

SKETCH OF A PROJECTED BOOK ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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In the projected book, we intend to offer an integral theological vision of God's coming kingdom, including what it will be and how hope for it should shape Christian life. Our view of course includes propositions that the Church already accepts as truths of faith. But it also includes propositions that, we think, she will eventually—perhaps in a few centuries—accept as truths of faith or, if our vision is unsound, reject as contrary to faith.

We shall try to show in the book that our vision is a hypothesis that accounts for the relevant data, including Scripture passages and infallibly proposed truths of faith, better than alternative theologies have accounted for them. In making that case, we shall do several things: show that well regarded exegesis supports our interpretation of scriptural texts; explain the relations between the propositions already accepted as truths of faith and those we are introducing; and deal with very widely accepted theological positions inconsistent with our view.

In this sketch, we do none of those things. Here we only articulate our vision; we do not even fully explain it. The Scripture texts and other theological sources we quote or cite are meant to help clarify our view, not make the case for it. Many of the novel propositions we introduce plainly are arguable and require clarification and support. While we do not qualify each of them as we assert it, we propose them only as elements of our theological hypothesis. As we have developed our vision over many years, we have repeatedly found and corrected mistakes, and we expect to find more. So, we will welcome discussion and criticism of this sketch, and we always submit our views to the ultimate judgment of the Catholic Church's magisterium.

We do not deal here with death, judgment, purgatory, angels, or the prospects of children who die unbaptized before they have the use of reason.

God's Kingdom in Scripture and in the Theological Tradition

The Israelites to whom Jesus preached understood *the kingdom of God* from the Scriptures they heard in their synagogues and the psalms they prayed. God rules creation and particularly Israel. Both are afflicted by grave and pervasive evils, but God will rescue them. He will anoint a

Davidic king (see Isa 11:1–10); he will himself come like a gentle shepherd (see Isa 40:9–11); he will send a servant who will triumph through suffering (see Isa 42:1–4, 49:1–6, 50:4–9, 52:13–53:12). God will create new heavens and a new earth, where every evil will be overcome (see Isa 65:17–25). In the Book of Daniel, the kingdoms of the world are displaced by God’s kingdom. God confers universal and everlasting dominion on “one like a son of man” (Dan 7:13), and the dead are raised (see Dan 12:2).

Jesus proclaims the arrival of God’s kingdom and shows himself to be Messiah, shepherd, suffering servant, and son of man. A mighty savior, born of the house of David, Jesus superabundantly fulfills—though in unexpected ways—the promises made to Abraham and his children. By perfectly doing the Father’s will, Jesus makes the reign of God present. With his own blood, he forms a new and everlasting covenant and makes it permanently available. He says he is the Messiah and identifies himself with Daniel’s “son of man” (see Mt 24:30, 26:63–65; Mk 13:26, 14:61–64). Reigning on the cross, Jesus draws all humankind to himself. Risen and enthroned at God’s right hand, he inaugurates the new creation. The Father and Christ send the Holy Spirit to empower Jesus’ disciples to spread the incipient kingdom so that, when he comes again and raises the dead, people will be prepared to inherit the definitive kingdom—“the definitive realization of God’s plan to bring under a single head ‘all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1043; internal quotation, Eph 1:10).

God does not abandon the fallen world; his kingdom will be the world renewed. The human body will not be left behind but raised up immortal. Until around 200 AD, Christian writers fully embraced the New Testament’s understanding of the definitive kingdom. But Greco-Roman classicism misunderstood this world’s fallenness and knew nothing of God’s coming kingdom. Of course, the Church Fathers who were formed by that worldview—beginning with Origen (c. 185–254) and culminating with Augustine (354–430)—rejected all those elements of it that they recognized to be contrary to faith. But they tended to ignore much of the New Testament’s teaching about God’s coming kingdom, and so overlooked that teaching’s centrality to the Gospel and its focus on the renewal of this world. Many therefore reduced the kingdom to one or more of the following: the salvation of souls, Jesus

himself, the Church in this world and in heaven, and the whole group of those enjoying the beatific vision. Such reductions still prevail.

