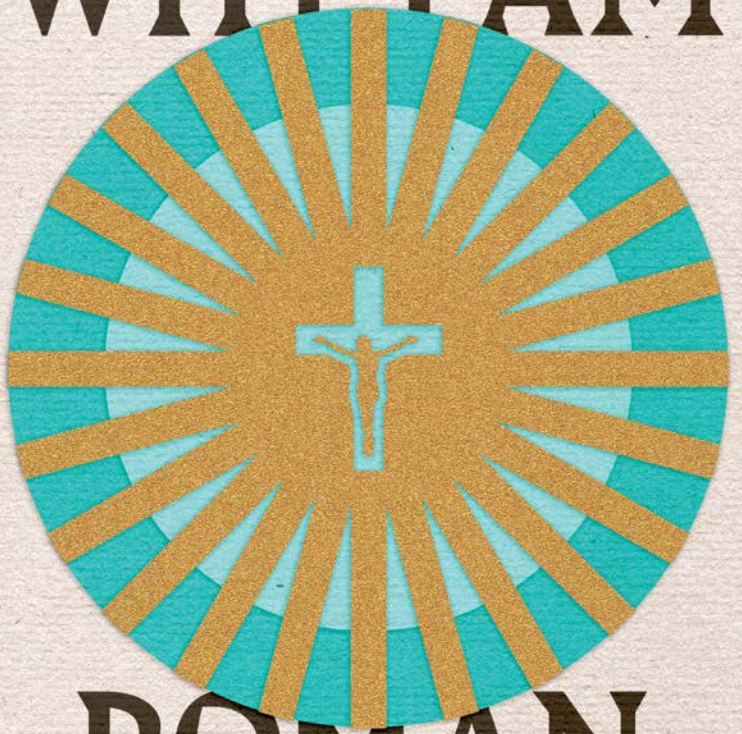
MATTHEW LEVERING

WHY I AM ROMAN CATHOLIC



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ONE

WHY I AM CHRISTIAN

Ninth-century English King Alfred the Great accomplished a great deal. He unified England, defeated the Vikings, reformed England's military defenses and governmental procedures, and fostered an intellectual renewal. According to his contemporaneous biographer, the monk Asser, he also suffered from very poor health. Asser states, "King Alfred has been transfixed by the nails of many tribulations, even though he is invested with royal authority: from his twentieth year until his forty-fifth (which is now in course) he has been plagued continually with the savage attacks of some unknown disease."[1]

On reading this, I thought, *Here is a brother!* On most levels I don't compare to King Alfred, and yet we are united on a very simple level by the experience of a chronic disease. Ever since my early twenties, I have endured pain and weakness in my back and left leg and gradual decline of mobility, though I can still walk. Doctors have not been able to identify the exact cause of

[1]Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, in *Alfred the Great: Asser's* Life of King Alfred *and Other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (London: Penguin, 1983), 101.

the problem, but I have a condition called multiple hereditary exostoses that may be one of the problem's roots, and that has caused me various additional troubles from childhood onward.

Fortunately, like King Alfred's, my debility has never been at a level that truly incapacitates—and the older I get, the more I realize that physical (and psychological) debilities are a powerful part of everyone's life.[2] Without doubt, my journey into Christianity was affected by this experience of bodily suffering.

In this chapter, I highlight four reasons I became Christian. They are the following. First, the mystery of death and dying spurred me to seek God. Second, I discovered the power of Christ's cross, due to my awareness of needing a Redeemer. Third, I was entranced by the infinite mystery of God. And fourth, I found the harmony of the two Testaments of Scripture to be extraordinary, and I found the ongoing life of the church to be a persuasive extension of the biblical depiction of the earliest Christian communities and of the people of Israel.

In the early sixth century, monastic elder St. Barsanuphius and his disciple John were asked by a young monk why God permitted him to undergo an illness. In reply, the two elder monks assured the young man: "Those who wish to please God must pass through certain afflictions. How can we call the holy martyrs blessed for the suffering they endured for the sake of God, if we are unable to bear a mere fever?"[3] Everyone has suffered and will suffer. We are in good company.

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[2]See Ross Douthat, *The Deep Places: A Memoir of Illness and Discovery* (New York: Random House, 2021); Alan Noble, *On Getting Out of Bed: The Burden and Gift of Living* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023).

