

THE TOUCH OF HUMILITY: AN INVITATION TO CREATURELINESS

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"Nothing before God belongs to us as our own, if not our ability to say *thank you*. What may appear as the most tenuous, the most slender of all possibilities is in truth the highest and most extensive: the praise that *responds* to the divine giving is the essence of human speech. It is in speech that the gift is received, and that we can give something of our own, in other words ourselves."¹

Jean-Louis Chrétien

There is no task more difficult than to be faithful and true to our creaturely condition and need. Whether out of fear, blindness, suspicion, arrogance, or rebellion, our abiding temptation is to evade or distort each other and our place in the world. Rather than patiently and honestly living up to our need before others—by taking full account of, and then honoring, the breadth and depth of the memberships we live through—we deform need into fantasy and unmake/remake the world to suit our own desires. Rather than being grateful for the contributions others make to our well-being and joy—through acts of friendship and nurture, but also the sacrifices of food and energy—we destroy (often in the name of self-preservation!) the very sources of life upon which all depend.

There is a certain lunacy in this attitude, a lunacy that we, for the most part, do not appreciate because of the disordered character of every fearful, blind, insecure, arrogant, and rebellious mind.² What our lunacy demonstrates, however, is a failure to be human, a failure to be honest about who and where we are. It is to forget that our being testifies over and over again to a primordial hospitality in which, as Jean-Louis Chrétien says, "We have been listened to even before we speak" (AS, p. 9). In a fundamental sense all true

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speech is a response to the call of others, a more or less faithful movement among the countless reverberations of life's memberships: human families and communities, shared histories and natural habitats of the world, and God. When we fail to listen³ and respond appropriately to this call, we bear witness to a spiritual malfunction of the highest significance. We precipitate the undoing of communities and creation.

As I will argue here, one of the best ways to understand our failure is in terms of the loss of humility, or perhaps more precisely, our *rebellion against* humility. Humility is central to human life because it is through a humble attitude that we most fully approximate our true condition as creatures dependent on others, daily implicated in the life and death-wielding ways of creation, all together sustained by the gifts of our Creator. It is in terms of humility that we express the understanding that we do not stand alone or through our own effort, but live through the sacrifices and kindnesses of others. Humility, in other words, takes us to the heart of an embodied and spiritual life that is true to the world as a place of belonging and responsibility. This is a thesis that needs clarification and defense.

To accomplish this goal I will refer to Jean Chrétien's phenomenological descriptions of the call-response structure to human life. Abstraction is the great danger in any discussion of humility and creaturely/spiritual life. By attending to the concrete ways in which every human life is always already a life that has many other lives deeply implicated within it,⁴ lives that we are far from being able to name completely (let alone comprehend), we come upon the fresh possibility of encountering and engaging the world as the site of grace and hospitality and mystery. As we have yet to see, Chrétien's phenomenological descriptions play a key role in giving richness and depth to various theological themes that develop as the meaning and sense of humility dawns on us.

My essay will begin with a brief account of the central significance of humility for human life as religiously conceived. What a humble disposition entails is here contrasted with the pride that is our perennial temptation. Criticisms of and challenges to humility as a virtue are also presented. My essay then turns to an investigation of embodiment and creaturely life—and the memberships and responsibilities our embodied creatureliness entail—as a fresh opening for understanding humility. In particular, I appeal to phenomenological descriptions of touch as a profound lens through which to appreciate and understand humility's wide significance. The deep theological significance of touch and humility are then made clear through an understanding of Christ as the archetype of proper relationality. Christ, as fully human, shows us practically what it is to be a creature (by modeling a life of attention and compassion), and thus is our inspiration for authentic humility. Humility is hereby shown to be central to the life of humanity (as *imago Dei*) because it is a reflection of God's own Trinitarian life, a life we are invited to witness to by participation.

Contrasting Humility

We can learn about the character and pattern of our collective malfunction if we turn for a moment to the prophet Isaiah. Babylon has overtaken Israel, but the prophet assures us that in the eyes of God the days of the Babylonians are numbered. Though they have exhibited great power for a time, their power is pathetic and destructive because it is without mercy or kindness. Having already been turned against others, it is a self-aggrandizing power that must finally turn against itself (a people devoted to self-interest will finally undermine themselves in the name of that interest). As Babylon begins to crumble we are left with the desperate and absurd image of a people trying to save the gods they have themselves created.⁵ They will not be saved because they are blind to their true need and closed to all genuine help. They are too comfortable and secure in themselves, believing they will never know widowhood or the loss of children.

The arrogant Babylonian presumption that as a people they are without need and beyond judgment (Isaiah suggests that they did not believe anyone to be in a position to see, let alone condemn, their wickedness) lies at the heart of their failure. Isaiah puts the matter precisely: “Your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one besides me’” (Isa. 47:10). This confident, though utterly naïve and destructive, sentiment is the root from which all mockery and disdain for humility grows. The delusional belief that for life we need only ourselves—“*I am, and there is no one besides me*”—that our associations with others are of a purely voluntary nature, and therefore that we need not be attentive to or responsible for anyone else, takes us to the height of human folly. A moment’s honest and detailed reflection should alert us to the fact that we are not the self-standing, self-legitimizing, autarchic beings we often present ourselves to be.

History shows us that folly and presumption are notoriously difficult to teach and correct. Our temptation, still, is to believe that we can take the world by force and without regard for the needs of others. Centuries after the Babylonians fell, whether by intention or by consumer proxy, we still adhere to the zealous project that the realms of nature be bound and enslaved, made to do our bidding and satisfy our every wish. Not surprisingly, technology has thus become for us the new sacred and the new sublime.⁶ Through it we will bring more and more of the world, even the rudiments of life itself, under the stamp of our desire and control. Too many of the results of our control—wasted and disintegrated communities, blown-up mountains, poisoned and eroded soils, oceanic “dead zones”, biological and viral “super pests”, war upon war, worker anxiety—are getting harder to ignore.