The Composition of the Definitive Kingdom

As Jesus' resurrection was the renewal and transformation of his individual body, so the definitive kingdom will be the renewal and transformation of the entire created universe (see Rom 8:19–23). But as resurrection presupposes death, so the renewal of the universe presupposes its dissolution (see 2 Pt 3:10–13). The definitive kingdom will be a new heaven and new earth, a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (see Rev 21:1–5; cf. Isa 24:19–25:9).

God's plan for the definitive kingdom is to unite all things in Christ (see Eph 1:9–10). All things were created not only through the Word (see Jn 1:3, Col 1:16) but also for him (see Col 1:16). Even now, Jesus' disciples are incorporated into his risen body, and thus really are his members—in a unique but not metaphorical sense. When he has conquered all other evils and raised the dead (see 1 Cor 15:22–28), that oneness will be palpable. Still, in that oneness each person's unique identity will not only be maintained but perfected. Unlike those members, sub-personal realities will lose their unique identity and simply be parts of Christ's body. When Christ appropriates and gathers in the entire created universe, his glorified body will expand, and nothing will remain apart from it.

The unity of all things in Christ will involve a special feature of his very being, but this point will be intelligible only if one understands what St. Thomas Aquinas means by *esse*. Unlike human persons, Jesus as man does not exist unqualifiedly by a finite *esse*. If he did, his humanity would be that of a human person. Jesus in fact exists unqualifiedly as God and man by the divine *esse*. Still, inasmuch as the eternal Word temporally *became* man, he also exists by a finite and secondary, though not accidental, *esse* (see Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata de unione Verbi incarnati*, art. 4, c.). When all things are gathered into Jesus' glorified body and God is all in all (see 1 Cor 15:22–28), human persons will continue to exist unqualifiedly by a substantial *esse* of their own, but they and every other created reality will also exist by Jesus' secondary *esse*.

The Origin and Fulfillment of the Desire to See God

Since “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9),

nobody has a natural desire for the beatific vision. But ever since God called Abraham and his posterity to cooperate in rescuing fallen humankind, those who respond to God with gratitude have wished to become better acquainted with him and to enjoy familiar access to him—to “see his face” (see Ps 17:15; 27:4, 13; 42:1–2). Disciples of Jesus who love him desire to know him better. While they have come to know him as man, their friendship is with the Person, not with the nature. So, even if what they desire is not clear to them, they humanly desire to see God.

However, “no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (Jn 1:18; cf. Mt 11:27; cf. Lk 10:22). Jesus enables those who believe in him “to become children of God” by a second birth which is “of God” (Jn 1:12–13; cf. 3:3–8), not of anything pertaining to human nature. Those who are now God’s little children will in the definitive kingdom be adult members of his family—they will be like him and so will see him as he is (see 1 Jn 3:2); having given up childish ways, they will know him even as he knows them and so will see him face to face (see 1 Cor 13:8–12).

The Word’s becoming flesh is not a modification of his divinity but his assuming a human nature, so that he is truly human. In the same way, the second birth of human persons as children of God is no mere created modification of their humanity but God’s gift of the divine nature, so that they are truly divine. Just as Jesus, a divine Person, will find his fulfillment not as God but as man by gathering all creation into his humanity, so human persons will find their fulfillment in intimacy with the Person Jesus is—and in him with the Father and the Holy Spirit—not inasmuch as the blessed are human but inasmuch as they are divine. So, the beatific vision will not pertain to the human intellect or any other human capacity but will pertain to the very divinity in which children of God share. Only in knowing, as God’s children alone can, “the love of Christ which surpasses [human] knowledge” will the blessed be “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:19).

How will friendship with Jesus enable children of God to know the Father? At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples that those who love him will be loved by both his Father and himself, that he will manifest himself to them, and that he and his Father will come to them and make their home with them (see Jn 14:21–23). In saying this, Jesus is speaking of disciples who love him—children of God united with him in the *communio* of the new covenant who are living members of that *communio*. Jesus loves such disciples with human love, and both he and the

Father love them with divine love. In the self-manifestation and indwelling of which Jesus speaks, he will fulfill his disciples' human desire for intimacy by sharing with them his knowledge of himself as eternal Son, a self-knowledge that includes his knowledge of the Father and the Spirit in their relations with him. In this way, children of God will enjoy intimacy with the Holy Trinity, and, because the Holy Trinity and the divine essence are identical, that intimacy with the Trinity is the beatific vision of the divine essence.