[3]Barsanuphius and John, *Letters from the Desert: A Selection of Questions and Responses*, trans. John Chryssavgis (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 79. Barsanuphius (d. 540) was a hermit and monk in Palestine.

According to his biographer, King Alfred "struggled like an excellent pilot to guide his ship laden with much wealth to the desired and safe haven of his homeland."[4] He may not be acclaimed as a saint, but he was a Christian charged with piloting his ship to its homeland—that is, he was charged with temporal duties as a ruler, intermingled with his spiritual mission to be united with his Creator and Redeemer, in union with the people whose well-being he served.

We all share this same responsibility, even if our particular tasks are not likely to be memorialized in biographies. In the kingdom of Christ, every single human being is important and beloved of God. And every single human being is called to seek God. As Alcuin of York says about the human condition after the fall, "Although we were cast down from the joy of blessed happiness to the wretched blindness of this life of exile . . . we were not, however, completely cut off and uprooted to the extent that . . . we lost all knowledge, desire and searching for eternity, truth, and blessedness."[5]

THE MYSTERY OF DEATH AND DYING

I was not raised a Christian, if by that one means someone who believes in God's existence or Christ's divinity or the Bible's truth. I grew up in college towns: Westminster, Maryland; Richmond, Indiana; and Davidson, North Carolina. I cannot speak highly enough of my parents and grandparents, and I was surrounded by many wonderful people at Quaker Meeting. These people were not opposed to belief in God, but generally

[4]Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, 101.

[5]Alcuin of York, *A Mind Intent on God: The Prayers and Spiritual Writings of Alcuin, an Anthology*, ed. Douglas Dales (Norwich, UK: Canterbury, 2004), 1. Alcuin of York (735–804) was an English monk, theologian, adviser to Charlemagne, and editor of the Vulgate.

they didn't believe in a living, personal God. The great majority of the adults I knew assumed that God did not exist and that Jesus did not rise from the dead. They considered that when we die, we become dust. Never again—for endless eternity—do we think, love, or enjoy anything. We are simply annihilated.

As a very young child, I was confronted with this viewpoint and found it bleak. I rebelled against the notion of personal annihilation with all my heart, without becoming what is generally called a rebel. With utter horror, I still can all too easily imagine the tragedy of never, ever knowing or loving again. Far from merely a return to the condition of not being, as was the case prior to one's conception, annihilation would be a horrific tragedy for a personal being filled with unique potential for communion with others and with a deeply personal and irreplaceable intelligence and love, marked by unique and powerful relationships. As a young child, I already knew what hospitals smelled like, the busy-ness and importance of doctors, and the long waits in a tiny room until the doctor came in with the crowd of internists to examine my somewhat deformed body. Of course, I met dying children.

Later, I made my own the words of Job, who begs that after his death, God will still love him and will still want to converse with him: "You would call, and I would answer you; you would long for the work of your hands" (Job 14:15 NRSVCE). Indeed, if there is a loving God, how could this God abandon me, who desires to be his beloved child, to everlasting annihilation? In fact, this is the great horror that Job faces in his agony.[6] With his body falling apart, the question is whether God is stripping

[6]See chapter 1 of Matthew Levering, *Dying and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

him of his bodily health in order to annihilate him. Is the Creator God also the annihilator, pretending to be a friend but then ripping us apart and discarding us forever? Death roars close to us; will it utterly destroy us?

At the time, as a young child, I did not know whether God existed. Nor did I even know to think about this question as such. I simply worried about getting various diseases and dying. I could already feel what Alexander Elchaninov describes, although I could not have put it in his words—words that now ring true to me, although I enjoy my days. Elchaninov says, "The swiftly flowing, irresistible, dancing current of the hours, days, years, often throws us into despair. We scarcely have time to live, to see our family. It is difficult to express my feeling—I am painfully aware both of the poignancy and strength of my love, and of its vanity, its torturing transiency."[7] In my own way as a child, I was very aware of the incredible fragility and transiency of life.

