

## The Radiant City

*“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”*

~Matt. 5:14–16

The Bible begins with a garden and ends with a city. But the city the Bible shows us descending from heaven is flowing with water and full of trees—it seems to be a garden as well as a city—and it is full of light, since “the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev. 21:23).

There are other cities that we know only too well, cities of squalor and concrete, full of hunger and violence, and it is there that darkness reigns.

The places we inhabit are projections. We make the world like ourselves, for better or worse. A “city” is that part of the world that we have shaped to the purposes of social life; a place in which large numbers of us can live and share resources, working and playing together. In order for a city to be worthy of human beings, it must take account of human nature and destiny. It must be a radiant city, a *just* city, a city where Justice reigns. But what does that mean?

### City with a Fever

In the *Republic*, a model society or “city” is presented that is rather remote from anything we would call Christian. Commentators disagree as to whether Plato intended it to be taken literally, or whether (as I believe) it was an ironic portrait of the kind of inferior society that emerges when the soul is pursuing the wrong goals. For me, the clue comes in Book II (368c–369b). Socrates is proposing to construct a theoretical model of an ideal city in order to explore the notion of justice in the human soul, projected outwards (see e.g.,

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443d–e). But Glaucon objects that the city Socrates describes first (see 372a–c) is lacking in luxury—such things as couches and sugary desserts. To this Socrates replies that he now understands Glaucon to be interested not in a healthy city but in a luxurious city, a “city with a fever” (372e).

In the rest of the dialogue he goes on to develop this second city in great detail, and this is the city we normally associate with the *Republic*. It is this city that needs to be defended from enemies, outside and within, who are jealous of its possessions; which therefore needs Guardians trained and prepared for their task; and which must be continually purified of its tendencies to corruption. In light of the discussion in Book II, it may be that Plato intended these prescriptions to be taken no more seriously than the reincarnation myth he presents at the end of the dialogue (or the joke at the expense of Pythagorean numerology he throws in at 546b–c).

The moral seems to be very clear. The desire to have *more than we truly need* is incompatible with true justice, which is defined as a state in which everyone receives his due. Under those circumstances the attempt to impose it will only lead to lies, propaganda, eugenic breeding, and the destruction of the family. In Books VIII and IX Plato traces the way his “ideal” aristocracy (more like a meritocracy in modern terms) will inevitably degenerate into a timocracy (that is, a state ruled by the strong), an oligarchy (one ruled by the rich), a democracy (ruled by the mob), and finally the worst sort of tyranny (ruled by a dictator). To this in the modern age we may add a final humiliation: technocracy, a state ruled by machines.

This may or may not be a correct reading of Plato. However much we may wish to give him the benefit of the doubt, we must remember that he was writing without the help of Christian revelation and the doctrine of the human person. In projecting the divisions of the human soul on to the canvas of the state, he was applying a strict analogy between the two (IV, 434). The various classes each have their own work to do, and each corresponds to a part of the human soul—elements symbolized by gold, silver, bronze, and iron. They must be kept in order in the same way, in order to serve the good of the whole. The best of the “cities with a fever” is the one in which the golden element is dominant and the

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classes unmixed. But as soon as the ruling class contains traces of the one below it, conflict will arise and eventually the military caste will become dominant. In this way the whole social order begins to unravel.

The mistake here, from a Christian point of view, is that each individual member of society and each member of every class is a person—therefore a whole and not merely a part—and should be treated as such. The harmony of society cannot be ensured by forcing each member of each of the four classes or races to conform to just one of the four elements that are found in everyone. Perhaps Plato would respond that my comment merely demonstrates that I am writing at a time when the worst has already happened, and the classes have become completely mixed. But it may also be that he intended his description of the Golden Age as a myth, pointing towards the ideal of the healthy city, the “city without a fever,” which is the city of the just soul.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Full of Light**

Whatever we make of the *Republic* as a whole, in the context of his discussion of the Cave in Book 7, Plato makes some remarks about the essence of education that transcend their literary and historical context.

Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes.  
—*They do say that.*

But our present discussion, on the other hand, shows that the power to learn is present in everyone's soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the

1. When Christians describe the unfallen state as one of “original justice,” we are reminded that, according to divine revelation, there was indeed a Golden Age on this earth, even if it consisted of no more than two people! More importantly, justice is not just harmony, but *truth*; that is, a state of affairs in which reality at its deepest level is accurately represented.

