

## **Serving and Being Served as Image of God**

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Together with prayer, work has always been important in monastic life. It serves to structure one's day, to prevent the mind from wandering, from being distracted away from the goal of serving and worshipping God. The desert fathers and mothers of Egypt worked to support their own simple lifestyles and have something left over to share with the needy. Yet they considered visiting the sick or lending a hand to a brother more valuable than working for oneself.<sup>1</sup> For them, work was a way to obey God's commandment of love for the neighbor and to acquire and practice virtues.

Is service to others intrinsic to being human? That is, since the image of God defines what is authentically human,<sup>2</sup> does service manifest an aspect of the divine image in us? If it does, we can assume that by practicing it we are becoming authentically ourselves, what God created us to be, and so we will flourish. This paper will explore how service to others manifests the image of God in us and moves us toward the actualization of God's likeness.

### **The Divine Image and Likeness**

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1. Theodore of Pheme 11.

2. Gregory of Nyssa

Throughout the ages Christians have believed that the image of God in which we are created (Gwen 1:26) is at the core of who we are and defines us as human. Theologians and spiritual writers have found the divine image in many different aspects of what we are, what we can and should do, and what we are called to become. These aspects include freedom, spiritual perception, connectedness to God, virtues, royal dignity, a vital connection to the natural world, reason, creativity, personal uniqueness, community, mystery, and life. The divine image is present not only in one or two of these aspects of human identity but in all of them. They are many facets of the splendid jewel that each human person can become. God invites us to remove the dirt hiding these facets and polish them until they shine with the beauty God bestows on each of us.

Our Creator has shared with us many gifts and powers so we can share in God's creative work and collaborate in furthering God's loving purposes for the world. Yet our human gifts and powers are often distorted and misused when we separate ourselves from God and pursue goals that conflict with the harmony and flourishing of our neighbors, ourselves and the whole of creation. The misuse of gifts God has given us in the divine image has had devastating consequences. However, the resulting damage does not express our authentic human nature. It reflects the ways that wrong choices by ourselves, others, and society as a whole have buried, wounded, or distorted our true nature. Nevertheless, the image of God remains present in us as a foundation and a potential that awaits our discovery and can transform our lives.

Early Christian reflection on the image of God shows what we have always been, what we can and should do now, and what we are called to become in the future. Some features of the divine image are already given to us at our creation, such as rationality, freedom and the capacity for growth in virtue and communion with God. By free collaboration with divine grace, we are called to grow little by little throughout our lifetime into others such as the practice of virtue, spiritual perception, and loving communion with God. Yet we hope for perfection in virtue, immortality, eternal growth in communion with God, and fuller participation in divine life as gifts that will be actualized only in the age to come. Life according to God's image thus combines a stable foundation with a dynamic movement that begins here and now but will continue beyond this life. As human beings we are called to an unending process of

becoming more and more like God, especially by sharing God's character and God's love. Some early Christian and eastern Christian theologians have described this process in terms of a distinction between the divine image and the divine likeness in Gen 1:26. The "image" names the stable foundation in human nature that provides the potential for growth in likeness to God, communion with God, and collaboration in God's creative and loving activities. The dynamic movement into greater and greater actualization of this potential is called the divine "likeness." This distinction is a helpful shorthand, though not all eastern theologians use it.

### **Christ and the Image of God**

The New Testament includes Christ in the theology of the divine image and likeness, thus encouraging reflection on relationships among God, Christ, and humankind. In 2 Cor 4:4, St. Paul speaks of "Christ, who is the likeness of God." Col 1:15 says of Christ, "He is the image of the invisible God," and Heb 1:5 adds, "He reflects the glory of God, and bears the very stamp of his hypostasis."<sup>3</sup> It follows that the Son's person is the image of the Father's person. Indeed, this is a perfect image, since Father and Son are consubstantial, equal, and thus alike, except in the distinctive features each bears such as begetting and being begotten. So Christ is the image of God *par excellence*. Other human beings, by contrast, are obviously less than the Father and unlike him in various ways, so the image of God in humanity must be imperfect. Early Christian theologians coined the term *to kat'eikona*, "that which is according to the image," to name those aspects of humanity that manifest the divine image and are thus the core and definition of what it is to be human. This paper will follow the modern shorthand and speak of "the image of God" in the human person, but would ask the reader to bear in mind the differences between Christ and all other humans. Christ *is* the Image, while we are made *according to* the image; the difference between Christ and all other humans is thus qualitative, not merely quantitative.