To this arrogant, and finally destructive, path we should contrast the humble way suggested by Saint Bonaventure. In *The Journey of the Mind to God* Bonaventure describes the path of contemplation whereby the follower of

Christ can enter into union with the Supreme Good, the Maker of all that is. He invites us to join him on this path, even as he extends several cautionary notes. To embark on the divine way of peace we must combine reading with fervor, speculation with devotion, investigation with admiration, observation with exultation, industry with piety, knowledge with love, study with grace, and understanding with humility. In an important sense, we cannot really approach the former if we do not practice the latter, since it is through the exercises of devotion, exultation, piety, love, and humility that “the mirror of our soul [is] cleansed and polished.”⁷ Bent over as we are by sin, we have become blind and dark, violent and destructive, devoted primarily to our own obsessions, and thus unable to see the light of heaven that calls us to our own and creation’s peace and good. We need the grace of charity and truth that has been revealed to us in the person of the crucified Christ, for what Christ does through his ministries of healing, feeding, exorcising, and reconciling of relationships is lead us more deeply into an attentive and affectionate embrace of creation. With this divine aid we can be lifted up into the supreme knowledge and wisdom of our place in creation, and into the enjoyment of our Creator.⁸

Bonaventure is describing a reorientation of the person that has humility at its core.⁹ This is a reorientation that grows out of the realization that we are creatures who are dependent upon each other and ultimately on God as our Creator. Bonaventure describes our complete dependence in terms of the nothingness of creation: “Therefore, since all things, which have been made, abide by the one principle and were produced from nothing, that man is truly wise who really recognizes the nothingness (*nihilitatem*) of himself and of others, and the sublimity of the first principle.”¹⁰

The link between the understanding of our interdependent creatureliness and the realization of true humility is of decisive significance. The mind must be cleansed and polished of its sinfulness—which, in one of its definitions, means the prideful refusal to be a creature and instead prefer the status of a sovereign, independent god—so that it can see honestly and desire properly. His assumption is that without this cleansing we will continually be infected with the hubris that places ourselves—our wants, fears, vanity, ambition, and anxieties—at the center of value and significance. This is why he says near the end of this book that the mind’s journey to God will require us to become “oblivious to ourselves.” A pure mind, one that is clothed by the theological virtues, demands that we “transcend ourselves” and our attachments to things, for it is precisely in holding to ourselves that we forego Christ and the flame of God.¹¹ When we so transcend ourselves we begin to see the world as it truly is: as nothing apart from God’s vivifying and sustaining care. For the first time we also begin to enjoy it truly, as God does: as the created, concrete manifestation of divine love.

Contrasting the paths of the Babylonians and Bonaventure we can now begin to appreciate how humility grows as the capacity to see ourselves and

creation in terms of our interdependent need and sustenance. We cannot be humble so long as we persist in the belief that we can stand on our own or the delusion that we are without need altogether. The significance of others does not reside primarily in how they signify for us. In a fundamental sense, humility is the natural outgrowth of persons fully aware of themselves as creatures made dependent upon each other and upon God, called to serve in the hospitable manner modeled by Christ, "the archetype of all relation." When we fail to appreciate the creatureliness of life we also inevitably fail in our understanding of humility.

As a capacity and disposition, however, humility is notoriously difficult to describe and develop because the person whose vision is clouded is not in the right position to sense or appreciate the full extent of every self-induced defect. We are all naturally predisposed to think that our vision is legitimate and clear, even when others around us challenge the ways we frame and picture reality. It takes honest self-awareness to admit and remove the logs in our own eyes that distort our vision and disfigure the world (cf. Luke 6:42). Our trouble is that by putting ourselves into the line of sight we cannot see things for what they are. We see as we want to see, which is to say that we engage reality in terms of its ability to satisfy, flatter, and glorify ourselves. Humility confronts this perennial temptation to self-aggrandizement head on by getting our ambition and arrogance, our fear and anxiety out of the line of sight. Iris Murdoch said it simply and directly: "The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are."¹²

Clearing a Space for Humility

It is precisely the call to see ourselves "as nothing" that has caused pleas to humility to be met with resistance, even scorn. What the call means is easily misunderstood (as when people mistakenly equate creaturely nothingness with worthlessness). That it can be abused is also readily observed (in power ploys that keep people down or subservient). If we are to rehabilitate the sense and the practice of humility we must, therefore, attempt a fresh characterization of its ways and inspiration. We should ask, how does the humble acknowledgment of our own nothingness relate to the nothingness (creation *ex nihilo*) that informs all of creation? What is it to be a creature created from nothing, and why is the proper attainment of our creatureliness of such significance for our spiritual development? How does the knowledge that our living always contains the lives of many others living within it challenge the autarchic conceptions we otherwise dearly maintain? In short, why and how is authentic humility the practical correlate of being a creature? As we will see, Chrétien's phenomenological description of the call/response structure of existence, precisely because it helps us to appreciate the nature and extent of creaturely interdependence, can serve as an excellent entry point into an account of authentic humility. But before we can consider his

contribution we first need to attend to objections that invariably arise whenever humility is recommended as an indispensable virtue.

First, there is the problem of false humility. Experience demonstrates that room for deception abounds as we are tempted to feign meekness and thus turn our professed lowliness into an empty, and perhaps manipulative, show. Who has not seen the potential for self-advancement through false posturing? Insincere flattery of others, though suggesting the sense of one's inferior rank, actually turns into mockery as we play the insecurity of others to our own advantage. Whatever advantage we achieve, however, turns out to be a sham since it is generated through the debasement and corruption of each other. What makes this humility disingenuous is that it is premised on a hubristic disposition that would elevate or magnify the self at the expense or demotion of another.

