engaging response to the eminently personal call of Christ. The starting point for reflecting on the Christian life is not our collective captivity to sin, but our baptism into the freedom and new life Christ has won for us in his death and resurrection.

The heart of the Christian life is the joyful summons to follow, learn from, creatively imitate, and ultimately embody Christ in the world. Echoing Paul’s memorable description of what it meant to be baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:4), Fuchs wrote that the Christian life, as a call to discipleship, unfolds in the awareness that we have been “awakened to ‘walk in newness of life.’”⁴

Fuchs’ essay directly responded to the Council’s call to renew moral theology not only by centering it in Christ, but also by rooting it in the Scriptures, reconnecting it to the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church, and by emphasizing the social significance of the

¹ Josef Fuchs, S.J., “Moral Theology According to Vatican II,” in *Human Values and Christian Morality* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970), 2. The essay was first published in 1966.

² Fuchs, “Moral Theology According to Vatican II,” 12.

³ Fuchs, “Moral Theology According to Vatican II,” 3.

⁴ Fuchs, “Moral Theology According to Vatican II,” 5.

Christian life.⁵ The Council recognized that there was a crisis in moral theology because, beginning in the sixth century with the development of the Irish penitentials, the discipline had become so identified with training priests for the confessional that it had lost touch with the overall sweep of the Christian life.⁶ Instead of seeing the Christian life as the ongoing transformation of persons in the love, goodness, and holiness of Christ, there was an almost exclusive focus on the darker and more rebellious dimensions of human beings. Vices to avoid received much more attention than virtues to develop while the language of grace, discipleship, and the Gospels essentially disappeared from the landscape of the Christian life. The result, as John Mahoney wrote, was a moral theology characterized by “a preoccupation with sin; a concentration on the individual; and an obsession with law.”⁷ With such a distorted and emaciated vision of the Christian life, it was not surprising that Catholics heard the stirrings of something new—even revolutionary—in the Council’s claim that every Christian is called to “the perfection of charity” and a “holiness of life” befitting the saints.⁸

The center of the Christian life is neither a theory nor an idea, much less a catalogue of rules and regulations, but a person to be followed, imitated, and completely taken to heart. Fuchs was right to insist that we properly understand the meaning and shape of the Christian life only when we see it as a *vocation*, as the very personal, continually unfolding, but always unfinished response to the invitation to follow Christ. But what precisely does this mean? What would a life of faithful discipleship entail? If we take our baptisms seriously, what happens? When Fuchs claims that baptism both frees us and calls us “to walk in newness of life,” what does this involve? In this

⁵ The most frequently cited text is found in the Degree on the Training of Priests (*Optatum totius*) 16: “In like manner the other theological subjects should be renewed through a more lively contact with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. Special care is to be taken for the improvement of moral theology. Its scientific presentation, drawing more fully on the teaching of Holy Scripture, should highlight the lofty vocation of the Christian faithful and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world.” *The Basic Sixteen Documents of Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: 1996).

⁶ For a superb analysis see John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 1-36. A more extensive account of how the penitentials and manuals shaped moral theology is given in John A. Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future: An Historical Study of Catholic Moral Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1990). For a study of the development of casuistry and probabilism see Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988).

⁷ Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, 27.

⁸ The claims are found in *Lumen gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), nos. 39-40.

essay I want to suggest some answers to these questions by developing Fuchs' insights about the absolute centrality of Christ for the Christian life. First, I will suggest that a fitting way to understand the Christian life in light of Christ is to see it as being initiated into, and remaining faithful to, the story of God that is Jesus. Life in Christ begins at baptism when fledgling Christians enter the story that marks the start of their life of discipleship. There they become part of a community of fellow disciples who apprentice themselves to Christ and in doing so discover what it means "to walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7).⁹ Second, if the Christian life is the continuous and always incomplete conforming of our selves to Christ, then it is also a life of ongoing conversion. Life in Christ is formed by the paschal mystery, and thus it demands continually dying to attitudes, habits, and practices that are contrary to the ways of God. I will examine this aspect of the Christian life primarily through an analysis of the virtues because it is through them that we acquire ways of being and acting befitting followers of Christ and citizens of the reign of God. Third, following the impetus of the Second Vatican Council, I will conclude by suggesting that the Christian life is completed in mission, in a holy ministry to the world that is best deciphered in light of Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God. Life in Christ is preeminently life for others, especially the most excluded, forgotten, or diminished members of the community in whom we are summoned to behold the love and goodness of God.

LIFE IN CHRIST: BEING FAITHFUL TO A STORY

Stories are arguments about life and about what counts as excellence and fulfillment in life. Stories offer accounts of what it means to be human, accounts of what we should aspire to as persons and communities, and accounts of how we should understand the meaning and purpose of our lives.¹⁰ Christians believe that they have found in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus a story that is not only truthful and compelling and abundantly promising, but also shows the path to a genuinely good and beautiful life. In Je-

⁹ All biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas was among the first to appreciate the importance of narrative for understanding the Christian life. See especially his earlier work *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1977); *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981); and *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983). For a more extensive critical analysis see *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

sus we discover what it means to be human and learn that “being Christian involves becoming more genuinely human.”¹¹ More importantly, in Christ we behold what God always calls us to become, and by following Christ faithfully grow into the persons we were always meant to be.¹²

But we become the persons we were always meant to be only by embracing a very different way of being human and a very different way of understanding human flourishing. Far from offering us just “more of the same,” in Christ “a new way of being human has been launched upon the world.”¹³ Jesus turns our customary views of happiness, success, and prosperity upside-down because his entire way of life testifies that fulfillment comes not through power, celebrity, wealth, and possessions, but in mercy, humility, justice, service, and unrestricted love of neighbor. Indeed, the first Christians believed that the death and resurrection of Jesus began a new age that invited radical consideration of our lives together in the world.¹⁴ Jesus’ life, death and resurrection brought something absolutely new into being, something so remarkably different that the apostle Paul could say, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17). That exultant declaration captures the liberating difference of the Christian story. With Jesus’ resurrection “the great reversal” took place because in raising Jesus from the dead, and vindicating everything his life was about, God affirmed that the powers that move the world are not violence, animosity, selfishness, greed, injustice and death, but hospitality, mercy, generosity, justice, love, forgiveness and peace.¹⁵

Such a story is extraordinarily hopeful; indeed, it is a story that offers the world a path to blessedness and light. To become a Christian is to find one’s place in the story of Jesus and to carry it forward. It is to become part of a community that has been entrusted with that story (a community that has taken the story to heart) and whose abiding vocation is to bring it to life in the world in creative and redemptive ways. That is why Christians can fittingly be described as storytellers who narrate the story of Jesus through their lives. But in order to do that well we have to locate our lives in the story of Jesus,

¹¹ N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 29.