In times past, theologians generally described the beatific vision, not as sharing in Jesus' divine self-knowledge and so in divine intimacy, but as attaining to God's essence by a unique act of human contemplative knowledge. Since God's essence is his goodness, it was sometimes argued that those enjoying the beatific vision will *thereby* be fulfilled in every human good, inasmuch as every created good exists in God's infinite goodness in an eminent way—that is, without the limitations that make it the particular created good it is (see, for example, Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, book iii, chapter 63).

However, if fulfillment in human goods as they exist eminently in God could adequately fulfill the blessed in those goods, their resurrection would be pointless, for in having the beatific vision they would already have in an eminent way all the benefit of risen bodies. Likewise, Jesus could not have endured the cross *for the sake* of the joy set before him (see Heb 12:2), for he would already have had that joy in an eminent way. Moreover, having served its salvific purpose, Jesus' humanity would be irrelevant; it might as well be absorbed into his divinity, as Origen and St. Gregory of Nyssa seem to have imagined. Thus, any fulfillment in human goods that the blessed enjoy in the beatific vision is no substitute for fulfillment in those goods as they exist in their created reality. That is why God, in his definitive kingdom, will perfect not only the oneness of human persons with himself by the intimacy of the beatific vision, but also the otherness from the Trinity of both human persons and of Jesus as man by fulfilling them as human.

Natural Desire and Properly Human Fulfillment

Like us in all but sin, Jesus lived a rich and full human life. And since his resurrection and ascension, he lives an even better human life and always will. Yet, as God, Jesus never ceased to enjoy the intimacy with the Father and Holy Spirit that the three Persons forever share with one another. As Jesus' human and divine natures are really distinct, so

are his human fulfillment and his intimacy with the other divine Persons, and neither of these detracts from the other.

Human persons, as we have seen, will share in divine intimacy precisely as children of God. Yet, precisely as human, they also will live in the definitive kingdom a splendid human life—one far richer and more fulfilling than life can ever be in the present age—for they will share in Jesus' resurrection life and in his peace, his *shalom*. Thus, the fulfillment the blessed enjoy by sharing as God's children in the intimacy of the beatific vision and their fulfillment in specifically human goods are really distinct, and neither detracts from the other.

All human beings naturally desire *shalom*. It is translated "peace," but in Scripture the word is used with a wide range of meanings: completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony (see *Strong's Concordance*, 7965). *Shalom*, then, refers to a wide range of goods that constitute human well-being and flourishing, not least living in harmony with one another and enjoying lasting friendship with God. Sin and its consequences interfere with *shalom*; freedom from all those evils, eventually even from death, pertained to the hope of the Old Testament and characterizes the kingdom promised in the New.

In the kingdom's complete freedom from evil, its *shalom* will be unchanging. But even in the kingdom, it will be impossible for anything to fulfill human persons as human so completely that nothing remains to be desired. Fulfillments of human capacities for knowledge and love, for play and creativity in literature, art, and music are always limited, and every achievement can be surpassed. Specifically human desires and satisfactions presuppose that openness to more, and dissatisfaction sets in only when reasonable expectations are thwarted. Thus, even in the definitive kingdom, the fulfillment of the blessed as human will not be definitive. Rather, it will always be open to more. And since human life in the kingdom will be unclouded by evil, its *shalom* will forever become better and better.

What Properly Human Fulfillment in the Kingdom Includes

The relationship with God of human persons *as human*—as distinct from *as children of God*—will be better in the kingdom than it can be in the present age. All will love the Trinity with their whole minds, hearts, souls, and strength. Increasingly experiencing God's goodness, their love

for him will forever grow. Glorifying God and cooperating with Christ in whatever they do, the blessed will be engaging in endless worship.

Resurrection life is not good only for individuals; it is a communal good in which the blessed will participate with Christ and one another. When Jesus rose from the dead, his wounds were visible, he ate fish, and he told his disciples: “Handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Lk 24:39). Since the body of Christ will include everything in the definitive kingdom, the bodies of the blessed will not be spirits but real flesh and bones, just as his is. The new heavens and new earth will be this physical universe transformed, with space for bodily persons to move about and be here and there at different times (see *Supplement to Aquinas, Summa theologiae*, qu. 84, art. 2).