Humility has also been roundly criticized as an unworthy attribute and goal because it leads to a rather depressing view of human potential and achievement. Critics, ranging from David Hume to Friedrich Nietzsche, routinely deride spiritual writers who, in their calls to humility, refer to the sinfulness and contemptibility of the human race. Norvin Richards is representative when he asks, "if humility is low self-esteem, where does this leave the rather *splendid* among us . . . ?"¹³ On this view, humility is a vice and a blemish on the strength, daring, ingenuity, and dignity that elevate us as a species. It is the surest and most miserable sign of self-imposed decadence, and therefore ought to be rejected as a valued character trait. Failure to banish humility from a list of virtues will inevitably lead to forms of self-hatred and self-loathing that have done so much personal and social harm. What Richards's criticism overlooks, however, is that self-hatred of this sort misrepresents our status as creatures who, though nothing *in themselves*, are created and maintained in their being by God's love, and thus are of *inestimable worth*.

A more subtle, and perhaps far-reaching, impediment to the realization of true humility has to do with practical developments within modern and postmodern culture. As we have developed societies and built environments through the unparalleled use of powerful, now ubiquitous technologies, we have constructed a world in which we often see reflected little more than our own desires. The "natural" or created world, now engineered and re-designed by us, signifies primarily as the idolatrous reflection of our own ambition, and has ceased to be an "iconic" realm of deep mystery and sanctity pointing beyond itself to God.¹⁴ Societies, in turn, are manipulated through media and marketing campaigns that enrich the few but deceive the rest by assuring them that consumer acquisition is what life is all about. In a world of the "spectacle" (Guy Debord), humility cannot make an appearance because the rule of the "image" determines virtually every aspect of personal, social, and economic life. Rather than trying to see ourselves and each other for what we truly are—as creatures dependent upon each other and on

God—we are busily projecting and purchasing “styles” and “brands” that will signify success.

Given these pitfalls and difficulties that are inherent in any exploration of humility, how are we to proceed? This question is more difficult than it seems because the very means to an answer—human speech and reasoning—are often implicated as being antithetical to authentic humility. Those people that we might identify as truly humble are known to shun unnecessary talk and prefer quiet, opting to let their actions, however inadequate, speak for themselves. After all, what could be more ridiculous than to argue for one’s own humility? And so the genuinely humble avoid boisterous crowds where people (inevitably?) jockey for position. They eschew the clamor of self-justifying lips because they understand that there are depths of anxiety, fear, and hubris that, while working themselves out in what we say and think, are not immediately or clearly evident to others or to us. For instance, a deeply rooted sense of insecurity may (unwittingly or unintentionally) issue in claims that are false, presumptuous, or simply grandiose. The problem is not only that we will deliberately misrepresent ourselves to others, but that we will be self-deceived. If we understand humility as beginning in a detailed and honest estimation of ourselves, as when Bernard of Clairvaux defined humility as “the virtue by which a man recognizes his own unworthiness because he really knows himself,”¹⁵ how, given our propensity for either self-promotion or self-deprecation, are we to arrive at such honesty and clarity?

One approach would be to follow Socrates, who was also compelled by the need and desire to “know himself.” His method, based as it was on the tireless questioning and cross-examination of others, yielded a most noteworthy, if unpopular, result: namely, that we do not know as much as we think, nor do we fully believe or even understand the things we outwardly profess. Many of the beliefs we hold about ourselves and the world are simply false or entail consequences that, upon further consideration, are unacceptable or in contradiction with other more deeply held beliefs. An equally important outcome of Socratic conversation and interrogation, however, was that his interlocutors could just as well be left speechless, without any “positive” result, and not understanding what they should do or believe. As Plato has Socrates put it in his *Apology*, “human wisdom is worth little or nothing” (23a) because we are so prone to speak when we should be silent or parade when we should retreat. In other words, we have great difficulty knowing and then respectfully observing the limits of our capacities and abilities. Fearful of our deep ignorance and weakness,¹⁶ we presume too much for ourselves, and in our presumption speak and act as arrogant fools.

The Body: An Opening Into Humility

If we are to talk clearly and honestly about humility we must, therefore, be as attentive as possible to the practical, concrete contexts of our humanity and

the limiting factors they may suggest.¹⁷ We need to determine precisely where and what the limits are, and then how they should be drawn and understood. We should consider if a perceived or proclaimed limit is truly a limit and not artificially (or falsely) self-imposed. Given the great potential for self-deception, and our propensity to falsify and distort experience through personal fancy or fear, we may do better to approach authentic humility through an examination of embodied life together. Attending to bodies will enable us to approach the meaning and significance of humility with less abstraction and greater practical focus. We need to appreciate how bodies are fundamental: it is in terms of them that we participate in and most basically approach reality. Whatever we know, believe, or experience, and thus also profess, depends upon points of access that each have their root and inspiration in a living body.¹⁸

In his remarkable essay "Body and Touch," Chrétien (following Aristotle) says "The most fundamental and universal of all senses is the sense of touch. . . . While touch is separable from other senses . . . the sense of touch is inseparable from life itself: no animal is deprived of touch without also being deprived of life" (CR, p. 85). Touch, in other words, is co-extensive with a living being. It defines us as creatures that must touch and be touched in order to be. Bathed in the mystery and complexity that life itself is, touch alerts us to what is so primordial as to elude our best efforts at comprehension.¹⁹ We simply cannot imagine a human being without touch altogether. Obviously not all touch is intentional or conscious of itself as touching. This is why a person in a comatose or vegetative state is still (in the minimum activities of respiration and digestion) "in touch" with the world. As humans we are tactile beings immersed and embedded in a world of bodies. It is in terms of the vast and deep memberships of creation, what ecologists call "webs of interdependence," that we derive our nurture and inspiration, our very being. We live *through* others and could not possibly live alone.