¹² Wright, *After You Believe*, 89.

¹³ Wright, *After You Believe*, 129.

¹⁴ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 19.

¹⁵ Allan Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Vancouver: Regent College, 1984), 15.

learn to live according to that story, and then discover what role we have to play in witnessing it to the world. Accomplishing that mission requires becoming a different kind of person; it demands taking on a new character formed through distinctive habits and practices.

And so to become a Christian is to begin to tell a new and different story.¹⁶ To take up a new story is to take on a new life. Christians begin their lifelong initiation into the story of Jesus at baptism. This is how the first Christians understood the significance of baptism. Baptism ritually symbolized their response to Jesus' call to discipleship and, like the first disciples summoned by Jesus, they believed that answering that call demanded wholehearted commitment and a thorough reorientation of their lives. They had been justified and accepted by God, not so they could remain as they were, but so that they could live the new life that had come to them in Christ. At baptism they "put on Christ" and made Christ's life the rule for their own; indeed, as Galatians 3:28 indicates, through baptism their primary identity was no longer determined by nationality, social status, or gender, but by their collective being in Christ ("There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."). Everything about the sacrament indicated that the changes brought about by baptism were profound. The exorcism that was part of the ritual, the renunciation of evil, the disrobing and immersion, the being clothed in a new garment, all dramatically indicated the sharp rupture between one's past life and the new life one was entering in Christ.¹⁷

The early Christians understood their baptism in light of the paschal mystery. Just as Christ died and was raised up to new and everlasting life, their baptisms symbolized dying to their former ways of life—burying that life for good—in order to be raised up with Christ into the liberating new life of grace. As Wayne Meeks notes, "Baptism represents a dying and rising, and the rising entails a new life. The ritual of initiation dramatized as sharply as possible the discontinuity between the old and the new, between the world the convert was leaving and the world he or she now entered, between the 'old human' and the new."¹⁸ Through baptism Christians acquired the new identity of being lifelong disciples of Christ, became part of a new community with its own distinctive habits and practices, and took on a new way of life whose focus was not on advancing them-

¹⁶ The section on baptism and its impact on the Christian life is largely taken from my *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 87-8.

¹⁷ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University, 1993), 32-3.

¹⁸ Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality*, 94-5.

selves, but glorifying God and following God's ways. "Because their old selves have been drowned in the baptismal waters and they have been resurrected with Christ, Christ himself becomes the pattern of their lives to which they are called by him to conform," Vigen Guroian explains.¹⁹ And that ongoing and ever deepening conformity to Christ results in "a new structure of life" with ways of thinking, perceiving, and acting that often are quite different from the ethics of the surrounding society.²⁰

The relocation of one's life entailed by baptism was considered to be so extensive that some early Christian writers compared it to leaving one's native land behind and traveling to a new homeland whose culture, traditions, and language presented a very different understanding of life. Baptism was a transfer of allegiance and a change of citizenship that marked "the separation from one life and one society and the joining of another, leaving the family of birth and the culture of residence and becoming a sister or brother of those who are God's children."²¹ Becoming a citizen of the reign of God required unlearning the culture and traditions and language of one's past life in order to be socialized into the culture, traditions, and language of those who had made the story of Jesus the illuminating center of their lives. Thus, to be baptized was to begin a lifelong process of moral reeducation whereby one took off the vices of a past life and put on the virtues of Christ.²² If at one time the newly birthed Christian was clothed in habits of anger, resentment, jealousy, divisiveness, and vindictiveness, now as a member of a community ruled and defined by Christ, he or she was to be clothed with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Col 3:12). As imitators of Christ they were to "bear with one another" and "forgive each other" (3:13) because in Christ God had been patient with them and had forgiven them. And in conforming their lives to the story of Jesus they were to "clothe" themselves with love, "let the peace of Christ" rule their hearts, teach and, when necessary, "admonish one another" (14-16). Above all, they were to "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:17). As L. Gregory Jones summarizes, "Baptism inducts those who are baptized into the shared practices of the community defined and ruled by the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection."²³ Additionally, Jones elabo-

¹⁹ Vigen Guroian, *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1987), 64.

²⁰ Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 62.

²¹ Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality*, 12.

²² Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality*, 67.

²³ L. Gregory Jones, *Transformed Judgment: Toward a Trinitarian Account of the Moral Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 138-9.

rates, “Quite profoundly baptism represents the changed context in which the Christian is now located; no longer under the grasp of the false and self-deceptive traditions of sin, the Christian is defined by her incipient friendship with the Triune God.”²⁴

However, it is impossible to be “defined and ruled by the story of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection,” much less to abandon “the false and self-deceptive traditions of sin,” apart from faith in Christ and his message and mission. The Christian life is inherently and inescapably a life of faith because it requires assenting to something we can never completely understand, and surrendering to someone whose ways often baffle and mystify, in the belief and hope that in him and in his teaching is the path to life. Jesus promises us abundant life—“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). But the way to the life he offers us shocks and scandalizes—“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). That is why the Christian life is impossible without the vulnerability and uncertainty entailed in believing. In order to experience the new life Christ offers, we must open ourselves to a way of being that at least initially will not only not make sense to us, but may also provoke misunderstanding and even rejection from others. As Jesus told his closest followers on the night before he died, “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18). Each of the gospels testifies that in Christ a new and much more promising way of being has broken into our world; however, we cannot know that new way of being without abandoning the customary ways of perceiving, valuing, thinking, and behaving that make so much sense to us. To be citizens of the new community and social order that Jesus called the reign of God, we must sever connections with our former ways of living in order to conform ourselves to Christ, and that is impossible without exquisite and unflinching faith.