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one we call the good. Isn't that right?

—Yes.

Then education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it. It isn't the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.<sup>2</sup>

The Christian doctrine that corresponds most closely to this Platonic insight is the Beatitude *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God* (Matt. 5:8). The Sermon on the Mount, where the Beatitudes are preached right at the start, also includes the instructions on prayer, in which Jesus tells his disciples that “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Matt. 6:22). The word translated “sound” here also means “single” or “undivided.” We have here a teaching that purity or singleness of heart forms the *organ of perception* by which we can see the good, which is God. The Christian teaching on purity, and on the “eye of the heart,” corresponds to the Platonic teaching on the education of the whole person as a turning of the body and soul towards the good.

The theme of purity will run through this book and emerge in different ways as essential to the living of a Christian life and the creation of a Christian society. “So, my brothers and sisters, our whole business in this life is the healing of the eye of the heart, that eye with which God is seen. It is for this the holy mysteries are celebrated, for this the word of God is preached, to this that the Church's moral exhortations are directed” (St. Augustine).<sup>3</sup> Purity, as a way of *seeing God in all things*, is the seed or foundation of the

2. Plato, *Republic*, Bk 7, 518c–d.

3. St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 88, 5 on Mark 10:46–52. Pope Benedict XVI, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* (the volume on Holy Week), remarks that over half of Augustine's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount is focused on “this basic idea of the purified heart” and the word *miser cordia* (mercy), because what is involved here is not a new norm to replace the Commandments, but a new “interiority,” the possibility of immersion in Jesus Christ (pp. 64–5).

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new civilization. The other Beatitudes fill out the image of the Christian citizen, whose life is graced by the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love. For reference, let's list them all here.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*  
*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*  
*Blessed are the meek,<sup>4</sup> for they shall inherit the earth.*  
*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*  
*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*  
*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*  
*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*  
*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.<sup>5</sup>*

“Beatitudes”—that is, statements about how we may be “blessed” or “happy”—take us to the heart of Revelation. God wants us to be happy. Through the prophets he reveals that we can only be happy through union with him. He also reveals the way to attain this goal: not by our own efforts (which is impossible), but by cooperation with grace. The Bible describes the different stages of that cooperation in terms of a Covenant, a union between God and man, culminating in the Hypostatic Union. And so we find God constantly reiterating, reminding us, that the way to happiness lies with him alone, through the Law, which must not simply be followed blindly, but *lived*. That is why at the heart of the Bible we find the Wisdom books and the Book of Psalms. And it is why the Book of Psalms opens with a Beatitude:

4. The Greek word *praus* translated as “meek” does not mean “weak” or “soft,” but refers to *strength brought under control*, like a wild horse that has been tamed.

5. Matt. 5:3–12. I have grouped the Beatitudes as St. Augustine does, with a list of seven followed by two referring to persecution. Another important collection of four Beatitudes and four curses or “Woes” may be found at Luke 6:20–26. It is followed by the instruction to love one’s enemies, not to judge others, and to build one’s house on solid foundations.

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“Blessed [Hebrew: *makarios*] is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.”

The opening of the Psalms reflects the teaching of the Bible as a whole. It describes the three obstacles that make our happiness impossible, represented by walking, standing, and sitting. The order, of course, is significant, because as we progress from merely taking the advice of sinners to settling into an identification with sin we become less and less able to “move,” to change. This is the consequence of the Fall, and of yielding to the three archetypal temptations that we will be discussing later.

It is no mere chance, then, that the second psalm contains a prophecy of the coming of Christ to Zion, the Holy Mountain: He said to me, “You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.” In other words, as soon as the Goal has been revealed, the Way to that Goal must also be revealed, at least implicitly. The second Psalm then concludes with another Beatitude—“Blessed are all who take refuge in him”—while the third broadens this blessing to apply to the whole people. Thus the Psalms are linked directly to the Beatitudes that Jesus preaches on the mountain, and form the basis for the “social teaching” of both Old and New Testaments.