This insight is of immense, but now mostly forgotten, significance. It is reflected in ancient spiritual traditions that recognize and celebrate rocks, trees, mountains, and springs as receptacles of a life-giving spirit, and in the Hebraic pronouncement in Genesis 3:19 that we come from out of and will also eventually (upon death) return to the soil. Indeed, the intimacy and ubiquity of our touching earthly bodies is conveyed in etymologies that identify humanity (*adam*) with the humus or life-giving layer of soil (*adamah*) that makes the earth come alive. Humility is the feature of a life that has adequately taken into account this body/earth relationship by honoring and strengthening the memberships of creation.²⁰ Pre-industrial cultures, because of hunter-gatherer and agricultural patterns of life, would have understood more readily (even if they did not always honor) the intimacy and practicality of relationship that joins us to the world.²¹ In the periods of modernity and postmodernity, as urbanization, industrialization, individualism, and consumerism come to dominate the practical shape of cultural life, the mass

forgetting of our material, bodily interdependence—what we can call an “ecological/biological amnesia”—becomes much more likely.

Another way of putting this is to say that a proper understanding of humility depends upon an honest estimation of how we are placed in a physical and social world.²² It includes a detailed and thorough accounting of the possibilities and responsibilities that follow from our placement. The humble person asks, “Being here, in this particular place, what is the proper and fitting (because attentive and respectful) thing for me to think and do?” When we let our arrogant or fearful foolishness control us, we are prevented from fully appreciating the precise nature of human limits that accompanies our being embodied in a place and embedded in a community. A sense for humility, or more precisely, the humble sense that follows from a deep and honest reckoning with our embodiment and embeddedness, is not something that we work ourselves into through an effort of the mind or tongue. It is rather a disposition and way of being that grows out of our faithful and non-evasive acknowledgment of our (material and spiritual) dependence upon others (worms, bees, chickens, photosynthesis, family, friends, teachers—the list goes on and on). When we are most honest and faithful, we bear witness to the many gifts from others of sustenance, inspiration, nurture, and sacrifice that are working themselves out in our lives. Failing this attention to and responsibility for our embodiment, we run the risk of misunderstanding, and thus also misrepresenting, humility.

What does our creaturely embodiment and embeddedness reveal about us, and how does this revelation contribute to an honest and true account of humility? Following Chrétien, we can describe the revelation as an encounter with excess, with “the excess of a human being over himself, an excess of what one is and can be over what one can think and comprehend.”²³ It is simply impossible for us to name and know the myriad of bodies, ranging from microorganisms in the soil to stardust in far-away galaxies, that feed into our being. To be in a world is to be “exposed” to countless others and to find oneself in a position wherefrom we must “respond” to them: have I honored their presence or compromised or violated it? Our exposure reveals the lie in every account of ourselves as self-standing and alone, as self-justifying and autarchic. To respond to others, as Derrida notes, alerts us to a fundamental transitivity in all human life: “The sense of touch is first of all, like the sense of every sensation, a sense of consent; it is and has this sense: *yes, to consent*, which always, and in advance, implies transitivity (*yes to, to consent to*).”²⁴

Our problem, however, is that we can never adequately or sufficiently account for or address what exceeds our comprehension or power. Our response forever falls short: we could never say “Thank you” or “I am sorry” enough. Chrétien is quick to point out that our falling short is neither a “contingent deficit nor a regrettable imperfection.” “It is the very event of a wound by which our existence is altered and opened, and becomes itself the site of the manifestation of what it responds to.”²⁵ Life is a perpetual passion

play, an unfathomably costly drama in which vitality, suffering, and death inform, close, and again open possibilities. The wounded character of our speaking, a wound we experience intimately and inescapably through our eating and corruptible bodies, is the mark of our finitude and our dependence upon others. Through it we encounter ourselves not simply as a question (Augustine) but as a paradox. I must appear to myself as impossible since I could not bring about my own existence or the existence of the world in terms of which I live. Human experience is thus permeated and formed by a fundamental disproportion or incommensurability between itself and that which brings it about.

What is revealed in our embeddedness is a fundamental inability to objectify and comprehend our being placed. The conscious ego cannot constitute its place because it is always already, and overwhelmingly, constituted *by* place. Our bodies, understood as the bearers of speech, are thus the concrete site in terms of which we respond to an appeal from another that exceeds our powers to master and predict it. The highest possibility of speech, speech that is maximally attuned to our embeddedness and embodiment, would therefore be an act of praise in which we affirm and give thanks for the life-giving places that (inexplicably) make our being possible. "Our task is not to give an answer that would in some sense erase the initial provocation by corresponding to it, but to offer ourselves up as such in response, without assigning in advance any limit to the gift" (CR, p. 13). Our lives and our world are gifts. That we exist at all, and the dynamic set of possibilities that our lives represent, are features of how we have been "called," quite gratuitously, into existence by a creative word and a continually expressive creation.²⁶ The fitting, humble response is first to listen, and then to offer our lives as gifts to others in return.

When we offer ourselves we are not simply returning the gift. Self-offering is not of the same species as re-payment, which presupposes economies of exchange in which we can estimate what sufficient repayment would be. Faced as we are with gifts that are inestimable in their being given, what we aim to do through our offerings is acknowledge and work to overcome the hubris, naiveté, or aggression that would claim the world as a possession or right. The offering of ourselves through humble service is thus a path of ascesis and purification leading us to our true creaturely humanity.

Life is a miraculous, inexplicable grace. It exceeds all economies of exchange. We all stand and eat within it, beggar-like, unable to fully or properly receive it because whatever we would take or claim already exceeds our longing and comprehension. In offering ourselves we do not often know what we are doing. Nor can we predict or control what our offering will accomplish. But in our acts of careful attention and humble thanksgiving we show ourselves to be mindful of our need, and the many gifts of creation available to meet it. We take seriously and respect the memberships of creation, and make the commitment to be faithful to them.

The Christological Relation

Our brief analysis of touch has shown us that “to be” is always already “to be in relation” with others. Life simply is being in relation, being “in touch” with others. Those who are humble recognize this to be the most basic truth about their living, and so do what they can do honor the relationships they live through. It is simply wrong to presume too much for oneself, not because of some infection of self-loathing but because presumption represents a distortion and falsification of our place in the world. I have also suggested that an appreciation for interdependent life leads us into an understanding of people as creatures. What this means we now need to develop.