To believe is to give unqualified assent and unconditional acceptance to something we can neither know on our own nor ever be absolutely sure is true. That is why in the Christian life we always “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). Josef Pieper says that to believe is to accept “a given matter as real and true on the testimony of someone else.”²⁵ In other words, “the reason for believing ‘something’ is that one believes ‘someone.’”²⁶ On the one hand, the “something” of faith must truly matter to us, concern us, and be important

²⁴ Jones, *Transformed Judgment*, 139.

²⁵ Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D., Richard Winston, and Clara Winston (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 29.

²⁶ Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 30.

to us; it must be captivating and compelling. Despite our doubts and uncertainty, we embrace the risk of faith because we believe what is proclaimed responds to our deepest needs and longings, the most unyielding hungers of our hearts, and will truly fulfill and complete us. But, on the other hand, if we do not find the “someone” who proclaims the “something” of faith to be authentic—if he or she does not teach with “authority” (Mark 1:27)—we will hardly believe what they say even if their message resonates with our hearts’ deepest desires. What distinguishes Christian faith, however, is that the “message” of faith is not only fully revealed in, but also absolutely identical with, the “messenger” who proclaims it. Jesus not only preaches the love, goodness, justice, compassion, and incalculable mercy and faithfulness of God, but is that love, goodness, justice, compassion, mercy, and faithfulness *in person*. Christians have faith in Christ because he not only talks about a new and better way of being human, but also reveals and embodies it in everything he does. Christians focus their lives on Christ because it is impossible for them to distinguish *what* they believe from *who* they believe; in other words, in his whole way of being in the world, in his attitudes, emotions, words and actions, Jesus verifies what he testifies.

This is why in the Christian life the assent of faith requires more than a rational or intellectual affirmation of what Christ taught. That is an important element of faith, but it is hardly sufficient for a life of faith because it suggests that one could understand and appreciate the teaching of Christ apart from a wholehearted commitment to Christ. But as the call stories of the gospels testify, one cannot understand Christ by observing him from afar. We learn what Jesus is about only by aligning our lives to his and only by claiming the identity of a disciple. In the Christian life, to “walk by faith” is to “walk with” Christ because we cannot grasp who Jesus is without partaking of his life. For Christians, knowledge comes from participation, from not only observing Jesus, but by also following him and actively sharing in his life. Thus, baptism, the sacrament of faith, signals the beginning of a lifelong apprenticeship with Christ. To be baptized is to set out on a journey led by Christ, a journey on which one follows, observes, listens to, and learns from Christ in order to become like Christ. Indeed, as we take that journey of faith our lives become so intimately entwined with Christ that we cannot be ourselves apart from him. For Christians, faith means that “our center of gravity” is not in ourselves, but “outside ourselves” in Christ.²⁷ And the more

²⁷ Gustavo Gutierrez, “A Spirituality of Liberation,” in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Conn (New York: Alba House, 1978), 309.

we are centered in Christ—the more, as Paul says, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20)—the more do we grow in the attitudes, affections, and virtues of Christ and thus are able to witness Christ in the world. The goal of a life of faith is for the apprentice to learn so well from the master that she can re-present Christ through her whole manner of living and thus be the “real presence” of Christ to others.

LIFE IN CHRIST: A SAGA OF ONGOING CONVERSION

Jesus began his public ministry with the stirring proclamation, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). One becomes part of the reign of God through faith and repentance. But in the gospel to repent (*metanoia*) does not mean to be filled with guilt, sorrow, or shame; rather, to repent is to completely rethink and reassess one’s life in light of Jesus and his message.²⁸ It is to thoroughly restructure one’s life—to become a new person with a different character—in response to experiencing the unconditional love of God in Christ. Yet, this fundamental reorientation of the self to Christ is hardly instantaneous; rather, it is an ongoing process that occurs over a lifetime. Jesus offers us a new way of being human, but it has to be learned. We grow in and experience this new way of life in the measure that we abandon old habits and practices and are increasingly transfigured in the love and goodness of God, but that transfiguration of ourselves in Christ always stands unfinished.

This is why life in Christ is simultaneously always a life of ongoing and hopefully ever deepening conversion.²⁹ In its most basic sense, conversion means to “turn around.” But that implies turning away from something old in order to turn toward something new, a movement that signals a sharp change of focus or direction in one’s life.³⁰ When we undergo a conversion in the most complete sense of the word, we abandon well-established patterns of thinking and perceiving and valuing and relating, forsaking those for new ways of thinking and seeing and valuing and relating that seem clearly superior and more promising. We abandon habits we once firmly embraced because we realize now that they were not good for us, that they harmed and diminished us, and in their place we nurture habits

²⁸ Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 47.

²⁹ For a more extensive analysis of conversion see Patricia Lamoureux and Paul J. Wadell, *The Christian Moral Life: Faithful Discipleship for a Global Society* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 93-101.

³⁰ John E. Smith, “The Concept of Conversion,” in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, 51.

we may have strenuously avoided before. Consequently, we are not now the persons we were then because we see the world differently, because our estimation of what is important has been significantly altered, and because what once loomed large in our lives now barely holds our attention. Bernard Lonergan captured the comprehensive transformation effected by a conversion when he wrote: "What hitherto was unnoticed becomes vivid and present. What had been of no concern becomes a matter of high import." Indeed, "the convert apprehends differently, values differently, relates differently because he has become different."³¹

Lonergan's comments attest that to convert is not to change in partial or superficial ways but to embrace a fundamental reorientation of one's whole life, a rethinking of life that is so comprehensive that it results in a completely new thrust to one's existence. To convert is to abandon former loyalties, devotions, loves, and commitments for the sake of new ones. It is a transformation of the self that goes deep, impacting everything about us. What once was on the periphery of our lives moves to the center. What once was scarcely noticed or appreciated becomes a burning concern.³² As John E. Smith says, it is "as if a new being now dwelt where another had lived before."³³ At its core, conversion signals "a change of heart, a change in nature, a change in the self sufficiently deep and lasting to bring about a change of conduct and bearing in the world."³⁴ Or, as John Haughey writes, "This means that the whole way one perceived reality, the principles and judgments one took to deal with the reality one found oneself in, has changed."³⁵ We see a stirring example of Haughey's description of conversion when Paul explains to the Christians of Philippi the radical and even shocking change that he underwent because of his new faith in Christ: "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:7-8).