It was this awareness of my fragility that spurred on questions of God. It is unpopular today to admit that one was moved toward Christianity by fear of death. Skeptics have deemed Christianity to be "the opiate of the masses" (as Karl Marx famously put it), wonderful promises that are never delivered, pie in the sky. But I am deeply moved by Christians who can embrace their own imminent dying, interiorly formed by a profound faith in God's promises and God's goodness. Julian of Norwich tells us that in the midst of a grave illness, when she was near death, "It seemed to me that all the time that I had

[7]Alexander Elchaninov, *The Diary of a Russian Priest*, English ed., ed. Kallistos Timothy Ware, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 103. Elchaninov (1881–1934) was a Russian Orthodox priest.

lived here was very little and short in comparison with the bliss which is everlasting." She thought to herself, "Good Lord, is it no longer to your glory that I am alive? And my reason and my sufferings told me that I should die; and with all the will of my heart I assented wholly to be as was God's will."[8]

Amazing. Could she really assent to the stripping away of her earthly existence, confident that God would embrace her on the other side of the seeming annihilation of her life? This requires not merely natural hope but the supernatural (divinely infused) virtue of hope. Theologian Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange comments, "By infused hope we tend toward eternal life, toward supernatural beatitude, which is nothing less than the possession of God. . . . We tend toward Him, relying on the divine help which He has promised us. The formal motive of hope is not our effort, it is God our Helper."[9]

In looking forward to the new creation that will bring God's creative work to its consummation, Christians sometimes imagine that it will be much like our world, though no longer with sin and death. Indeed, Christians today tend to be resolutely this-worldly, concentrating on this world alone. Christians deal with the death of loved ones by imagining them whole and healthy in heaven, eating their favorite dinner, playing with their pets, and so on. Rhineland mystic Claesinne van Nieuwlant calls us to a different path.[10] Instructed by Paul's teaching in Colossians 3:1-3 ("If then you have been raised

[8]Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge, OSA, and James Walsh, SJ (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 128. Julian (1342–ca. 1416) was an English mystic and anchoress.
[9]Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life: Prelude of Eternal Life*, trans. M. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis: Herder, 1948), 2: 219. Garrigou-Lagrange (1877–1964) was a French Dominican priest and theologian.
[10]Claesinne van Nieuwlant (1550–1611) was a Rhineland mystic.

with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God"), she insists that Christians even now are being led upward so that our lives are hidden in the "superessential" life of God. Dying leads into an unfathomable glory, not a mere restoration of comfortable earthly existence.

Yet, what sinners we are, and how we struggle against God's upward call, as we cleave to our earthly homes. Focused on this world, we may actually wish to do without God entirely. The extent of human sinfulness can hardly be exaggerated. Van Nieuwlant remarks, "Sometimes they [Christians] are left to such desolation, in their nothingness and evil, that they cannot stand themselves or cannot remain present where these mysteries [the Eucharist] are celebrated."[11] This sounds right—there is no sentimentality in this perspective on the sins of Christians. In *The Roads to Zion Mourn*, Hugh of Balma finds with great dismay: "No one pays attention to the *solemn feast* [the Eucharist], since clerics and layfolk alike have cast off true wisdom and immersed themselves in worldly delights and useless curiosities."[12]

In response to our spiritual sloth, van Nieuwlant urges that we go looking for God. After all, everything other than God—even the most glorious gifts or the greatest angels—"is all too

[11]Claesinne van Nieuwlant, "Conversation [with Jan Pullen]," in *Late Medieval Mysticism of the Low Countries*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, Robert Faesen, SJ, and Helen Rolfson (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 165-75, at 168.

[12]Hugh of Balma, *The Roads to Zion Mourn*, in *Carthusian Spirituality: The Writings of Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte*, trans. and ed. Dennis D. Martin (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 69-170, at 69. Hugh's exact identity is unclear; scholars think it likely that he was a thirteenth-century Carthusian theologian.

small." Who are we and who will we be, when it is a matter of our literally dying and going forth into eternity? Van Nieuwlant advises that each person should be "standing in his own inner nothingness," aware of depending solely on God for being and indeed for everything.[13] Let me put it this way: If life beyond death depends on my own human strength, then I am in trouble. In my puny resources, I teeter on the very verge of nothingness. But to enter into God is to find infinite plenitude, if God will enable me to stand before him. Let me accept my nothingness and look to God's plenitude.