We should begin by observing how many people fear being in relation. It is easier and less threatening to assume the role of spectator, keeping others at a comfortable distance. Moreover, we are suspicious of the idea that we are fundamentally dependent on others because there is in this dependence such great potential for abuse. Others, as we well know, can turn our dependence to their advantage. And so we cling to the myth of a self-standing, self-regulating being, all the while ignoring the fact that what most needs our attention is the correction of relationships that have been distorted by sin. In other words, what we need is an account of how relationships are disfigured and how they can be made whole. The fact that we live in and through relationships does not automatically guarantee that we will live through them properly. We need an account of proper relationality.

For this account we can turn to traditions in theology that see in Christ the archetype of all relations. Why is Christ this archetype? Most fundamentally it is because “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:3–4, cf. Colossians 1:15–20). Christ is the Word through whom all things are created. Given that this Word became flesh, we know that God remains profoundly “in touch” with creation: the world comes to be through the Word that has itself come into the world, which means that there is an intensity of intimacy at work between God and the world that surpasses all our imagining. What the incarnation of God communicates is that the relationships that constitute creation do not achieve their perfection until they approximate the intimacy and care that marks the relation between God and creation. The salvation of the world, as many of the early church fathers argued, depends upon a process of theosis or divinization where we enter more deeply into the divine way of being. “Human beings are not truly themselves, are not truly flesh, until they have become flesh as he became flesh.”²⁷ The pattern for proper relationality, in other words, is to be found in God’s own ways of relating.

To appreciate this insight we must move beyond monarchical conceptions of creation that see the creative act as some sort of divine imposition. Rowan Williams has observed that we have misunderstood the logic of creation. As

the creator of everything God does not exercise power over things, most basically because there is “nothing” (*creatio ex nihilo*) for God to exercise power over: “what creation emphatically isn’t is any kind of imposition or manipulation: it is not God imposing on us divinely willed roles rather than the ones we ‘naturally’ might have, or defining us out of our own systems into God’s. Creation affirms that to be here at all, to be a part of the natural order and to be the sort of thing capable of being named—or of having a role—is ‘of God’; it *is* because God wants it so.”²⁸ In other words, to be a creature means that we exist because of our relation to God, and depend upon God for our existence. How we choose to exist is not a feature of God’s imposition but the result of our freedom to either acknowledge or refuse that relation.

Because God creates out of freedom and not through struggle—God’s creative act is not an act of negotiation or domination (as in other creation myths)—we do not need to worry that God is somehow behind the scenes pulling strings. Rather, God’s delight in the freedom of creation to be itself is grounded in God’s own freedom. “With God alone, I am dealing with what does not need to construct or negotiate an identity, what is free to be itself without the process of struggle. Properly understood, this is the most liberating affirmation we could ever hear.”²⁹ Because God did not have to create, the fact that there is a creation at all means that the divine creative action is to be understood as the work of love. God’s way of being, as revealed to us in the history of Israel and the incarnate Christ, is a way that is “for others.” To “be” God (and insofar as we understand God at all) is to make room for others to be. This is what the “economy” of the Trinity communicates. What this “making room” for others, this hospitality, looks like in the flesh is most clearly to be seen in the ministries of feeding, healing, exorcism, forgiveness, mercy, and celebration as modeled for us in the life of Christ. To say that Christ is the archetype of relation, the one through whom the full potential of touch is best realized, is thus to understand that creation achieves its redemp-tion when its memberships are characterized by vitality, health, justice, and freedom. Relationships that share in this redemptive work thus become the pattern for all right relationships.

If we think now again of how relation at its most fundamental level occurs through touch, then we should be able to appreciate how the practices of love and compassion must be the origin, medium, and goal of our living. As Chrétien puts it, “Only a thought of love . . . gives the flesh its full bearing of intellect and leads touch to its highest possibility” (CR, p. 129).³⁰ It is the touch of compassion that most properly leads us into the world and that most fully defines the character of our relationships, for in this touch we participate in the ongoing creative and sustaining work of the Creator.³¹ This is work that is marked by detailed attention to the needs of all creation:

You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;

the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth. (Psalm 65:9–10)

But it is also marked by such Christological virtues as friendship (Jesus' concern for the family of Lazarus in John 11), tenderness (Jesus' healing of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5), mercy (Jesus' promise of paradise to the criminal in Luke 23), forgiveness (Jesus' unfailing welcome of Peter), and restoration of relationship (Jesus' healing of the lepers in Luke 17). God's intimacy with creation, as manifested in God's daily and sustaining touch, is the context that models and inspires all proper relationality.

The Flesh of Humility

It is not enough to characterize the humble person as one who appreciates the interdependence of created life, as one who understands that living is made possible through the receiving of gifts, and that speaking is always a responding to a primordial call. We need also to think more carefully about the character of our response. If it is true that we have been gripped by a world that speaks to us from all sides, how should we speak in return?³² How should we speak through our bodies, put flesh on humility, since "there is no voice but the bodily voice" (*CR*, p. 83)? We cannot bear witness to humility in the abstract any more than we can speak without the organs of the body.

Chrétien tells us that the bodily voice is a "resounding voice that puts me, body and soul, in my entirety, to work in the world" (*CR*, p. 78). To appreciate the depth and revolutionary significance of this claim we must see it from the perspective of the relationships that characterize all created existence. Too often we confine speaking to the action of a mouth or think of our speaking as something we choose to do. We presuppose, in other words, that we could just as well not speak. But on Chrétien's and our theological reading, our not speaking is an impossibility. This is because we cannot choose not to be in relation any more than we can decide not to be in touch with others. As Aristotle put it long ago in *De Anima*, touch is co-extensive with life itself (and death). Reality through and through is constituted by relationality.³³

If this is true then our dwelling and working in the world does not simply place us alongside others, as if we could choose to be with this or that other. Rather, from time immemorial, and for good or ill, we have always already participated in the life of others. We do not touch each other as spectators. Our relationships with others, whether we admit it or not, are far more intimate and involved than that. It is the nature of this participatory touch that we now need to understand.