³¹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., "Theology in Its New Context," in *A Second Collection*, ed. William F.J. Ryan, S.J. and Bernard J. Tyrrell, S.J. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 66. For a fine study of how Lonergan's philosophy shapes Christian ethics see Kenneth R. Melchin, *Living with Other People: An Introduction to Christian Ethics Based on Bernard Lonergan* (Ottawa: St. Paul University, 1998).

³² William James, "The Divided Self and Conversion," in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, 125.

³³ Smith, "The Concept of Conversion," in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, 54.

³⁴ Smith, "The Concept of Conversion," in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, 56.

³⁵ John C. Haughey, S. J., *Should Anyone Say Forever? On Making, Keeping, and Breaking Commitments* (Chicago: Loyola University, 1975), 44.

Still, no matter how dramatic and overpowering the experience that inaugurates a conversion may be (Saul being knocked to the ground and blinded when en route to Damascus), it is only the beginning of a way of life whose aim is to make us “a different sort of person altogether.”³⁶ In this respect, conversion is a way of life we enter into, a transformed and transforming way of life, but one whose goal is never perfectly achieved, especially when we consider that for Christians the aim of conversion is the remaking of ourselves in Christ. Thus, it is best not to speak of oneself as being converted, but as always in the *process* of being converted. As Russell Connors and Patrick McCormick remind us, “The call to conversion asks everything of us, and it takes a whole life to give that gift. It takes us a *whole* life to answer the call to give ourselves completely to God, to achieve our full dignity as loving human persons, to live out our vocations as disciples.”³⁷

The transformation of ourselves in the love and goodness of God primarily occurs through the virtues. This does not deny the absolute necessity of grace for indeed it is only on account of God’s love and forgiveness that we are able to “put on Christ” in the first place. But it is to say that what grace makes possible is to be nurtured and developed through the virtues, those habits and practices engendered by grace and developed in cooperation with God, that enable us to become fully flourishing human beings by being formed in the ways of Christ. In this respect, the virtues are our response to grace; they represent our decision to deliberately cultivate the attitudes, perspectives, intentions, and behavior that grace makes possible and that enable us to become the persons Christ calls us to be.

In general, virtues are the qualities of character we must possess and the habits we must acquire if we are to achieve the excellence and perfection possible to us as human beings and thus reach our most distinctive and promising good. They are the quintessential humanizing qualities—indeed, the virtues constitute a wholly human way of being—because through them we achieve the good most befitting our nature and thus come more fully to life. Guided and formed by the virtues, our passions and emotions, our intelligence and our reason, our imagination and our perceptions, our freedom and our choices, even our memories, work together so that we can live in ways characteristic of flourishing human beings.³⁸ The virtues integrate and direct all our capacities so that everything about us is disposed to at-

³⁶ Wright, *After You Believe*, 16.

³⁷ Russell B. Connors, Jr. and Patrick T. McCormick, *Character, Choices and Community: The Three Faces of Christian Ethics* (New York: Paulist, 1998), 238.

³⁸ Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 12.

taining the excellence that constitutes happiness, the excellence Christians find in friendship with God through following and imitating Christ. Thus, it is through the virtues that we become good persons, men and women who know what it means to live a good life, a “life that is becoming to a human being”³⁹ in every possible way. Formed in the distinctive and varied goodness of all the virtues, we grow more fully into the proper goal or purpose (*telos*) of human beings. Indeed, the virtues are the ways of being and acting that enable us to achieve excellence not only in our everyday lives, but also in our lives as a whole.⁴⁰

The virtues are indispensable to a life of ongoing conversion because it is through them that we are increasingly able to turn toward and do what is good, and that is because the virtues make us good. The virtues enable new and better ways of acting only because they also enable new and better ways of being. Put differently, our actions flow from and express our character. Ways of acting follow upon ways of being. But, it is also true, that developing certain ways of acting forms us in corresponding ways of being, and thus changes our character. The transformation of the self that is the goal of conversion occurs through developing and acquiring the virtues because through them all the distinctive qualities of goodness become enduring qualities of ourselves. Habits form who we are because the more often we endorse certain attitudes and feelings, and the more often we act in certain ways, the more deeply do those attitudes, feelings, and actions become genuine characteristics of ourselves. Joseph Kotva captures well the relationship between our character and our actions when he says, “In simplest terms, ‘being’ precedes ‘doing,’ but ‘doing’ shapes ‘being.’ That is, who we have become, including our states of character, precedes and informs our choices and actions. But our choices and actions help shape who we are and thus our future choices and actions.”⁴¹

This explains why we become what we most consistently think, feel, and act. Those thoughts, feelings, and actions are not something other than who we are, but genuinely express who we are. For example, we may have a capacity for acts of justice and generosity and mercy and courage—and may even be disposed to such behavior—but that is not enough to assure that we will act justly or generously

³⁹ Herbert McCabe, *The Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 11.

⁴⁰ Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Colleen McCluskey, and Christian Van Dyke, *Aquinas’s Ethics: Metaphysical Foundations, Moral Theory, and Theological Context* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2009), 153.

⁴¹ Joseph J. Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1996), 30.

or mercifully or courageously at any particular moment. We possess a virtue only when our disposition for a particular feeling, attitude, or action has through practice and repetition developed into an abiding characteristic of ourselves. Then we can be counted on to be just, generous, merciful, and courageous not just occasionally but regularly, because each of those expressions of goodness truly characterizes us. We are just, generous, merciful, and courageous because we bear those qualities within us. In this respect, the virtues contribute to our ongoing conversion because instead of being added to an already formed character, they rehabilitate and reform that character according to what is truly best for us. In short, none of us possesses the fullness of a virtue instantly, first because oftentimes before we can acquire a virtue we have to uproot and overcome an already attained vice and, secondly, because there is no one who cannot grow more deeply in a virtue's distinctive goodness.