When Colossians and Hebrews speak of Christ as the divine image, they also speak of him as Creator. Thus, from the beginning he is the link between the Father and humankind and the source from

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3. Here I have modified the RSV according to the Greek text.

whom the image of God in humans is derived. St. Irenaeus speaks of God the Father, who is above time, looking to Christ incarnate as the model when first creating humankind.<sup>4</sup> St. Athanasius says that Christ is like an artist painting God's image in the human person, yet is also the model sitting for the portrait.<sup>5</sup> For humans, the divine image is first of all a direct link at the very core of their being with Christ, and through him with God the Father. So, through prayer, and by the Holy Spirit, we can find Christ in our own hearts. So also we can receive from him, whom we can reach from within our own selves, moral excellence and eternal life, and thus come to bear the divine likeness.

### **The Image of God and Service**

By acts of service, enabled by the divine image in which we are made, we can acquire more and more of the divine likeness. Virtues such as wisdom, justice, and love are originally divine attributes, and we come to share in them by grace. Virtues such as these are at the core of the divine likeness. God is continually at work creating and sustaining everything in the world. Jesus Christ, following his Father, works also when incarnate as a human being. He teaches, heals, loves, and restores the people around him. So like him, we also are called to serve. By imitating our Lord, with his help we hope to become like him.

Virtues develop as we use them over time, and one of the primary ways we can use them is service. There are many inspiring stories of people who have turned from crime or self-destruction and become leaders in loving, creative service to God and neighbor. Because we bear the image of God, we are all capable of virtue, and in principle all are called to be saints. The real question, though, is how such positive transformation can become possible and be sustained despite a lifetime of obstacles and challenges. Can ordinary human beings like us, beset by countless problems and weaknesses, follow the paths trod by the saints and heroes we have known in our families and communities, and whose

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4. *Against Heresies*, 3.22.3.

5. *On the Incarnation*, 14.1-2.

testimonies and examples have illumined humankind throughout history? Early Christians believed that even if we can only walk the paths of virtue for a short distance, this can make a tremendous difference in our own lives and the lives of others around us. Small acts of kindness, truthfulness, and justice, repeated over time, can have an enormous cumulative effect. The ancient mothers and fathers of the desert learned from experience how reverence for God and deep respect for neighbor and self can and must be enacted within the ordinary and messy details of daily life. With disciplined effort and continual help from God, genuine virtues like perseverance, moderation and generosity can truly be learned and put into practice, one moment at a time.

The royal dignity and authority of Adam and Eve were also central to the divine image (Gen 1:26). Although they lost these gifts, at least in part, through sin, and misuse their authority in destructive ways, Christ has fulfilled the human vocation to serve the created world as prophet, priest and king. By joining our will and our actions to his, we can share in this vocation, which is also originally ours as image of God.

Different people may be called to a different kinds of prophetic, royal, and priestly service. (1) Our neighbors, who are endowed with the dignity of God's image, may need our service because they are poor, oppressed, ill, or homeless.<sup>6</sup> To give them food, clothing, or shelter, to visit and care for them when sick or in prison, is to honor Christ with these gifts, for in their poverty they share his image. Their benefactors, too, like the bountiful Creator, share his image.<sup>7</sup> The true king watches over his people so as to love, serve and care for his them.

(2) Like the ancient prophets, we may be called to speak the truth and advocate for justice on behalf of our neighbors, or on behalf of the earth and its ecosystems.