Touch is unique among the senses because it entails reciprocity and reversibility (though not necessarily symmetry). When I touch another I am at the same time being touched. Touch thus has the peculiar quality of enabling me to feel myself. "I feel myself only by the favor of the other. It is the other who gives me to myself insofar as the return to myself and my own actions or affections always supposes this other . . . I never start by saying 'I'" (CR, p. 120). Moreover, I discover another and feel myself not through any particular, isolatable sense organ. As Aristotle put it, "touch is not a single sense but many" (*De Anima*, II, 11). We cannot control or direct the sense of touch since we are always already immersed in a world beyond our knowing and comprehension.

Our immersion in touch should not be taken to mean that the difference between self and other is therefore obliterated. When I reach out to another, as when I grab another's hand, there is still a gap: "proximity always includes some minimal remoteness" (CR, p. 88). Besides being a warning against all claims to complete comprehension, this distance or gap is of the highest significance for understanding the character of our relationships. Graham Ward has put it well when he observes, "Only when there is space, where there is distance, where there is difference, can there be the love that desires, that draws, that seeks participation."³⁴ We need the space between self and other so that we can learn to act on another's behalf, learn to suffer with others in their struggles and share in their joys. When we obliterate the boundaries between self and other we destroy the prospect of any self-possession which could then open up into "a free dispossession for the sake of the other"—the very mark of compassion.³⁵

The movement between self and other is difficult for us to understand because we have grown so accustomed to thinking of persons first as free-standing agents who then decide to enter into relationship. But if we start with relation, as our treatment of the call/response structure of experience compels us to, then we discover that all selves are constituted by the exchange itself. Who I am is a feature of the relationships that exist before I can self-identify. "I never start by saying 'I.' I start by being 'thou-ed' by the world" (CR, p. 120).

Again, the best way to understand this is theologically. Creation is the concrete manifestation of the Creator's own Trinitarian life.³⁶ Insofar as we exist at all we participate in the ways of grace. The intimacy of relation that grace communicates can be better appreciated when we remember that the Hebrew word for grace (*hēn*) carries the connotation of the life-giving womb (*rehem*). The fetus depends entirely on the womb for its life, participates in the life of the mother, but is not dissolved into the mother. The fetus remains itself, though not as a self-standing being. That it is and what it is are features of the relationships it lives through. In a similar way, our existence is womb-like to the extent that it is "in" God that we move and have our being (Acts 17:28). Without God's continuous, intimate, life-giving Spirit and breath,

we all would, as the Psalmist said, “die and return to their dust” (Psalm 104:27–30).

This way of speaking should not surprise us since it is the reflection of God’s own Trinitarian life.³⁷ As theologians struggled to make sense of God’s life as reflected in God’s involvement with creation, they found the term *perichoresis* particularly helpful. *Perichoresis* means something like reciprocal participation or interpenetration. The three persons of the Trinity do not exist alongside each other. If they did we would move quickly to a notion of Tritheism. The Three are so closely related that they form a single divine dance. Here the intimacy of touch leads us to conceptual breaking points. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit perform a work together. Their togetherness is so intimate that we cannot really speak of any of the members as individuals. What we have here is a fellowship of love, the sense that relationality is the very core of the divine way of being.

While this talk about the Trinity may seem abstract, it yields a most practical and revolutionary insight: “In God, there are no individuals; the Three dwell in each other so completely that we cannot divide them, one from another. And so we too are called to live lives of mutual participation, in which our relationships are not just something that we ‘have,’ but are what constitute us as human beings.”³⁸ The early Christian communities understood something about this practicality since it led them to set up economic practices of sharing and benevolence that would not have made sense if they did not see the identity of each member in terms of the well-being of the whole (cf. Acts 2:44–45). These early Christians understood that they do not exist as individuals, and so were willing, even saw it as “natural,” that they should sell what they have, give it to the poor, and live economically in such a way as to hold things in common.

When we learn to appreciate how our relationships with one another constitute our being, then we can understand why the apostle Paul stressed the importance of the upbuilding of the body of Christ. As he repeatedly states, to become a follower of God means that the self no longer lives as a self-standing, self-justifying being: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:19–20). As ones who have “the mind of Christ,” (I Corinthians 2:16) Christians are to live in such a way as to manifest and continue the healing, feeding, and forgiving work modeled by him. True life demands that we stay “in touch” with him and allow ourselves to be touched by him. The focus of human life is thus shifted to the noble but practical and mundane work of protecting and strengthening the relationships we live through.

What we can now see is that flesh of humility is the sort of life in which our bodies are sympathetically in tune with the bodies of creation. The humble person is one who has grasped the “nothingness” of solitary life. There is no life apart from relation, apart from our mutual participation in the life of each other. This is why humble people do not try to stand out from others. They

realize that an appropriate human life is one dedicated to serving others. Our attempts to stand out represent denials of the fact that we need each other and are constituted through the gifts we daily receive and can then share again. Because we are constantly in touch with each other, we bear the marks of each other in our bodies. Or as Chrétien would put it, we each carry the voices of the whole world within our own voice. What we need to do is learn to carry the voices of others in a way that respects them and brings honor to their Creator. "To sing the world is to try and concentrate its profuse and confused choir in the tremulous clarity of our own voice" (AS, p. 129). For us to sing the world our speech must first become hospitable by participation in the primordial, divine hospitality that continuously creates times and places in which the members of creation can thrive.