We are tempted to try to take charge of our passing over. On my deathbed, if I am still able to think, I fear that I'll be mentally going through the proofs of God's existence, or recalling evidences of Christ's resurrection, as a strengthening of faith in the hour of trial. But van Nieuwlant presses deeper. If I dare to follow her instruction, I must not cling to anything of my own. My ideas about Christ and God are not false, but if I cling to my ideas, that way lies disaster. It is the living God who alone can fill the space that dying (and, for that matter, living) opens up. Only the living God can fill this space with gifts: Christ, the blessed, the new creation, beatitude. According to van Nieuwlant, I must enter into Christ's self-surrender: "humility, nothingness."[14] Otherwise, I will allow myself to stop within what is my own, and then nothingness or emptiness yawns before me, since only God is life.[15] This is the case even though our souls truly are immaterial: God alone upholds our souls in

[13]Van Nieuwlant, "Conversation," 169.

[14]Van Nieuwlant, "Conversation," 171.

[15]I believe in the spiritual (immortal) soul, but it takes God to sustain the spiritual soul in being. See Matthew Levering, *Jesus and the Demise of Death: Resurrection, Afterlife, and the Fate of the Christian* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), chap. 6.

existence, and only Godward souls share in the eternal realm of the new creation.

This God is no abstraction, as Alexander of Hales reminds us. Coming as King to his long-suffering people Israel, Israel's God "was found to be made small, the immortal was weak, the one containing was contained, the first was last, the most high the most lowly; Psalm 8:1: 'How wonderful is your name in all the earth,' and Genesis 32:29, 'Why do you ask my name, which is wonderful?'"[16]

CHRIST'S CROSS

I am a Christian in part because in 1993, after enduring a three-day experience in which I felt that God did not exist (how hollow and shell-like everything seemed, swaying on the edge of endless annihilation), I went to Duke Divinity School's library and discovered books that showed the reasonableness of believing in the existence of God and in the resurrection and divinity of Christ. As St. Charles de Foucauld puts it—though I have not lived in the extraordinary way he lived—"As soon as I believed there was a God, I understood that I could not do anything other than live for him."[17] My conversion to Christianity and Catholicism then moved quickly.

Even prior to this, however, during my college years I felt a deep attraction to Christ. His crucifixion attracted me. If God were to dwell among us sinners in this brutal world, it *should* be by a radical solidarity with us, and by enduring the sorrow and

[16]Alexander of Hales, *On the Significations and Exposition of the Holy Scriptures*, trans. Aaron Gies (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2018), 16. Alexander (ca. 1183–1245) was a theologian at the University of Paris and, in the last decade of his life, a Franciscan.

[17]Charles de Foucauld, *Charles de Foucauld: Writings*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 37. De Foucauld (1858–1916) was French aristocrat, soldier, explorer, and (after his conversion) desert hermit in Tamanrasset, Algeria; he died a martyr.

destruction of interpersonal communion caused by sin and death. By taking the lowest place, Christ makes me feel as though I have a place. In his supreme self-offering, Christ bespeaks the reconciliation that God wills to offer his people Israel and the whole world with them. Jesus did for me what I cannot do myself, namely, he gave himself freely and with perfect love rather than clinging to his life. He endured the direst humiliation. If he has stooped so low, then he is reachable by us. We can cross to God on the new-covenant path that Christ has marked out, since it is the path of God's uttermost desire for each and every sinner. I can show myself to God in Christ, and in Christ God reveals to me that he wants me to come to him. St. Catherine of Siena expresses this truth: "I see the Word, your Son, nailed to a cross. And you have made him a bridge for me, as you have shown me, wretched servant that I am! My heart is breaking and yet cannot break for the hungry longing it has conceived for you!"[18]

The cross stimulated a hungry yearning in me. When I cross over to eternity, and indeed at every moment prior to this crossing, let me cross over on the Lord's cross. Christ's humility, his mercy, his love: this is a bridge to God indeed.