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6. Gregory of Nyssa

7. Gregory of Nazianzus, Or. 14.

(3) As human beings, we are connected with every part of the created world. Our souls participate in the world of the angels, and our bodies in the world of animals and the substance of the earth. So we are called to a priestly ministry of uniting all of creation together, within ourselves and all around us, and offering everything to God. Likewise, we are called to bestow God's blessing on the creation around us. We are thus mediators between God and the world. This ministry is accomplished through prayer and through our presence, and it can become manifest in the character of all the work we do.

(4) Part of our royal task is attentively watching the world around us and working to mend what is broken, strengthen what is weak, and heal what is ailing. For example, scientists and naturalists saved a magnificent giant bird, the California condor, from extinction. They studied the birds' environment and the hazards they faced, placed all remaining specimens in zoos, bred them, returned them to the wild, and continue to watch them lest hazards trap them again.<sup>8</sup>

(5) The artist, too, who works to reveal God's beauty in the created world, is acting in accordance with God's creative activity. The iconographer is a prime example of this.

### **Is Service Really at the Core of Human Identity?**

It seems that to be human is to serve, to give oneself to God and to others. Gregory of Nazianzus summarized this beautifully in his first sermon.

Let us make an offering to the one who died and rose again for us. Perhaps you think I am speaking of gold or silver or tapestries or transparent precious stones, earthly matter that is in flux and remains below, of which the greater part always belongs to evil people and slaves of things below and of the ruler of this world.<sup>9</sup> Let us offer our own selves, the possession most precious to

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8. John Nielsen, *Condor, To the Brink and Back: the Life and Times of One Giant Bird* (New York: Harper, 2006).

9. Jn 14:30.

God and closest to him. Let us give back to the Image that which is according to the image,<sup>10</sup> recognizing our value, honoring the Archetype, knowing the power of the mystery and for whom Christ died.<sup>11</sup>

Gregory has a great sense of human dignity; he says we offer our own self to God because that is the best thing we have. Our Creator always honors our gift and preserves our existence, however much we give ourselves away to him. He gives the martyrs their lives back, for all eternity.

Yet service to our neighbors, in an interpersonal or communal context, elicits some hard contemporary questions. (1) In today's American culture, people are valued for what they do and encouraged to perform more and more in order to establish their value as human persons. Christianity rightly calls this perspective into question on the grounds that God loves and values each and every one, whether we perform for our neighbors or not. Our ultimate value lies in who we are, not in what we do; contemplative monks and nuns bear witness to this. If the divine image, which is the core of our human identity, is identified with what we do for others, does this mean that a man who becomes unemployed loses his worth and even the divine image? A balanced theological anthropology must avoid such a conclusion. The divine image includes many other things besides service, such as the relationship to God and capacity for contemplation prized by monastics.

(2) Our cultures have often expected women to efface themselves to the point of losing their identity in serving others. Then Christianity encourages them to sacrifice themselves even more. Feminists would like to restore a balance between women and people around them, and seek to reclaim

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10. Gregory and many of the Greek fathers hold that the eternal Son, who became incarnate as Jesus Christ, is the Image of God in the strict sense, since he is of one essence with the Father and entirely like him. The divine Logos is thus the model according to which human beings have been created, so they are said to be made "according to the image."

11. Oration 1.4.

their own voices instead of always only helping the voices of others to be heard more clearly. In order to offer themselves to God, they first need to rediscover their unique selves. Under these circumstances, telling them they are called to serve more and more can increase the imbalance instead of fostering wholeness.

(3) Helen Betenbaugh and Marjorie Procter-Smith observe that for persons with disabilities, the text, “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” can be painful to hear.

Persons with a disability must frequently ask for assistance of various kinds, and are thus often the recipients of the giving. All of this results in a crushing blow: one is guilty for not being a giver (and therefore blessed) and further guilty for being a taker. Such assumptions are abusive. People with disabilities need confirmation and affirmation of the fact that by their receiving, they are simultaneously giving grace to the giver.<sup>12</sup>

If the image of God is identified with service, such persons may think they are left to draw the conclusion that they are not fully human, which may already be the silent fear buried at the depth of their hearts. Again, our theology must be reconfigured to avoid the possibility of any such conclusion.