### **Life in the Spirit**

The Christian life is most succinctly described in the double commandment to love God with all one’s strength and one’s neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:37–40). Among Catholics, this is regarded as a summary of the Ten Commandments—the first three of which concern our worship of God, and the second series of seven commandments concern our love of neighbor. This “second tablet” of the Law is transformed by the statement of Jesus in the Gospel of John: “This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12). It ceases to be abstract and becomes concrete: Jesus himself becomes a living example, an embodiment of the Law.

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This is expanded further in the Beatitudes, which contain a more detailed portrait of the human person transformed by the Holy Spirit. According to the Beatitudes, blessedness accrues to those who are “poor in spirit”—that is, sufficiently detached from whatever wealth they possess to be able to give generously to others. It accrues to those who mourn—that is, those who remember the dead, and who remain loyal to tradition. It accrues to the meek and to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness—that is, for justice. The merciful shall obtain mercy, the pure in heart will see God, and peacemakers will be adopted as God’s sons.

Blessedness is the bright shadow cast by love. We tend to recognize it when we see it. But, as we have seen, the Beatitudes end with a warning:

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Christians today live in an age when persecution for righteousness’ sake is just around the corner, if not already here.

The Beatitudes were preached in the context of a long sermon recorded by the Evangelist Matthew in his fifth chapter. St. Augustine calls it simply “The Lord’s Sermon,” as we call the Our Father “The Lord’s Prayer.”<sup>6</sup> In his commentary Augustine treats the first seven Beatitudes as a group (not too far-fetched, given Matthew’s propensity for groups of seven), which he then interprets in terms of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit enumerated in Isaiah 11.<sup>7</sup> In this way he abolishes any distinction between morality and spirituality, demonstrating that the moral life is in continual need of the help and grace of the Holy Spirit.

6. The Lord’s Sermon corresponds to the third of the Mysteries of Light, “The Preaching of the Kingdom,” added to the Rosary by Pope John Paul II.

7. Servais Pinckaers OP remarks that later scholastic theologians, “taking as their moral foundation the theological and cardinal virtues,” retained Augustine’s idea, relating them “to the gifts and Beatitudes in the manner of St. Augustine. St. Thomas, notably, would introduce this concept of morality into the very structure

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**Beatitudes in Slow Motion**

Let me, then, just quickly go through the first seven Beatitudes in slow motion to show how they—as Augustine puts it—“build the house upon rock.”

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*—This Beatitude is directed against pride, which is the foundation of all sin. The poor in spirit are not “puffed up,” says Augustine; they do not take themselves to be more than they are, nor rely on their material possessions.

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*—Those who mourn do so because they have lost temporal things, on which we cannot rely, but they are comforted by the Holy Spirit who assures them of an eternal reward. The gift of tears flows from knowledge.

*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*—The meek are the gentle, those who do not use violence to get what they want. They overcome evil with good. The meek person is an image of the Incarnation, and Christ is the one who “inherits.”

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*—Lovers of the true and indestructible good are those who feed primarily on the will of God, and drink of the “living water,” their courage and patience strengthened by divine grace. Hunger and thirst for justice are a measure of the distance between earth and heaven, and a sign of the reality of the latter against which the former must always be measured.

*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*—We must learn to forgive in order to be forgiven. Without forgiveness there is no love. Mercy is the complement of justice, and goes beyond it, reaching into the very heart of God, giving where nothing is due.

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*—God can only

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of his *Summa*. He would base morality on the connections among the virtues, gifts, and Beatitudes, adding to them the fruits of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Letter to the Galatians”—*The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1995), pp. 154–5. The Lord’s Prayer was also brought into this scheme, after Augustine divided it into seven petitions. Pinckaers speaks of the patterns of seven in Matthew (pp. 143–4).



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be seen with a single or undivided heart, Augustine tells us; a heart that loves only God in all things.