Let me admit that after my conversion, I assumed that by now, thirty years later, I would be fairly well sanctified. In fact, temptations and sins continue to plague me. This seems ridiculous for a Christian. It requires a continual recourse to the cross of Christ. St. Bonaventure tells us that fallen humanity—marked by ignorance and concupiscence—is "blinded and bent over" and "sits in darkness and does not see the light of heaven, unless grace

[18]Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, OP (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 63. Catherine (1347–1380) was a lay Dominican mystical theologian.

comes to his aid—with justice to fight concupiscence, and with knowledge and wisdom to oppose ignorance."[19] St. Gregory of Narek gets to the heart of the situation, having examined his own soul. We almost want to stop his confession—stop now, surely you, St. Gregory, are holy!—but he nevertheless proclaims: "Here is the true picture of me, worthy of blame: Sad face, extinguished flare, dry mouth, no moisture left, defamed image, saddened soul, distorted voice, bent-down neck." Fortunately, it is precisely this real St. Gregory, joined to all of us sinners, whom Christ has come to save from sin and death. Christ "became greater by saying: 'I am merciful.'"[20] St. Gregory rejoices about Christ:

> Your dictate is to cleanse me of my sins, the criminal.
> Your foot is to give shelter to me, the fleeing,
> Your hand is to render support to me, the speedily rushing,
> Your light is to lead me, the errant,
> . . . Your will is to set me free, the oppressed.[21]

However, why give glory to the God who allows us to fail in perceiving the divine light and who does not prevent our suffering? St. Anselm was a Christian if ever there was one, but still he complained mightily to God. For instance, he says—expressing my own perspective whenever things are not going my way—"How wretched man's lot is when he has lost that for which he was made! Oh how hard and cruel was that Fall! Alas, what has man lost and what has he found? What did he lose and

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[19]Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, ed. Stephen F. Brown, trans. Philotheus Boehner, OFM (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 7. Bonaventure (1221–1274) was an Italian Franciscan theologian.

[20]Grigor Narekatsi, *The Book of Sadness*, trans. Hachatoor Hachatoorian (Yerevan: Nairi, 2007), 143, 149. Gregory of Narek (950–1003) was an Armenian monk and theologian.

[21]GrigorNarekatsi, *Book of Sadness*, 149-50.

what remains to him? He lost the blessedness for which he was made, and he found the misery for which he was not made."[22] Christians experience a blessed hope and enjoy many treasured relationships. But it is evident that Christians also continue to experience interiorly and exteriorly the misery for which we definitely were not made.[23]

I think of St. Augustine here. In his *Confessions*, he recalls his adolescent self, who prayed, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet." As he explains, "I was afraid you [God] might hear my prayer quickly, and that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust which I preferred to satisfy rather than suppress." Eventually God healed St. Augustine of lust, but even then St. Augustine did not declare victory. Not only did he continue to have lustful dreams, but also he found himself continually at risk of disordered desires. He reports, "I struggle every day against uncontrolled desire in eating and drinking." He is more keenly alert than most of us to the ease of falling into idolatry. He is so sensitive that he actually says, "When it happens to me that the music [of a religious hymn] moves me more than the subject of the song, I confess myself to commit a sin deserving punishment, and then I would prefer not to have heard the singer."[24]

One may make fun of St. Augustine here (and I love good music!), but I think he has grasped a truth: the world comes at us from every direction, and we are never entirely unsnared. He

[22]Anselm, *Proslogion*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 82-110, at 85. Anselm (1033-1109) was a theologian who served as Abbot of Bec and Archbishop of Canterbury.

[23]See Will N. Timmins, *Romans 7 and Christian Identity: A Study of the "I" in Its Literary Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[24]Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 145, 203, 207-8. Augustine (354–430) was a theologian and bishop.

admits that when he should be thinking of God, his attention may be captivated by everything but God: the extraordinary way a lizard catches flies, the power of a hunter's dogs chasing a rabbit. Still worse, he confesses that he loves praise. As he sums up, "Every day, Lord, we are beset by these temptations. We are tempted without respite."[25]

St. Augustine makes clear that such constant temptations are no reason to give up. Nor are they a reason to deny God's sanctifying power, let alone to refuse to contemplate the beauty and power of animals because we might become attached. In these passages, St. Augustine is gently responding to his opponents, who accused him of being an embarrassment due to his unseemly past. His point is that *all of us* have been or are ensnared by the world's beauty, captivated by it rather than rejoicing in it for what it really is, namely, an icon of the bountiful Creator God. Despite such temptations, St. Augustine refused to flee the world. He states, "I had racked my heart and had meditated taking flight to live in solitude. But you [God] forbade me and comforted me."[26]