This is especially true in the Christian life. The process of conversion unfolds as we acquire, grow in, and become skilled in the virtues because it is through them that we move from who we are now to who we are called to be.⁴² But this suggests that we cannot properly understand the meaning, substance, and purpose of a virtue apart from what we take to be the ultimate goal of our lives. Virtues take their meaning from different understandings of life. Different ends, different purposes, and different accounts of human excellence and flourishing result in correspondingly different accounts of the virtues. Something is a virtue only if by attaining it we not only move toward but also participate now in the utmost possible excellence of our lives. But people understand this in different ways. If one measures human excellence and fulfillment in terms of power and prestige, wealth and prosperity, or fame and celebrity, then he or she will develop habits and qualities of character to achieve those ends. On the other hand, if, as Christians believe, our most distinctive and promising good is not found in material success but in love and communion with God, then something will be a virtue only if it enables us to move toward and share in that end. Christians have a different understanding of the virtues because they have a different understanding of what it means to be human and of what constitutes our utmost fulfillment. Ways of being and acting that enable us to do well in the world are important; however, they are not, as Aquinas insisted, truly virtues because with them alone we cannot reach our consummate good of friendship with God and the saints in heaven.

⁴² Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. William E. May (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2001), 51.

What does this analysis of the virtues have to do with how one envisions the Christian life? It suggests that Christ not only changes the landscape of the moral life, but also vastly expands its horizons. Christ subverts our customary understandings of the purpose and meaning of our lives as well as how we think about fulfillment and happiness precisely because his life, death, and resurrection open up possibilities for us that were previously unthinkable. Because of Christ our ultimate and most complete happiness is not found in the natural goods of this world no matter how precious and indispensable they are for a good human life, but in the truly supernatural good of everlasting life with God.

This fact impacts a Christian account of the virtues in at least three important ways. First, because in Christ God calls us to a *telos* that completely transcends us—God’s own life, goodness, and happiness—we cannot possibly reach or participate in that end by our own agency alone. This is one reason Christians think differently about the virtues. We do not have within ourselves the power or the capacity to reach a good that utterly surpasses us; therefore, God must provide what we cannot provide for ourselves and does so through grace, the theological virtues, and the infused moral virtues. If the acquired virtues direct us to a “natural human happiness proportionate to human powers,”⁴³ the theological and infused moral virtues, given to us through grace, direct us to a supernatural happiness that is utterly disproportionate to our human powers. That is why they must be infused into us by God.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, to say that these virtues are infused does not imply that God suddenly takes over our lives and makes our own actions superfluous. The infused theological and moral virtues give us the capacity or potential for acts that help us attain God, but that capacity has to be intentionally acted on, developed, and strengthened over time. As the authors of *Aquinas’s Ethics* explain, “While it is true that God causes infused virtue in us ‘without any action of ours,’ Aquinas also adds that God does not do so ‘without our consent.’ Once God gives us a virtue, furthermore, it is up to us to act on it, and acting according to an infused virtue in turn strengthens the habit. God is the direct cause of the virtue itself,

⁴³ Diana Fritz Cates, *Choosing to Feel: Virtue, Friendship, and Compassion for Friends* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 32.

⁴⁴ As the authors of *Aquinas’s Ethics* summarize, “Given to us directly by God—in Aquinas’s terms, ‘infused’ by the grace of the Holy Spirit—the theological virtues expand our natural capacities and inclinations and direct us to a supernatural end, an end *above* our nature, which we could not apprehend or achieve with our own natural power. Theological virtues, therefore, have a supernatural source corresponding to their supernatural end—God.” See DeYoung, McCluskey, and Van Dyke, *Aquinas’s Ethics*, 142.

therefore, but human beings in turn must use these virtues to direct their own acts.”⁴⁵ Thus, the infused theological and moral virtues suggest an ongoing and dynamic partnership between God and ourselves. We can neither acquire nor “perform” the infused moral virtues without God’s assistance; in this respect they are foremost the work of grace. But they are still genuinely human acts because in developing the infused virtues we remain the agents of those acts. In short, the infused virtues do not override or violate our human nature but “complement and perfect” it.⁴⁶

Second, life in Christ changes our understanding of the virtues because if for Christians something is a virtue only if it draws us closer to God and makes us more like God, then each of the virtues must orient our lives toward God. The theological virtues do this because each of them directly concerns God and focuses us on God. As William Mattison says, “We believe in God (faith). We love God above all else, and all things in God (charity or love). We yearn for union with God, experienced fully only in the next life but tasted in this one (hope).”⁴⁷ Similarly, the infused moral virtues make all of our activities serve our ultimate end of pleasing God and of bringing us closer

⁴⁵ DeYoung, McCluskey, and Van Dyke, *Aquinas’s Ethics*, 144.

⁴⁶ Michael Miller, “Freedom and Grace,” in *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective*, ed. David Matzko McCarthy and M. Therese Lysaught (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 178. As Miller notes, “The use of the term ‘infused’ should not imply that they are suddenly poured into us by God against our human nature, as some mistakenly suggest. Rather, God complements and perfects our very nature with these infused virtues, for these dispositions bring us both to our fulfillment as human beings and to life with God.” Similarly, N. T. Wright sees the infused virtues as a partnership between God and ourselves inasmuch as they involve both “something God does” and “something humans do.” As Wright explains: “Some theologians have distinguished carefully between the sort of virtue you can acquire by unaided hard work and the sort you can have only if God gives it to you. The question is then raised, Is there no work involved in the latter kind? Paul’s answer is emphatic, here and throughout his writings. Christian virtue, including the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit, is *both* the gift of God *and* the result of the person of faith making conscious decisions to cultivate this way of life and these habits of heart and mind. In technical language, these things are both ‘infused’ and ‘acquired,’ though the way we ‘acquire’ them is itself, in that same language, ‘infused.’ We are here, as so often in theology, at the borders of language, because we are trying to talk at the same time about ‘something God does’ and ‘something humans do’ as if God were simply another character like ourselves, as though (in other words) the interplay of God’s work and our work could be imagined on the model of two people collaborating on a project.... It is sufficient to note that the varieties of spiritual fruit Paul names, like the Christian virtues, remain both the work of the Spirit and the result of conscious choice and work on the part of the person concerned.” See N. T. Wright, *After You Believe*, 197.