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*—Augustine has much to say on this Beatitude. They are peacemakers who,

by bringing in order all the motions of their soul, and subjecting them to reason—i.e., to the mind and spirit—and by having their carnal lusts thoroughly subdued, become a kingdom of God: in which all things are so arranged, that that which is chief and pre-eminent in man rules without resistance over the other elements, which are common to us with the beasts; and that very element which is pre-eminent in man, i.e., mind and reason, is brought under subjection to something better still, which is the truth itself, the only-begotten Son of God. For a man is not able to rule over things which are inferior, unless he subjects himself to what is superior. And this is the peace which is given on earth to men of goodwill; this the life of the fully developed and perfect wise man. From a kingdom of this sort brought to a condition of thorough peace and order, the prince of this world is cast out, who rules where there is perversity and disorder.<sup>8</sup>

We see that each of the Beatitudes, though distinct, reflects aspects of every other, and each unfolds from the central notion of love, which is the principle at the heart of all Christian teaching. This principle is far from abstract—it is incarnate in Jesus Christ, of whom the Beatitudes are a description. It is by following him, and allowing him to live his life in us, that the work of the Holy Spirit is accomplished, and human work is transformed into the work of God.

Thus each of the Beatitudes throws a shaft of light from the heart of the Gospel. Take the fifth as an example: *Blessed are the merciful*. The word “mercy” (Hebrew *chesed*) is associated with the first day of creation—the day of Light. The Greek equivalent *eleos* refers to the oil or balm used to soothe or heal a wound, and thus to restore it to its original wholesome state. Purity, light, healing—mercy is

8. Augustine of Hippo, *On the Sermon on the Mount* (ebook at limovia.net), Book 1, Ch. 2, Para. 9.

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often paired with justice, but mercy reveals how love goes further than justice, and deeper. In the end, justice serves love.

Pope John Paul II wrote an entire encyclical on mercy (*Dives in Misericordia*, 1980), in which he says that love “is transformed into mercy” or expresses itself as mercy “when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice” (DM, n. 5),<sup>9</sup> as in the parable of the Prodigal Son. And so mercy reveals the Father by revealing his love for his Son. Christ on the Cross suffers the full weight of justice (on our behalf) precisely in order to reveal the Father’s mercy.

Do not the words of the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy,” constitute, in a certain sense, a synthesis of the whole of the Good News, of the whole of the “wonderful exchange” (*admirabile commercium*) contained therein? This exchange is a law of the very plan of salvation, a law which is simple, strong and at the same time “easy.” Demonstrating from the very start what the “human heart” is capable of (“to be merciful”), do not these words from the Sermon on the Mount reveal in the same perspective the deep mystery of God: that inscrutable unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in which love, containing justice, sets in motion mercy, which in its turn reveals the perfection of justice? (DM, n.8)

#### **Blessed Are the Peacemakers**

But is Christ really a “peacemaker”? “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth,” he tells us. “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). Between this saying of Jesus and the seventh Beatitude lies the tension of a paradox. But paradox does not mean contradiction. Jesus is talking of the hostility and persecution his disciples will meet even within their own families. The Gospel will not be everywhere accepted, and those who do not accept will often violently reject—sometimes with open hatred and fear, because of the fact that the Gospel implies a judgment against them. The presence and message of Jesus is the beginning of a war.

9. So he says also: “the equality brought by justice is limited to the realm of objective and extrinsic goods, while love and mercy bring it about that people meet one another in that value which is man himself, with the dignity that is proper to him” (DM, n. 14).

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“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). Here Jesus is talking about the interior peace, the peace of the heart, a peace that transcends all such warfare. This peace is not like any gift of the world. It is the peace of God himself, the peace of the one who has created and saved all things.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9). Which kind of peace is being referred to here? It doesn’t seem to be simply peace of the heart. But how can it be the peace that Christ has come to disturb, the peace of worldly compromise and the status quo? We need to reflect more deeply, and we are helped in this by Pope John XXIII:

The world will never be the dwelling-place of peace, till peace has found a home in the heart of each and every man, till every man preserves in himself the order ordained by God to be preserved. That is why St. Augustine asks the question: “Does your mind desire the strength to gain the mastery over your passions? Let it submit to a greater power, and it will conquer all beneath it. And peace will be in you—true, sure, most ordered peace. What is that order? God as ruler of the mind; the mind as ruler of the body. Nothing could be more orderly.”<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the “peacemaker” of the Beatitudes is the one who bridges the tension in the paradox of peace. The peace of the heart—beginning with peace in the heart of *the peacemaker*—is the key to peace in the world, the exterior peace, where a person’s enemies are liable to be “those of his own household.” Though the primary reference here is to the violence that comes as the result of preaching the Gospel, it can be applied more broadly too.