As Betenbaugh and Procter-Smith suggest, giving and receiving must be held in balance, in reciprocity. Moreover, they both occur in the context of a community. The church is both the body and the bride of Christ. Every member is like the bride, encountering and receiving her Beloved in the people she meets, and like the bridegroom, serving others as an extension of Christ’s own body. Throughout our daily interactions with others, we can each play both roles again and again, in any number of ways. Thus, by giving and receiving, receiving and giving, we construct community. We build the church, as it were, one brick at a time.

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12. “Disabling the Lie: Prayers of Truth and Transformation,” in Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers, ed. *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), pp. 281-303, at 285.

If we must always be giving, are we like Peter protesting when his beloved Master wants to wash his feet? By this act of service at the Last Supper, our Lord Jesus drew his disciples closer to himself than before. Similarly, he honored John the Baptist when he insisted on accepting baptism from him. Most of all, he honored his mother by borrowing her flesh in the incarnation and accepting her service before his birth and throughout his childhood. In the Orthodox Church, there is an icon called the Deesis, in which Christ sits enthroned with saints on both sides praying for the whole world. The two who are closest to him, on either side, are John the Baptist and his mother. By letting them serve him, he drew them close, so that now they can serve the world by their prayers.

### **In the Image of the Trinity**

Gregory of Nazianzus said in the fourth century that communities of people made in the image of God should act toward one another and structure their community life in the likeness of the Trinity, as far as is possible. Modern Orthodox theologians have suggested that human community is made in the image of the Trinity, and recently many Western theologians have been saying much the same thing. I would suggest that by placing our service to others and our being served by them in this broader context, we can avoid the difficulties discussed above.

Some would ask whether humans are in the image of Christ or in the image of the Trinity. In my opinion, both these claims are true, and indeed the first leads to the second. Christians often begin with prayer to Christ, whom they come to know as their personal Lord and Savior. Then gradually, over time, their relationship with him broadens and opens out into a relationship with each of the three divine persons. One sees Christ in the Gospels continually in communion with his Father whom he loves, doing his works, speaking of him, pointing his disciples toward him. When asked to teach his disciples to pray, he taught them the Our Father. In so doing, he shared his own closeness to the Father with them. By repeatedly praying this prayer, they were invited to enter into a loving relationship with him as well. Likewise, Christians gradually become more aware over time that the Holy Spirit is behind their prayers, enabling them to say, “Jesus is Lord,” and, “Our Father.” They come to rely on the Holy Spirit and ask him for help, and in time these prayers, too, unfold into a personal relationship. Thus, they find they are surrounded by the three persons of the Trinity. Our relationship with Christ, and with each of the three

persons, is made possible by our being created in the image of God, and little by little it can strengthen the divine image in us into a divine likeness.

In this way, the three divine persons share with humankind the communion they have with each other. As the Father eternally begets the Son and breathes forth the Holy Spirit, he gives his very being, his very divinity, to them. In return, they offer themselves and all that they are back to the Father. The Father enables the Son and the Spirit in their creative activities and sovereignty, and they act in accord with his holy will. Thus, the divine persons serve each other for all eternity. Since human community is called to bear the image of this divine community, people are likewise called to serve each other. Here we find the ultimate divine model for human service and self-offering.

Yet there is more. As each of the three divine persons gives himself to the other two, they also must receive him. They dwell in each other, yet they must also receive each other's indwelling. There is continual balance. continual movement, continual reciprocity among them. It follows that to receive the service of others graciously and with thankful love for the giver is also a facet of human existence that is imprinted with the image of God, that is grounded in the divine image and manifests the divine likeness. As Procter-Smith suggests, one person cannot give unless another receives. Giving and receiving belong together, in community.

When human self-giving occurs in a context of balance, reciprocity, and community, the imbalances noted above can be avoided. Persons with disabilities are blessed by their inclusion in community. Women are supported in affirming themselves, so that others can share their unique presence, not only their self-effacing work. And finally, human persons, who are invited into the circle of the Trinity's unending love and interpersonal communion, are valued for what they are, not only for what they do.