⁴⁷ William C. Mattison III, “Moral Virtue, the Grace of God, and Discipleship,” in *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective*, ed. David Matzko McCarthy and M. Therese Lysaught (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 200.

to God. They do so because they differ from the acquired moral virtues both in their source (grace) and in their ultimate purpose (union with God). Thus, the justice we extend to others also draws us closer to God just as the forgiveness we offer brings us more deeply into the life of God. As William Mattison explains, the infused virtues “incline us to do innerworldly activities well in the larger perspective of our supernatural destiny.”⁴⁸ Aquinas understood this to be the special function of charity. Aquinas said there was no true virtue without charity because under charity’s influence all of our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and actions are directed to God and serve our overriding desire for God. As he saw it, the “proximate” end of the moral virtues concerns our well-being in the world; however, the “ultimate” or truly final end of any virtue is our principal good, which is everlasting beatitude with God, and that can only be attained through charity.⁴⁹ Aquinas captured the special role of charity in the Christian life by speaking of it as the “form” of all the virtues.⁵⁰ By this he meant that if our sovereign desire in life is friendship and communion with God—and all that God loves—then this desire will inspire, inform, empower, and guide everything we do so that even the most ordinary activities of our lives move us toward our greatest possible good. By animating all our actions with a desire for God, charity brings every other virtue to its utmost possible perfection. This is another reason Christians think differently about the virtues.

Third, life in Christ changes the narrative in light of which we understand and define the virtues. Different accounts of excellence and different understandings of the greatest possible good lead to different accounts of the virtues, and Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God makes a Christian account of the virtues, in significant ways, different from other understandings of the virtues. N.T. Wright argues that the New Testament reveals “an eschatologically driven virtue ethic which outdoes anything the pagan world can offer.”⁵¹ His

⁴⁸ William C. Mattison III, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 326.

⁴⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), II-II, q. 23, a. 7. “It is obvious then that true virtue, without any qualification, is directed to man’s principal good; as Aristotle puts it, virtue is *what disposes a thing already perfectly constituted in its nature to its maximum achievement*. And so taken, there can be no true virtue without charity.”

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 23, a. 8. “But the form of an action always follows that of the agent which produces it. Hence in morals what gives an act its reference to end must also give it form. Now it is evident from what has been said already, that charity directs the acts of all the other virtues to our final end. Accordingly it shapes all these acts and to this extent is said to be the form of the virtues, for virtues themselves are so called with reference to ‘formed’ acts.”

⁵¹ Wright, *After You Believe*, 172.

point is that what Christians think about why we need the virtues, what they mean, and how they are defined is substantially illumined by the reign of God. That overarching theme of the life and ministry of Jesus leads both to a different list of virtues and a different sense of the kind of life the virtues make possible. In Colossians 3:12-17 Paul tells the community that their lives, both individually and collectively, should be marked by compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, peace, gratitude and, above all, love. But many of the qualities that Paul claimed constitute and identify the Christian life in light of God's kingdom would not be recognized by Aristotle (much less Nietzsche) as virtues at all. As Alasdair MacIntyre noted, "Aristotle would certainly not have admired Jesus Christ and he would have been horrified by St. Paul."⁵² Even where Christian virtues overlap with other accounts of the virtues, what represents the utmost excellence of a particular virtue can differ. For instance, for Aristotle the exemplar of courage was the soldier in battle who even in face of death perseveres; however, for Christians, as Aquinas suggested, the exemplar of courage is the martyr who remains steadfast in her faithfulness to God even when threatened with death.⁵³ Moreover, if justice generally means to fulfill our obligations toward others, a Christian account of the virtue will summon us to practice a generosity that exceeds our ordinary sense of what we owe others precisely because we live with the awareness that everything we have is gift. As William Spohn writes, "Different conduct is appropriate in a world framed by fairness than would fit a world framed by generosity.... In a word, the world according to God is not fair; it is gracious. Those who want to enter it have to read the world and themselves in a new way and act accordingly."⁵⁴

But life in Christ also changes our sense of the kind of life that the virtues make possible. As Wright explains, "Those who follow Jesus can begin to practice, in the present, the habits of heart and life which correspond to the way things are in God's kingdom—the way they will be eventually, yes, but also the way they *already* are because Jesus is here."⁵⁵ In light of the Christian narrative, virtues are the habits of being and acting that enable us to live now, however imper-

⁵² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 172. MacIntyre notes that a Christian account of the virtues has "the same logical and conceptual structure as Aristotle's account," but nonetheless that what counts as a virtue for Christians is sometimes notably different from what Aristotle recognized as a virtue.

⁵³ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 124, a. 3.

⁵⁴ William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 106.

⁵⁵ Wright, *After You Believe*, 105.

fectly and incompletely, as responsible citizens of the reign of God. Our sense of who we should be and how we should and can live in the present is driven by what we already know about the future—thanks to Christ. As Wright notes about Paul, “He has glimpsed a fresh vision of the ultimate future, which has given him in turn a fresh vision of the habits of life by which humans can already live in the present as people shaped by that future.”⁵⁶ Although we experience the tension between the reign of God that is “already” present in the world thanks to the life and ministry of Christ and the “not yet” of the fullness of that kingdom that awaits us at the end of time, we can nonetheless “genuinely partake in that final reality in advance. We can draw down some of God’s future into our own present moment. The rationale for this,” Wright elaborates, “is that in Jesus that future has already burst into our present time, so that in *anticipating* that which is to come, we are also *implementing* what has already taken place. This is the framework of thought which makes sense of the New Testament’s virtue ethics.”⁵⁷

Consider three examples of how life in Christ changes our understanding of what a truly good life asks of us. First, being in Christ requires that we learn “to see in a different way, with different eyes.”⁵⁸ If one thing that distinguished Jesus was “his remarkable ability to see,”⁵⁹ then life in Christ means striving to see as Jesus did. The Christian life requires not only that our vision is corrected, but also that it is radically transformed. We must come to see other persons and the world without illusion and deception; but we must also turn to Christ as the “light” in which all things are truly seen.⁶⁰ Moreover, this new and transformed vision should result in new and transformed ways of being and acting. We are called to *see* as Jesus did in order to *act* as Jesus did. As Spohn observed, “The New Testament writers attempt to convert the imaginations of Christians by parables, metaphors, and stories” precisely because they “want their readers to see life in a new way and to act in radically different ways.”⁶¹ For ex-

⁵⁶ Wright, *After You Believe*, 172.

⁵⁷ Wright, *After You Believe*, 65-6.