Owing to the presence of so much sin in the world, of so many disordered and assaulted relationships, the song we sing will often have the character of the lament. Lament presupposes that we have first to become attentive to others, see their pain and suffering, and so can exercise compassion. If we are attentive to each other, as humble persons must be, then we will appreciate that suffering with others is an essential ingredient of current creaturely life, not because we prize the suffering but because we resist the distortion and violence that undermines creation. Our suffering, however, is not without hope since it is "joined with all the living" (Ecclesiastes 9:4). If we lived as individuals, like the Babylonians who proclaimed "I am, and there is no one besides me," then our suffering would indeed be one long, bleak night. But humility rises out of a primordial and communal³⁹ affirmation of the goodness of relation and sees in our relatedness cause for gratitude and praise. "Only praise can make lamentation possible, for only love can really suffer. If there were nothing in the world for which we could give thanks, a lament would merely form an empty vociferation. Only the light shows the darkness as darkness, only beauty can be the index of ugliness" (AS, p. 145).

Touching/Witnessing God

One of the defining and most important features of a humble life is that it bears witness to the interdependent character of all life. Humble people demonstrate through their attention and kindness that we are all the beneficiaries of gift upon gift, and that the most fitting and honest response is to name these gifts and then honor them by cherishing and caring for them. Gratitude, praise, and celebration, are the marks of the humble worship that grows seamlessly out of a life that is faithful to the many memberships of creation. Through our compassionate touch we bear witness to the divine, creative, sustaining compassion that is continually in touch with the world.

What this means is that love and compassion as touch's highest possibilities are never simply or merely of profane or pragmatic significance. Commenting on Thomas Aquinas, Chrétien observes that the transitivity of touch

leads beyond the finite to the infinite. The touch of love moves from physical contact to the grace of God at work in all created things. As Aquinas says in *De Veritate* 28:3, "God himself touches the soul by causing grace in it." There is therefore, in our proper handling of creation, a touching of God, or mutual contact between Creator and creation (*CR*, p. 129). The witness of humility is therefore, and at the same time, a witness to God.

If this is the case, then we should not be surprised to hear the Psalmist say "O taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8), or discover mystics who turn bodily senses into spiritual faculties for the discernment of the divine. In *The Journey of the Mind to God* Bonaventure offers a remarkable meditation on precisely this theme. In order for the soul to be purified and perfected it must pattern its life on the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Word through whom all creation is what it is. Following this conformity to Christ the senses of hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch are themselves reformed so that we can enjoy sweet communion with our Maker. Bonaventure is clear that the senses, what he calls "the experience of the affections," count for more than the considerations of the mind. When our senses have been restored by Christ we are enabled "to see what is most beautiful, to hear what is most harmonious, to smell what is most fragrant, to taste what is most sweet, and to embrace what is most delightful . . ."⁴⁰ Because the Word has become flesh, we are through love made capable of touching the Word (*CR*, pp. 129–130).

Although God is not the sort of being that can literally or physically be touched, it still makes sense to employ the language of touch in this context. The reason the refinement of touch is so important is that it better opens and attunes us to the grace of God at work in the world. Only as we give ourselves over completely to others, body and soul—is this why sexual intimacy and vulnerability are taken by scripture to be the high point of knowledge?—do we become maximally sensitive. Without such fine sensitivity, Aquinas argued, we cannot have a fine intelligence. What our study has shown is that the ground for such sensitivity and intelligence cannot be prepared without the disposition of humility. Humility trains us in the art of being creatures. It does so by teaching us to be honest about our need, grateful for the gifts of others, and faithful in the service of healing the many memberships of creation. As an indispensable disposition in every spiritual life, humility prepares us to welcome our Creator and enter into our highest calling—friendship with God.⁴¹

NOTES

- 1 Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown, London: Routledge, 2004), p. 123. Future references will be in the text followed by the abbreviation *AS*.
- 2 We should recall here Augustine's maxim: "the punishment of every disordered mind is its own disorder" (*Confessions* I, 19).
- 3 Listening is not confined to the ears. Following Chrétien, I will assume throughout that "listening exceeds by far the sense of hearing. Everything in us listens, because everything

- in the world and of the world speaks." Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 14. Future references will be in the text following the abbreviation CR.
- 4 I here amend the quotation from Joseph Joubert that opens *The Call and the Response*: "In order for a voice to be beautiful, it must have in it many voices together" (p. 1).
 - 5 Speaking of a Babylonian idol, Isaiah declares: "They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries out to it, it does not answer or save anyone from trouble" (Isa. 46:7). An idol cannot save them because it is but the reflection/projection of the evil that has led to their destruction in the first place.
 - 6 The story of how technology became the new sacred is worked out clearly in Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). See also David Noble's less technical rendering in *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1997).
 - 7 Saint Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, trans. Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M., (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1956), p. 2.
 - 8 Graham Ward echoes this sentiment precisely: "Christ, as second person of the Trinity, is the archetype of all relation. All relations, that is, participate in and aspire to their perfection in the Christological relation. Not only in him is all relation perfected, but the work and economy he is implicated in . . . the reconciliation of the world to God" in *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 1.
 - 9 Christopher Cullen argues that for Bonaventure "the summary of the whole of Christian perfection consists in humility." See Christopher Cullen, *Bonaventure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 13.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, p. 13. Cullen is right to suggest that genuine humility is tied to and grows out of an appreciation for human beings as *creatures*. What this means, and how the connection between creatureliness and humility is maintained, will be developed in this essay.
 - 11 Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, p. 39.
 - 12 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 103–104. Earlier in the text she elaborates by saying humility is a "selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues" (p. 95).
 - 13 Norvin Richards. "Is Humility a Virtue?" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 25/3, (July 1988), p. 253 (italics in the original). Richards uses as his example Bernard of Clairvaux, who says (in *Sermon 42 on Canticle 6*), "if you examine yourself inwardly by the light of truth and without dissimulation, and judge yourself without flattery; no doubt you will be humbled in your eyes, becoming contemptible in your own sight as a result of this true knowledge of yourself . . ." Richards observes that, outside of an allegiance to the archaic belief in original sin, this "depressing view is not obviously correct. In fact, it is difficult to see a reason to hold it" (p. 253). As we will see, Richards has failed to consider what it means to be a creature.
 - 14 See Bruce V. Foltz, "Nature's Other Side: The Demise of Nature and the Phenomenology of Givenness," in *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodeman, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 330–341. This idolatrous signification is the exact opposite of St. Bonaventure's view, which argued that the natural world is a vestige "in which we can perceive our God" (*The Journey of the Mind to God*, p. 13).
 - 15 Bernard of Clairvaux, "On the Steps of Humility and Pride," in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G.R. Evans, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 103. Bernard, who is here following Augustine in his definition, reflects a common view within spiritual literature.
 - 16 Consider here the sobering observations of Pascal: "When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after . . . the small space I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which know nothing of me, I take fright and am amazed to see myself here rather than there: there is no reason for me to be here rather than there, now rather than then. Who put me here?" and "Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him." Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 48 and 95.