In the first centuries of the Christian era, believers were at loggerheads with the emperors and with the state religion that enshrined them as gods for the sake of civil order. Christianity stripped divinity away from the state as such. But once the emperors themselves began to be converted, and a Christian polity emerged, war became more of an issue: should a Christian fight in defense of the realm,

10. *Pacem in Terris* (1963), n. 165.

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kill in defense of peace? Later, when the empire had divided into nation states, could a Christian fight against other Christians in defense of one particular homeland?

St. Augustine's solution is well known, especially in the systematic form presented by Thomas Aquinas and the School of Salamanca in the Renaissance. The doctrine of the "just war"—originally developed in ancient India and Rome (Cicero)—specified that fighting was licit when done in a just cause, for a just end, using just means, and under a just authority. The teaching on war is an extension of the principle of self-defense. Christians may resort to violence to protect their families from assault, if faced with no alternative. Something similar applies to the state. The authority must be legitimate, there must be a reasonable chance of success, and the means used must be "proportionate" or measured to fit the objective (the violence must be minimized). War must be fought in self-defense or to punish a guilty tyrant—not for glory or gain or even conversion of the infidel. Innocents, non-combatants, prisoners, etc. must be protected and mass destruction is condemned.

After the Second World War and well into the Atomic Age, it is not hard to see why the popes have argued that the conditions for a just war can no longer realistically be met.<sup>11</sup>

Rules such as these, and all the others that are designed to cover the various contingencies and grey areas that arise in a complicated, fallen world, flow from the underlying principle of the *peaceful heart*, which is the seat of all virtue. It is here that the Beatitude promising divine sonship to the peacemaker (who thereby enters into the identity of the Son) joins up with the fifth of the Ten Commandments, "You shall not kill," which governs all forms of murder, including abortion, suicide, and euthanasia. But as our Lord explains, his teaching applies primarily to the heart:

11. See William L. Portier, "Are We Really Serious When We Ask God To Deliver Us From War? The *Catechism* and the Challenge of Pope John Paul II," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23:1 (Spring 1996), pp. 47–63. Portier also discusses the recent strengthening of the Church's critical view of capital punishment (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2267). Portier notes, however, that the *Catechism* tries to avoid use of the term "just war" (p. 49).

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You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire.

Warfare, too, is interior before it is exterior (and in the next chapter we will look into the interior dimension of chivalry), as is peace, but all of this should be understood in the context of what is known about the relationship of nature to grace. The interior and exterior are distinct but not separate. The human heart is the meeting point of the natural and the supernatural—the loom, if you like, where the two are woven together. What we must do, and what John Paul II was trying to do by making more absolute the strictures against war and capital punishment, is not just taking account of the changed conditions of modern life and the power of technology, but once again reading the Commandments in the light of the Beatitudes, in the light of the model or portrait of Christ—a living model in which the power of the Holy Spirit allows us to participate. As he writes in *Veritatis Splendor* (n. 23), “Love and life according to the Gospel cannot be thought of first and foremost as a kind of precept, because what they demand is beyond man’s abilities. They are possible only as the result of a gift of God who heals, restores, and transforms the human heart by his grace: ‘For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17).”

Instead of separating grace from nature, and treating the question of killing as one of legitimacy, John Paul II insists that we must go deeper. “Thus the commandment ‘You shall not murder’ becomes a call to an attentive love which protects and promotes the life of one’s neighbor” (VS, n.15).<sup>12</sup> Similarly with the other commandments, of course—those directed not against the person of our neighbor but his wife or his property.

In the heart these things are real. This is why Jesus tells us that to be angry with our neighbor is enough to deserve judgment: to be angry is to kill, just as to imagine sleeping with another man’s wife

12. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (“The Splendor of the Truth,” 1993), n. 15.

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can be the equivalent of adultery. All the Commandments are calling us to perfect love; impossible though that may seem before Christ comes onto the scene. International war cannot be ended, though it may be restricted, by attempted obedience to codifications of the natural law—that for us is only the beginning.

At this deep level, there is a stark choice. We can either hate or love, kill or give life. If we do not love we are hating; we are beginning to kill. If we renounce hatred, it must be in the name of a love that gives life, that protects and nurtures, that gives to the other what is his due, that even gives more than his due, because he is worthy of love in God's eyes.