⁵⁸ Robert Ellsberg, *The Saints’ Guide to Happiness* (New York: North Point, 2003), 171.

⁵⁹ Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 78.

⁶⁰ For a more detailed analysis of the importance of “vision” in the Christian life see Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection” and “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1974), 30-47; and Christopher Steck, *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 123-149.

⁶¹ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 67.

ample, the parables teach us to see as Jesus did, but only because they clash so dramatically with our customary sense of what is proper and expedient, and thus often shock us into new ways of seeing, thinking, and acting. As Sallie McFague said, instead of reassuring and comforting us, parables have an “unnerving, distasteful, disturbing quality in them” because they are “an indirect assault on the accepted, conventional way of viewing reality, ‘the way things are.’”⁶² Obvious examples of parables that confound and disorient are the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16); the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21); and of course the classic parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

Second, if Christians are called to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom 12: 2), then life in Christ results in a different understanding of moral reasoning and a different grasp of what it means to live and act in “good” conscience. In the Christian life, a well-formed conscience belongs to the person who “seeks to view all things with the mind of Christ.”⁶³ As the great Redemptorist moral theologian Bernard Häring wrote, “Of itself, conscience is a candle without a flame. It receives its truth from Christ who is Truth and Light; and through him it shines forth with his brightness and warmth.”⁶⁴ In order for our consciences to be imbued with the truth and light of Christ, prayer must be a regular practice of our lives. In prayer we “keep company” with Christ in order to listen to Christ and learn from him, and thus discern as well as we possibly can what God is both calling and enabling us to do.⁶⁵ Too, prayer is essential for a well-formed conscience because through prayer Christ eventually not only guides and informs our conscience, but also “becomes the content of the conscience.”⁶⁶ No prayer is more important for the formation of Christian conscience than the Eucharist because when rightly celebrated and participated in the Eucharist shapes in us a conscience that is inspired by and conforms to the vision and values of the reign of God.⁶⁷ That is why, for example, a Christian conscience is marked by a keen awareness of the solidarity that exists

⁶² Sallie McFague, “Conversion: Life on the Edge of the Raft,” *Interpretation* 32, no. 3 (1978), 256.

⁶³ Dennis J. Billy and James F. Keating, *Conscience and Prayer: The Spirit of Catholic Moral Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2001), 29.

⁶⁴ Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*, vol. 1, *General Moral Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 224.

⁶⁵ Billy and Keating, *Conscience and Prayer*, 3.

⁶⁶ Billy and Keating, *Conscience and Prayer*, 62.

⁶⁷ For a powerful, insightful, and very challenging analysis of this point see Tissa Balasuriya, “The Eucharist in Contemporary Society,” in *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Curt Cadorette, Marie Giblin, Marilyn J. Legge, and Mary Hembrow Snyder (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 260.

among all persons and consequently the obligations in justice that we have for other human beings and creatures.⁶⁸

Third, life in Christ not only changes how we see and judge, but also how we are called to act. In imitation of Christ, Christians are called to mercy and forgiveness, to humility and truthfulness, to kindness, generosity, and peace; however, they are especially called to compassion. In the Christian life, compassion is not an optional virtue but a quintessential way of imitating and growing in the way of Christ. In his study of the virtue of compassion, James Keenan links compassion with mercy and defines it as “the willingness to enter into the chaos of others so as to answer them in their need.”⁶⁹ As we make our way through life we encounter people in pain, people who are afflicted and distressed, wounded and broken. As the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) attests, we are tempted, like the priest and the Levite, to pass these sufferers by lest caring for them inconvenience us or disrupt the plans we have made for ourselves. But with compassion we turn toward and befriend those who are suffering precisely because that is what God in Christ has done for us. In becoming one of us in Jesus, God entered into the chaos and suffering of our world to be with us and help us in our need. Jesus is God’s compassion incarnate, God’s merciful presence in person. Indeed, in feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and reaching out to the forgotten and neglected people of his world, Jesus’ entire ministry embodied and expressed God’s heartfelt compassion; in fact, through his compassion Jesus reveals to us who God really is. Thus, if in Jesus God was immersed in the pain and sorrow and suffering of the world, then in imitation of a God *who is compassion*, Christians are called to enter into the pain and suffering of others not only to comfort them in their suffering, but also, like Jesus, to do what we can to alleviate it and to eliminate the causes for it.⁷⁰ The virtue of compassion makes us like God because nowhere is the character of God more fully revealed than in God’s willingness to enter into the tears, misery, and sorrows of our world. As Keenan wrote, “Mercy is so important because it is, above all, the experience we have of God. In response to that mercy, we become imitators of the God in whose image we are made.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ David Hollenbach, S.J., *Justice, Peace, and Human Rights: American Catholic Social Ethics in a Pluralistic Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 199.

⁶⁹ James F. Keenan, S.J., *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 124.

⁷⁰ Sebastian K. MacDonald, C.P., *Moral Theology and Suffering* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 42.

⁷¹ Keenan, *Moral Wisdom*, 127.

LIFE IN CHRIST: A HOLY MINISTRY TO THE WORLD

As the above reflections on compassion suggest, life in Christ is always life for others. The freedom Christ won for us is always freedom for others. If we respond to Jesus' call to follow him, we will take up a way of life that continually unfolds in love and service to others. This is why life in Christ is completed in mission, in a holy ministry to the world. Or, as N.T. Wright puts it, "And in God's kingdom human beings are rescued, are delivered from their sin, in order to take their place (as Jesus already called the disciples to take theirs) not only as *receivers* of God's forgiveness and new life, but also as *agents* of it."⁷²

How then are Christians, precisely because they have received new life in Christ, called to be agents of that new life in the world? There are many ways to answer this, but I want to suggest three. First, we are agents of Christ's new life—and thus promote and advance the reign of God—when we continually expand the circle of love. Life in Christ is an inherently *ecstatic* existence because each day it calls us out of ourselves to befriend all our neighbors (even our most persistent enemies) as God has befriended us. A life of discipleship does not allow us to shrink the horizons of love; it does not allow us to practice a love that is calculating or safe or choosy or selective. As the gospels testify, Jesus excludes no one. He embraces the seemingly permanently excluded ones as he sits down at table with prostitutes, tax collectors, lawbreakers, and anyone else who is habitually shunned and forgotten. In a world where differences provoke fear and there always seems more energy devoted to dividing and excluding than unifying and embracing, Christians bring Christ's new life to others by imitating and practicing the infinitely expansive and absolutely indiscriminating love that is God.