- 17 It is important to underscore that a limiting factor both closes *and* opens possibilities. Rather than being simply negative, a limit is the practical condition in terms of which our living is successful and appropriate.
- 18 "No experience of the self can bracket the body, and thus bracket the relations of proximity to which the body binds us; the experience of the self is the experience of place as much as of time." Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 8.
- 19 Jacques Derrida wonders if touch is not best understood as "unrepresentable presence." See Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 250. Chrétien says "Touch veils itself" (CR, p. 87).
- 20 I have developed the significance of the soil/humanity relationship in *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 21 It is instructive to wonder how much Descartes' description of the self as a disembodied mind is symptomatic of this dawning ecological amnesia. It would have been inconceivable to a peasant or farmer to cast the person primarily as a thinking thing (*res cogitans*). People, rather than being the measure of themselves, are measured by the earth and how well they fit within its life. Consider here the ancient peasant maxim: "The earth shows up those of value and those who are good for nothing" (quoted by Jean Pierre Vernant in *Myth and Thought According to the Greeks*). To be of value is to live and work in a manner that respects the earth and that contributes to the health and flourishing of the entire biological and social community. Here the quality of our life is judged in terms of our ability to move responsibly among the memberships that constitute our living.
- 22 For a detailed historical examination of the indispensability of "place" for world and self understanding, see Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
- 23 Jean-Louis Chrétien, "Retrospection" in *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2002), p. 119.
- 24 Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, p. 246.
- 25 Chrétien, "Retrospection," p. 122.
- 26 It is significant that in theological traditions God creates through speaking. God's speaking, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes, must not be understood in a causal way, because God is transcendent and creates in freedom. This means that even as God can be said to commit to creation through love, God is not bound out of some kind of causal necessity. Creation is not, therefore, an effect but an expression of freedom and love. The difference between an effect and an expression is that the former would indicate a sharing of nature or essence between Creator and creation, as though God and creatures were on an ontological continuum, while the latter indicates God's utterly gratuitous commitment to and presence in the created work. Bonhoeffer notes that "between Creator and creature there is neither a law of motive nor a law of effect nor anything else. Between Creator and creature there is simply nothing: the void. For freedom happens in and through the void. . . . Creation comes out of this void." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1–3*, trans. John C. Fletcher, (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1959), p. 19.
- 27 Ward, *Christ and Culture*, p. 76. Ward is here simply echoing the sentiment of Tertullian, who argued that God lived with us as a person so that we can be taught to live like God (p. 5). See also the lucid and succinct treatment of these themes in Jean Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1979), especially chapter 11.
- 28 Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 69.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 30 Or in Graham Ward's formulation, "Touch is an orientation towards being incarnate and it finds its true self-understanding in love" (*Christ and Culture*, p. 76).
- 31 Oliver Davies has done an excellent job demonstrating the connection between compassion and creation. Insofar as we live compassionately we "align our 'being' with God's 'being', and thus, performatively . . . participate in the ecstatic ground of the Holy Trinity itself." Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), p. 252. And again more recently in *The Creativity of God: World, Eucharist, Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) Davies writes: "Compassion is the divine creativity. It is the outflowing of the

- inner Trinitarian life in the formation of the world. Human compassion is a sacrament or sign of the joyful, life-giving creativity of God" (p. 164).
- 32 "Every voice, hearing without cease, bears many voices within itself because there is no first voice. . . . Between my voice as it speaks and my voice as I hear it vibrates the whole thickness of the world whose meaning my voice attempts to say, meaning that has gripped it and swallowed it up, as it were, from time immemorial" (*CR*, p. 1).
 - 33 That Aristotelian metaphysics would come to be governed by a substance ontology stressing the identification of things being this rather than that, as things being what they are in separation from other things, suggests that Aristotle did not heed his own profound insight. For an illuminating discussion of how the Cappadocian church Fathers struggled to correct this substance ontology in the process of developing a Trinitarian account of God, see John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).
 - 34 Ward, *Christ and Culture*, p. 145.
 - 35 Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*, p. 8.
 - 36 More precisely, creation is the scene in terms of which our speaking of an Economic Trinity becomes possible. Who God is in Godself (the Immanent Trinity) exceeds our comprehension. As Aquinas says in *Summa Theologiae* I.13.8, "God is not known to us in His nature, but is made known to us from His operations."
 - 37 We need to remember that our speaking of God's Trinitarian life continually leads us to conceptual breaking points. Put simply, the Trinity is beyond space-time representation. This means our speaking must be understood to be analogical, as participating in a reality that exceeds our comprehension.
 - 38 David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 169.
 - 39 "We cannot say *yes* except in unison, and the speech that expresses the unity of the world can itself be nothing if not unifying" (*AS*, p. 147).
 - 40 Bonaventure, *The Mind's Journey to God*, p. 24. For a wonderful, short description of the spiritual transformation of our senses in the light of gardening work—one of the most ancient practices of humility!—see Vigen Guroian, *The Fragrance of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).
 - 41 My thanks to Merold Westphal, Bruce Benson, and Adam Glover for reading an earlier draft of this essay, and for offering helpful suggestions for improvement. No doubt, this essay would have been better had I followed all their advice.