#### **The Cross and the Tomb**

The birth of a new world, and the secret of the peacemaker, that which *makes* him a “son of God,” is forgiveness. Only forgiveness can create reconciliation and heal relationships that have been broken. The violence that destroys peace throughout the world and in every historical era, a violence that begins when Cain murders Abel—in other words with anger and jealousy (fruits of the first sin)—cannot be overcome Pelagian-style without the help of grace. But forgiveness is impossibly difficult. To understand this we need to contemplate the Cross and the Tomb, which is where all these sins lead, and which also mark the place where they are definitively overcome.

Without Christ, forgiveness in the true sense could not exist. We are incapable of it—or capable only of feeble imitations of it, for example when we decide to “forget” a slight for the moment, or overlook it for the sake of avoiding some trouble. This is like weeding a garden but leaving the roots of the weeds under the soil. Christ, on the other hand, grasps the roots. He takes upon himself the full consequences of the anger and jealousy of the world. He is the two tablets made by God that Moses cast down in anger, shattered as a consequence of the infidelity of the people (Gen. 32:15–19). He is beaten and whipped, crowned with thorns, stripped and pieced through the heart. On the Cross he asks his Father to forgive his enemies. He is laid in the tomb as a dead body.

The difficulty we have in forgiving can be traced back to fear. If

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we were all invulnerable, there would be no problem. It is easy to be magnanimous from a position of strength. In reality we are all damaged goods, we are all wounded. To forgive in the full sense means to open ourselves up to being hurt again—and what if the person we are trying to forgive shows no signs of repentance? Will not our scars soon be re-opened?

Christ knew fear, and yet was able to forgive. But he was not vulnerable in the way sinners are vulnerable, because sinners are separated from God—even if they are trying to find their way back to him. Fear immediately follows from the first sin, because sin made us vulnerable: as soon as they had sinned, Adam and Eve felt the need to hide in the forest from God. Sin separates us, makes the other an alien to us, a potential threat. Marked by sin, damaged by it in ways we are hardly aware, we are no longer able simply to receive what happens to us—if it is something “bad”—as a gift to be grateful for, because permitted by God. This is the struggle we see in Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, when he prays to be able to accept the cup of suffering that comes to him from the Father. And he succeeds.

So when Jesus promises to give his peace to the disciples, he links it to the release from fear. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). To forgive fully and to be truly reconciled with the other—to establish peace, the tranquility of order inside ourselves and outside in society—is possible for those who participate in the Resurrection, which places us beyond the reach of harm of every kind by reuniting us with God. “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

This identification with Christ is made possible by the Holy Spirit, whose role in all this is often forgotten—the Spirit who is the gift of divine nature, the gift from Christ, the source of all grace, making us one with the Son and the Father. The gift of the Spirit that Christ bestows is the confirmation of his forgiveness of us—for every sin ever committed is directed against him, and this is why we are cut off—and the two streams that flow from his side, that is of blood and water, are the streams of forgetfulness and of memory,

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enabling us to forget our sins as no longer belonging to us, and to remember all our good actions as those that Christ is doing in us.<sup>13</sup>

Thus St. Paul writes to the Colossians:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.<sup>14</sup>

### **Sons in the Son**

The intimate relationship between the Beatitudes and the Commandments is spelled out by Pope John Paul II in his major encyclical on moral theology in 1993, *Veritatis Splendor*. Here are some further extracts:

*The Beatitudes* are not specifically concerned with certain particular rules of behavior. Rather, they speak of basic attitudes and dispositions in life and therefore they *do not coincide exactly with the commandments*. On the other hand, *there is no separation or opposition* between the Beatitudes and the commandments: both refer to the good, to eternal life. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the proclamation of the Beatitudes, but also refers to the commandments (cf. Matt. 5:20–48). At the same time, the Sermon on the Mount demonstrates the openness of the commandments and their orientation towards the horizon of the perfection proper to the Beatitudes. These latter are above all *promises*, from which there also indirectly flow *normative indications* for the moral life.

13. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, Purgatorio, Canto 28 (124–33). The streams from Christ's side are mentioned at John 19:34 and are much commented upon. As I read it, connecting the two references, Dante's stream Lethe represents the forgetfulness of death, just as we die with Christ and leave our old life behind us—the stream of water represents Baptism. The other, Eunoe, is equivalent to the stream of blood, signifying the Eucharist and the sacrament of Reconciliation. Immersed in the one, remade by a draft of the second, Dante is now “pure and prepared to climb unto the stars.”

14. Colossians 3:12–15.



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In their originality and profundity they are a sort of *self-portrait of Christ*, and for this very reason are *invitations to discipleship and to communion of life with Christ*. (n. 16)

Those who live “by the flesh” experience God’s law as a burden, and indeed as a denial or at least a restriction of their own freedom. On the other hand, those who are impelled by love and “walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16), and who desire to serve others, find in God’s Law the fundamental and necessary way in which to practice love as something freely chosen and freely lived out. Indeed, they feel an interior urge—a genuine “necessity” and no longer a form of coercion—not to stop at the minimum demands of the Law, but to live them in their “fullness.” This is a still uncertain and fragile journey as long as we are on earth, but it is one made possible by grace, which enables us to possess the full freedom of the children of God (cf. Rom. 8:21) and thus to live our moral life in a way worthy of our sublime vocation as “sons in the Son.” (n. 18)

This is true, but there is also a deeper level to which we must penetrate. The philosopher Michel Henry guides us to this level in his book *Words of Christ*.<sup>15</sup> He points out that many, perhaps the majority, of Christ’s words in the Gospels (including the Beatitudes) are directed not towards the building up of the social fabric—even that of the family or tribe—but rather its total dissolution. This implies that the Gospels do not offer a “social doctrine” in the worldly sense we might at first imagine, but something much more far-reaching and all-embracing.

Social life is based on a certain conventional reciprocity.<sup>16</sup> We do good to others (or at least refrain from doing evil to them) so that they will do the same to us. But when Jesus says he has come to kindle a blazing fire, and tells us to hate our family; when he commands us to seek the highest place by becoming the servant of all and washing their feet, and tells us that those who mourn are

15. M. Henry, *Words of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

16. The market economy depends on exchange, as do most political systems, in which we grant power to a leader in return for protection; even the peace of a household or neighborhood depends on each being prepared to help the other from time to time.

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“happy” (and so on for the rest of the paradoxical Beatitudes), something other than reciprocity is involved.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.<sup>17</sup>

This passage alone demolishes the most common interpretations of Catholic social teaching. What is going on here, Henry suggests, is that conventional morality is being swept away. Jesus condemns it as so much hypocrisy: a mask for self-interest. In so doing—in looking deep within the human heart that has deceived itself into thinking all is well—he exposes something that needs to be overthrown, a “human nature” or “old Adam” that needs to be discarded or burned away so that the true human being (the Son of God who is “*the relation to God as such*”)<sup>18</sup> can come into his own. This filial relationship with the Father to which Christ admits us is primarily vertical, interior, because it is the very root of our being. That is why all “horizontal” relationships must be discarded first, and if there is to be a Christian society, it will be built on different foundations—a different kind of reciprocity. “Whoever does the will of God is [now] my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mark 3:35).

Thus Jesus demolishes our superficial human notions of reciprocity in the name of this deeper relationship to God the Father, who tells us to love our enemies, and in his own providence does not merely reward those who do good but has mercy on sinners, and sends his sunshine and his rain both on the evil and on the good (Matt. 5:45). In Luke we find:

17. Matthew 10:34–9 (cf. Luke 9:23–5).

18. Henry, *Words of Christ*, p. 44. Henry speaks of an “abolition” of human nature, in order to accomplish “the *substitution of a divine genealogy for a natural genealogy*” (p. 41).

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If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.<sup>19</sup>

We must by all means possible resist the tendency to interpret the Beatitudes “ideologically.” That would be to use them to construct a world in which we feel (intellectually) comfortable, rather than actually *living* them as Christ intended. For the Beatitudes themselves are followed by a kind of “commentary” by Jesus, in which he draws out and illustrates the implications of each one. First (5:13–14), the Christian is exhorted to be “salt” and “light”—not to hide his difference from others but to live according to the Gospel. The laws and prophecies of the past are not to be neglected but fulfilled (5:17–20). Commandments of the Law against murder and anger must be obeyed not just in the exterior realm but applied to the heart (5:21–26), as must those against adultery (5:27–32). The Christian must be straightforward and honest (5:33–37), generous (5:38–42), loving towards enemies and friends alike (5:43–48).