Second, we extend a holy ministry to the world and bring Christ's new life to others through the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving hospitality to strangers, visiting the sick, ransoming prisoners, and burying the dead. Aquinas saw the corporal works of mercy as one of the identifying marks of a life of charity, which he understood to be a life of friendship with God.⁷³ This suggests that one cannot truly be in Christ if he or she ignores the bodily needs of their neighbors. If Christ brought God's compassion, goodness, and life to the world by tending to the physical needs of those around him, then life in Christ is most vividly and credibly expressed through such concrete expres-

⁷² Wright, *After You Believe*, 112.

⁷³ *ST*, II-II, q. 32, a. 2.

sions of justice and love on behalf of the most excluded and forgotten members of the community.

Third, Christians extend a holy ministry to the world when they commit themselves to being agents of reconciliation and peace. In their 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace*, the Catholic bishops of the United States wrote, “Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus.”⁷⁴ Too, the bishops said every follower of Christ is challenged “to live up to the call of Jesus to be peacemakers in our own time and situation.”⁷⁵ In a world that often seems much more adept at violence and brutality and destruction than reconciliation and peace, there is no more urgent way to bring Christ’s new life to others than by being a peacemaking people of a peacemaking God. In 2 Corinthians 5:17-18, right after Paul tells the Christians at Corinth, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” he says that we carry forward this new life when we embrace “the ministry of reconciliation” that Christ has given us. We who have been reconciled to God in Christ are to be ministers of God’s forgiveness and peace in a world that sometimes seems beyond healing.

That we have received new life in Christ in order to bring that life to the world underscores the importance of personal vocation. In light of Christ, if a Christian asks, “Why am I here?” the answer is to contribute to the creative and redemptive activity of God. As agents of the reign of God, Christians are called to use their gifts and talents to further God’s work in the world. A theology of vocation emphasizes that God has plans and purposes for the world—that God has a dream for the world that Jesus named the reign of God—but that God works through us and depends on us for those plans and purposes to be realized. As Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God testified, God wants to bring love, justice, mercy, beauty, and goodness to life in the world, but chooses to do so through the work of our hands. That is why Jesus called his disciples and entrusted to them the mission he had begun. If we are in Christ, then that same mission has been entrusted to us. “God has chosen to work in this world through the agency of human hands,” Lee Hardy wrote. “He chose to create a world where we, as God’s representatives, are involved in the ongoing business of creation and the repair of creation—a world where we

⁷⁴ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1983), no. 333.

⁷⁵ *Challenge of Peace*, no. 331.

assume responsibility for the well-being of the earth and all who inhabit it.... In responding to our callings, we are actually participating in God's care for humanity and the earth. We are God's co-workers."⁷⁶ The language of calling or vocation reminds us that every person is "providentially situated"⁷⁷ to carry on the work of Christ. In short, just as God once entered the world in Jesus, God continues to enter the world through our acts of kindness, justice, compassion, truthfulness, and love.

Josef Fuchs was right that we correctly apprise what the Christian life is about when we envision it not through a prism of laws and endless regulations, but as responding to the call to follow Christ by creatively imitating his ways in the world. In this essay, I have elaborated on Fuchs' crucial insight by considering what it might mean "to walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). If the center of the Christian life is not a theory or idea, but a person to be followed, then how does the Christian life unfold? As I have suggested, it begins with our initiation into the story of God that entered the world in Christ, a story Christians embrace in baptism. It continues through a life of ongoing conversion, a transformation that occurs through the theological and infused moral virtues, along with one's participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the church. And it culminates in a life for others, a life that unfolds in love and service to our neighbors. If life in Christ calls for a deeper and more extensive transformation of ourselves in the love and goodness of God, it also empowers us to bring God's love and goodness to life in the world in abundantly creative ways. To give to others the life, mercy, goodness, love, peace and joy we have received is the heart of the Christian life. And, as Fuchs' intimated, it is the most compelling and hopeful way to revitalize a moral theology that "left much to be desired," but also, more seriously, had dangerously lost its way. **M**

⁷⁶ Lee Hardy, "Investing Ourselves in the Divine Economy," *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* 4, no. 1 (2004), 30, 32.

⁷⁷ The expression "providentially situated" comes from Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 39.

Christology is that part of Christian theology that studies and defines who Jesus the Christ was and is. It is generally less concerned with the minor details of his life; rather it deals with who he was, the incarnation, and the major events of his life (his birth, death, and resurrection). Important issues in Christology include: His human nature. His divine nature. The interrelationship between these two natures; how they interacted and affected each other. Christology, Christian reflection, teaching, and doctrine concerning Jesus of Nazareth. Christology is the part of theology that is concerned with the nature and work of Jesus, including such matters as the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and his human and divine natures and their relationship. The. Traditionally, Christological reflection has focused on two specific aspects of that portrayal—namely, the person and the work of Jesus. It has also sought to clarify and systematize the meaning of the scriptural depiction of Jesus. Sources and concepts. The Christology of the earliest Palestinian Christian community apparently had two focuses. It looked backward to the earthly life of Jesus as prophet and servant of God and forward to his final return as Messiah (Acts 3:21). Meanwhile Jesus was thought of as waiting inactively in heaven, to which he was believed to have ascended after the resurrection (Acts 1:9). Soon their experience of the Holy Spirit, whose descent is recorded in Acts 2, led the early Christians to think in terms of a two stage Christology: the first stage was the earthly ministry and the second stage his active ruling in Biblical Christology shows that one and the same Jesus Christ is both God and man. While Christian tradition has always maintained this triple thesis that Jesus Christ is truly man, that He is truly God, and that the Godman, Jesus Christ, is one and the same person the heretical or erroneous tenets of various religious leaders have forced the Church to insist more expressly now on the one, now on another element of her Christology. See also recent works on the life of Christ, and the principal commentaries on the Biblical passages cited in this article. For all other parts of dogmatic theology see bibliography at the end of this section (I.). About this page.