I love Christ's cross because, like St. Augustine, I know I need it. To throw oneself on the mercy of the cross is a grace. Few of us are worthy of the exalted name "Christian"—if this names a person who always lives the beatitudes, performs the works of mercy, and embodies the new commandment of love. Our deficiencies, however, should only redouble our prayers to cooperate with God's grace, trusting that God will accomplish his salvation in us, for the good of all, by the power of Christ's merciful cross. As St. Cyprian of Carthage reminds us with the

[25]Augustine, *Confessions*, 214.
[26]Augustine, *Confessions*, 220.

healing power of the cross in view, "The Lord left the ninety and nine who were well, and sought the one that wandered and was exhausted. He carried the wanderer on his arms when he had found him (Lk 15.4-5)."[27]

GOD IS ALL GOOD

The third reason I am Christian is sheer awe before God. In a class I took at Duke Divinity School in 1996, I read the spiritual testimonies of St. Angela of Foligno, who received an extraordinary mystical vision. She describes it this way: "I saw the All Good."[28] In comparison to God, she says, everything else is absolute darkness. In fact, the vision of the All Good is itself "darkness" because it is far too bright for her to see. St. Angela goes on to have a second vision that she experiences as being *within* her vision of the All Good. This is a vision of the God-man. When St. Angela knows herself to be *in* the God-man, her soul is filled with life, delight, and joy. The All Good contains the God-man and contains trinitarian relations inclusive of the God-man.

Once, Satan tempted St. Angela when she was washing lettuce. She heard a voice that told her that she was not even worthy to wash lettuce. But she also experienced, on a different occasion, such a concentrated perception of the power of God that she recognized the world to be "pregnant with God" because God fills and sustains creation by his presence and power.[29] Having rejoiced in the *power* of God, she proceeded to

[27]Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Church: Select Letters*, trans. Allen Brent (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), 127-28. He is here critiquing Donatist rigorism. Cyprian (ca. 200–258) was bishop of Carthage and a theologian.

[28]Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance, OFM (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 203. Angela (1248–1309) was an Italian Franciscan mystic.

[29]Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, 170.

have the fullest perception of God's humility, by comparison to which our greatest humility is like pride.

I have experienced God, though not in the especially striking way that St. Angela did. As an adult, I have experienced three intense presences of God. When I was baptized at age twenty-three in 1995, I felt the Holy Spirit pulsing through me for some minutes, in waves of absolute joy. It was a wondrous, unexpected, and thrilling confirmation of faith. Four years prior to that, when I was faced with a life-threatening medical situation while traveling in France, I experienced powerful waves of the Spirit strengthening me in an extraordinary assurance of God's care. For me, it was a confirmation of hope, though I was then only slowly on the way to becoming a Christian. When fourteen years ago I was struggling professionally and was on the brink of choosing what would not have been the right job, I again experienced the Spirit's powerful presence, this time giving me a strong sense of God's love and filling me with intense love for my wife and family, which poured forth with joyful tears. It was a confirmation of love, a vision of the All Good.

I can testify to the reality of faith, hope, and love—to their supernatural source, to grace coming from outside myself, elevating my soul beyond all expectation and beyond any reasonable claim. In these experiences, I believe I encountered what Angela calls the All Good, whom we know in the God-man.

Of course, after these exalted experiences, I soon returned to normal. So normal that I may often not have been worthy even to wash God's beautiful creature, the lettuce (recall the voice that tried to tell St. Angela that she was unworthy of even

washing lettuce!). Fortunately, like St. Angela, I know that God is infinitely merciful. Having perceived God's extraordinary power, I have experienced his humility in reaching out to me. He is the God whose eternity—his infinitely glorious power and presence—is meant for us. God's eternity has touched me, not as an impersonal or threatening force but as the inviting and consoling breath of the All Good.