Furthermore, the Christian must be generous in secret, acting not for earthly reward or approbation but for the approval of his Father in heaven (6:1–4). This leads into the teachings on prayer. And if our souls are integrated, unified, and purified in this way (so that we “serve one master” not two: 6:24) we have nothing to fear or be anxious about (6:25–34). With the kingdom in first place, all else will take care of itself.

The final teachings of the Sermon, in Chapter 7, apply to those who are following the Christian path just outlined, but who will for that very reason be subject to a new set of temptations. The temptation, for example, to judge others because it is easier to see their faults than one’s own (7:1–5); the temptation to speak too openly, as

19. Luke 6:32–6.

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though everyone was ready to receive these teachings (7:6); the temptation to despair, if the Father's gifts happen to be delayed (7:7–12); or the temptation to assume too readily that one is already saved (7:13–14). There is also the need to discriminate between true and false prophets, not being misled by the latter (7:15–23).

#### **The City of God**

The freedom to which we are called is not the freedom of mere self-control and contentment in this world; for that freedom becomes sin when it sets itself against the possibility of a *divine* freedom participated by men. To leave one's own "life" behind and take up the cross is to die to all anxiety about the self and its development, including "all those religious techniques that aim at the well-being of one's own 'I,' 'depth-ego' or 'self.'"<sup>20</sup> This is also the reason why we are now (as a culture) in a worse state than paganism.

Jesus' claim is absolute: "No one comes to the Father except by me." This does not mean that the adherent of another religion cannot be saved, but it does mean that whether he knows it or not he can be saved *only by Jesus*. In the face of this claim, Balthasar argues, other religions will tend to dissolve or disintegrate, even in the process of trying to appropriate the more attractive aspects of Christianity ("socially engaged Buddhism," and so forth). The post-Christian society that rejects the claim of the Logos will tend to be totalitarian and militantly atheistic.

"In opposition to a 'flesh' that originates in Spirit and can become the Spirit's bearer—ultimately in the humble Incarnation of the divine Word—we see the implacable materialism that degrades matter to the mere raw material of its abstract, dis-incarnating power structures" (ibid., p. 445). The Christian revelation thus ultimately forces a concentration of worldly power into the hands of the Trinity of Hell (the Dragon, the Beast, and the Lying Spirit). In the words of Solovyev's fictional Antichrist: "World peace is assured forever. Every attempt to disturb it will instantly meet

20. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol. IV: *The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), p. 434.

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with irresistible opposition; for from now on there is only a single central power on earth. . . . That power is mine” (cited *ibid.*, p. 447).

At the end of time, a moment that perhaps draws near, the works of man will be revealed in a great judgment. The crisis is described in mythopoetic terms by John in the Book of Revelation. On the one hand we see the heavenly City built by God and man in harmony, the New Jerusalem, the liturgical city, descending from heaven as the centerpiece of the new creation. On the other, we see the great world city, called symbolically Babylon, a city built on exploitation and corruption of every kind, destined to be burned and thrown down.

As she glorified herself and played the wanton, / so give her a like measure of torment and mourning. / Since in her heart she says, “A queen I sit, / I am no widow, mourning I shall never see,” / so shall her plagues come in a single day, / patience and mourning and famine, / and she shall be burned with fire; / for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.<sup>21</sup>

Babylon is the city of impurity, in which men have lost themselves by serving themselves only, and their own greed. The City of God, by sublime contrast, is the city of the pure that see God “unveiled.” It is the city of the Vision of God, in which “we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.<sup>22</sup>

This is the fruit of purity, in which those who are deemed worthy are filled with light, and all that is unclean will be purged away, and

21. Revelation 18:7–8.

22. *Ibid.*, 21:22–27.

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the tears of the mourners will cease forever. We glimpse this when we celebrate the Eucharist and receive Holy Communion. It is an image of the social world created by God and man working together—the City of the Peacemakers, the City of Mercy, the City of Beatitude.