The blessed will, however, be free of all bodily defects, will never be sick or injured, will never suffer pain, will never die again. Each of the blessed will have his or her unique beauty, and every bodily capacity, including the sensory capacities of memory and imagination, will function superbly.

The blessed will experience the real bodily oneness with Christ and one another that the Eucharist now generates. In the present age, spouses experience their oneness in respect to the reproductive function. In the age to come, there will be neither marrying nor being given in marriage. But the blessed will experience their nuptial oneness with Christ and one another with respect to their entire lives, and the experience will be inclusive rather than, as marriage now is, for only two persons, excluding all others. Always functioning well together, the blessed will delight in their oneness.

The best *human* friendship of each of the blessed will be with Jesus as man, for he will have saved all of them and will be the center of each one’s life in the definitive kingdom. He will know and appropriately appreciate what each brings to the definitive kingdom. Since the wedding feast is endless, there will be no limit to the time he can spend with each of the blessed individually, no matter how many there will be.

The blessed will reign with Christ. He will enable them to participate in the plans and choices that will shape their life at all of its various communal levels.

Among the blessed, each friendship will be unique, and friendships will increase in number as the blessed become acquainted. The interaction of friends, not least when it involves a friend’s other relationships, will reveal further aspects of his or her goodness and so deepen friend-

ships, and every friendship will go on deepening forever. All of the blessed will love each of the others as they love themselves, and their love will not be limited by any defect on their part or the part of those they love. Rejoicing in others' joy as much as in their own and delighting in the joy that others take in them, the blessed will share together in a glorious, ever-rising cycle of joy.

The blessed will also exercise their human capacities for theoretical knowledge, esthetic experience, and performances valuable in themselves. The ways in which such capacities were realized in the present age will be the starting point for further realizing them, helping others realize them, and sharing the fruits of exercising them.

Hell—Empty or Populated?

Since God will be all in all in the definitive kingdom, it may seem, as it has to a few Church Fathers, that hell will be vacant—even Satan will eventually repent. Today, many Catholics think that one ought to hope no human being will go to hell and think that, at worst, only the rare, totally depraved person will be lost forever.

Jesus, however, makes it clear that some people—and not just the few who seem totally depraved—will end in hell (see, e.g., Mt 7:21–23, 25:31–46; Lk 13:23–28; cf. 1 Cor 6:9–10, Gal 5:19–21; 2 Thess 1:8–9). Some today dismiss Jesus' sayings as empty threats, but that implies he was lying. Some claim those sayings are offset by other New Testament texts suggesting that all will be saved, and that the two sets of passages are irreconcilable. But that implies that the New Testament contradicts itself and is not divinely inspired.

Moreover, in 1336 Benedict XII solemnly defined that “the souls of those dying in actual mortal sin descend right after their death into hell” (DS 1002/531), and the Fourth Lateran Council had defined in 1215 that after such people are raised from the dead, they will undergo “perpetual punishment with the devil” (DS 801/429).

Nevertheless, starting after World War II, most Christians, whether Catholic or not and regardless of how they understood God's kingdom or heaven, stopped hearing and thinking much about the last things. People still found it consoling to recall the kingdom or heaven when confronted with death. But for most, it had become almost unthinkable that they or those they cared about were at all likely to end in hell. So, having come to expect that no one, or almost no one, will be lost, most no longer felt it urgent to strive to enter the kingdom or get to heaven, or to help others

do so. Taking salvation for granted, they no longer hoped for it. That happened because people can no more hope for what they regard as inevitable than for what they consider impossible.

Hell—Suffering without Evil?

God is pure goodness, and his willing of anything other than himself always is love for it—causing it to be, sustaining it, and bringing it to fulfillment. At the end of the sixth day, God saw that his creation was very good, but the account of creation in Genesis concerns only the first stage of God’s creative work. Being privations, evils are not created realities. God allows them only insofar as they are unavoidably involved in the coming to be of good things he is creating. God is creating the definitive kingdom, and in it there will be many good things that could never have come to be without evils. But God *cannot* allow evils that have nothing to do with the coming to be of good things. In the definitive kingdom, there will be novelty only in ever-increasing goodness—for example, the ever-increasing human fulfillment of the blessed—in which evil is impossible. So, there will be no evil whatsoever in the definitive kingdom, not even in hell.