St. Angela received a further revelation of God's love for her, but at the same time she felt a sense of deep unworthiness: "I had, nonetheless, a vivid remembrance of all my sins and saw nothing good in myself."[30] Christians may hasten to assure her: Oh no, Angela, you are fantastic, worthy of all God's love! But she saw rightly, because she saw that God's merciful love for us is infinitely more than we deserve. St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain observes, "The mind rises to God through contemplation of his divine perfections, while the beloved God condescends from his height toward the mind that loves him, uniting himself with it."[31] God, the All Good, comes to us, offering us his own triune life.

THE HARMONY OF THE TWO TESTAMENTS

Fourth and finally, I am a Christian because of Scripture and its exemplification in the ongoing life of the church. Early on in my journey toward becoming a Christian, I discovered that the Old and New Testaments come together in striking ways. St. Irenaeus of Lyons remarks, "Through the many diversified utterances [of Scripture] there shall be heard one harmonious

[30]Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, 149.

[31]Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain, *A Handbook of Spiritual Counsel*, trans. Peter A. Chamberas (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 217. Nicodemos (1749–1809) was an Eastern Orthodox mystical theologian.

melody."[32] The vastness and richness of the Scriptures of Israel, with their covenants and promises, their testimonies to divine action, their wondrous prophecies, their intense spiritual yearnings and frustrations, their proverbial wisdom, their psalms of temple praise and their sacrificial cult, their frank account of the depths of personal and communal sin—all this seems far too colorful, diverse, and boldly *human* to be integrated into a unity prior to the end of time. And yet, in Jesus Christ and by Jesus Christ, all the things contained in Israel's Scriptures find their unity. In him the promised consummation is already inaugurated, through the outpouring of his Spirit.

When in 1991 I spent a couple of weeks in a hospital in France with a ruptured artery, a few years before I became a Christian, I tried to read the Gospel of Matthew. I recall how foreign the figure of Jesus and his various interactions with the people of his day seemed to me. What a strange man, caught up in a world long gone, a world of dueling Jewish sects in a bubbling cauldron of eschatological excitement (the imminent arrival of the kingdom, the expectation that the Messiah would come). This intensity was compounded by Roman occupation and oppression, along with the usual misery of disease, hunger, and death. Although I was intrigued by the high-sounding words of the Sermon on the Mount and by the report of his resurrection, I could not connect with him. He seemed quite alien.

Reading the whole Bible in 1993–1994 changed things for me. Once I better understood the intrascriptural connections, Jesus no longer seemed alien, though he still seemed strange.

[32]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.28, in *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 315-567, at 400. Irenaeus (ca. 130–ca. 200) was bishop of Lyons.

His strangeness comes in part from his first-century Jewish context, to be sure; but I now realized that his strangeness was also felt strongly by his first-century compatriots, including his own disciples. After all, he is the divine Messiah. It is hardly surprising that people experience him as unsettling, depending on their expectations and desires. His is an intensely challenging, loving, and transformative strangeness. He reveals the strangeness of the Creator and Redeemer, manifested in words and deeds that show the foundations of real hope and love.[33] The context of the whole Bible and of the people of Israel allowed me to perceive what Jesus was and is about, and to be amazed at the fulfillment he enacted.

But what about all the centuries after Jesus? Does he draw them into a unity too? Yes, he unites them with the scriptural story. The church lives by participating in Jesus' saving work and by walking in his ways. Jesus expected his followers to be sinners, and we have been, but Jesus also expected his followers to cleave to him and to be transformed in love for one another, worshiping the living God, and this has happened. As St. Vincent de Paul comments about Jesus' apostles, "He went to the trouble of instructing, warning, and forming, and lastly of animating them with his Spirit, not for themselves alone but for all the nations of the earth."[34] The story of Scripture spreads out into the world through the church, manifested not least in the mission of St. Vincent de Paul himself—and countless others like him—toward the poor.

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[33]See Matthew Levering, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Historical and Theological Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chap. 4.

[34]Vincent de Paul, "Conferences of Vincent de Paul to the Congregation of the Mission," in Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, *Rules, Conferences, and Writings*, ed. Frances Ryan, DC, and John E. Rybolt, CM (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 119-50, at 143 (translation slightly altered). Vincent de Paul (1581–1660) was a French priest.

For St. Irenaeus, the Bible makes sense in light of the church; otherwise the unity of the Testaments would be a unity that breaks off after the death of the last apostle, a unity that failed. St. Irenaeus thinks it important "to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world."[35] He differentiates the Catholic Church from Gnostic factions on the grounds that the latter have neither perceived nor remained in the unity of either Scripture or the church.[36] He calls on

> that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul. . . . For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority.[37]

St. Irenaeus puts his faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex 3:6).

According to St. Irenaeus, the Scriptures will not reveal their full meaning unless read in the church. Reading Scriptures without the guidance of the church is like trying to put together a mosaic without knowing its proper order. St. Irenaeus concludes in this regard, "If any one, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling."[38]

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[35]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3, p. 415.

[36]For background to second-century Gnosticism according to recent scholarship, along much more sympathetic lines than I take, see David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[37]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3, p. 415.

[38]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.8, p. 326; 4.26, p. 496.

To say that Jesus Christ is the meaning of the Scriptures is not to reduce or simplify matters but rather to open up even more fully the range and depth of the Scriptures and of history. Christ is the eternal Word, the *Creator,* in the infinite mystery of the Trinity. Christ is the *Redeemer,* filled with supreme love manifesting itself in absolute humility, and filled also with the power to overcome sin and death and to make us children and heirs of God. Christ is the *head of his body, the church,* as believers are configured to him and come to share through the Spirit in his life with the Father.

Without God, history would just be one thing after another until humanity is swallowed up into an endlessly onward-rolling nothingness and meaningless forgetting. And unless God is supremely personal love, history's meaning could only be cruel, given its violence and victims. Through his words and deeds, Christ reveals God to be self-surrendering love *for us*. The embodiment of love is the meaning of history; this is why Christ is the center, the definitive treasure.[39] In this eschatological sense, as St. Irenaeus says, all history and the whole of Scripture are "brought to light by the cross of Christ . . . showing forth the wisdom of God."[40]

A similar point is made by St. John of Damascus in a sermon on the Feast of the Transfiguration. Enthralled by the eschatological light of Christ, Damascene remarks in the midst of the difficulties that he endured: "In ancient times, on Mount Sinai, smoke and darkness and a windstorm and terrifying fire covered that peak, and proclaimed the lawgiver as inaccessible;

[39]See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).
[40]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.26, pp. 496-97.

he revealed his back parts in a shadowy way, and showed through his own creatures that he was the best of creators. But now all is filled with light and radiance!"[41]

CONCLUSION

Are these four reasons—the mystery of life (and death), Christ's salvific cross, the goodness of God, the harmony of Scripture—enough to warrant being Christian? Yes, they are, but there are also many more reasons. Among contemporary authors, Robert Barron is superb at giving reasons—as are Thomas Joseph White, Brant Pitre, N. T. Wright, and many others. I have simply laid out a few of the reasons that moved me to become a Christian and that still move me today. As I grow older, the saving cross of Jesus Christ, who is the revelation of the All Good, seems ever more relevant and reasonable. Either we find freedom in self-sacrificial love grounded in the crucified Lord, or else we will tend to seek freedom in something lesser (most likely in various paths of selfish self-seeking, whose end is death). Either we find happiness in God, who wills to draw us into his glorious life, or else we will demand that some this-worldly good must satisfy us—and none can. "For if a man reflects on himself he knows he does not exist from himself, nor does he suffice for himself for his own perfection, nor do all the creatures which he experiences satisfy him," says Francisco Suárez.[42]

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[41]John of Damascus, "Oration on the Transfiguration of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," in *Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, trans. Brian E. Daley, SJ (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013), 205-31, at 210. John of Damascus (675–749) was a monk and theologian.

[42]Francisco Suárez, SJ, *The Metaphysical Demonstration of the Existence of God: Metaphysical Disputations 28-29*, trans. and ed. John P. Doyle (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 2004), 144. Suárez (1548–1617) was a Spanish Jesuit, philosopher, and theologian.

Let us therefore take our place within the biblical story. Let us join the great cloud of witnesses, and, begging for the Spirit's grace to enliven us in charity, let us live as they have lived. I give to St. Dorotheos of Gaza the last (Pauline) word, summing up our mission in Christ: "Hold all your strength in readiness to do every service with love, with humility, deferring to one another, honoring one another, consoling one another."[43]

[43]Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 120. Dorotheos (ca. 506–ca. 560) was an abbot and spiritual theologian.