Various Scripture passages point to that conclusion. *All things* will be united in Christ (see Eph 1:10), and he of course is entirely good. He will overcome every evil and deliver the kingdom to the Father, and God will be *all in all* (see 1 Cor 15:20–28). We hope for a new heavens and new earth where God’s “righteousness dwells” (2 Pt 3:13)—his goodness in overcoming evil will be manifest. While some mistakenly drew universalism from some of these and other texts, such texts better support the view that Christ will entirely overcome evil. We agree with Julian of Norwich, who firmly believed that many are damned, yet held that “all manner [of] thing shall be well” (quoted with approval, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 313).

Yet in warning about hell, Jesus often mentions fire, and the theological tradition has generally regarded that fire as an evil God inflicts upon the damned as just retribution. John Paul II, however, provides a different account of those warnings (*General Audience*, 28 July 1999). He teaches that hell “is not a punishment imposed externally by God but a development of premises already set by people in this life.” Hell “is the ultimate consequence of sin itself, which turns against the person who committed it. . . . To describe this reality Sacred Scripture uses a symbolical language which will gradually be explained. . . . By using images,

the New Testament presents the place destined for evildoers as a fiery furnace, where people will ‘weep and gnash their teeth’ (Mt 13:42; cf. 25:30, 41), or like Gehenna with its ‘unquenchable fire’ (Mk 9:43). . . . The Book of Revelation also figuratively portrays in a ‘pool of fire’ those who exclude themselves from the book of life, thus meeting with a ‘second death’ (Rev 20:13f.).”

Of course, the damned will never enjoy the beatific vision, and their not enjoying it is the punishment of loss (*poena damni*). The damned will also suffer a punishment of sense (*poena sensus*). Always aware of the palpable joy of the blessed—a joy arising both from their friendship with Jesus, through which they, as children of God, share in the beatific vision, and from their rich and splendid fulfillment in other respects—the damned will forever regret missing out on that glorious joy and forever wretchedly realize that they have no one to blame but themselves. That profound and endless emotional suffering is the fire that never goes out and the worm that never dies, and it is pain of sense inasmuch as emotions pertain to sentient nature.

Although the damned will be unable to enter the *communio* of the kingdom, they will be under Christ’s kingly reign, without, of course, reigning with him. In creating the new heavens and new earth, God will give even the damned all the good they are able to receive. Being raised, the damned will share in Jesus’ resurrection life, the only resurrection life there is. So they will be members of his body, but, as mortal sinners now are, “dead” members—that is, although humanly united with Christ, they will never share in divine life, as children of God do. However, within limitations due to their self-centeredness, the damned will realize human goods by using their human capacities.

Yet it certainly pertains to faith that the damned never repent and that they forever undergo punishment. How can those things be true if no evil remains?

Although the damned never repent, God, without taking away their freedom, will bring it about that they cease willing evil. Motivating the damned by their self-interest, which is not evil in itself, and limiting their options to good ones, God will bring their wills into conformity with his. No longer willing evil, the damned will do nothing in conflict with the good of the *communio* of the blessed or with one another’s good.

Although the damned will suffer punishments of loss and of sense, those will not constitute or include privations. Lacking the beatific vision will not be a privation, because divine intimacy is not owed to any

created nature. Even lacking intimacy with other human persons will not be a privation for the damned. Intimate friendship realizes in an especially rich and fulfilling way the good of harmony among people. Even without intimacy, that good is realized to some extent in the present age when self-centered people pursue their mutual interests by avoiding conflict and functioning smoothly together, and the damned will do that. But the damned will not love others for their own sakes, which is necessary for intimacy. Thus, while lack of intimacy with others will severely limit their human fulfillment, that lack will not be a privation for them. And despite the gravity of their unending emotional suffering, that suffering will be a sound awareness of their situation and an appropriate attitude toward it—an awareness and attitude, therefore, that though sensibly evil will be intelligibly good.

In sum, a populated hell is compatible with the elimination of all intelligible evil.

Seeking the Kingdom and Benefiting God

Jesus teaches his disciples not to be anxious about the things all human beings naturally seek, but to seek first the Father's kingdom and his righteousness; Jesus assures them that the Father will provide as well those things everyone seeks (see Mt 6:25–33). By adding *and righteousness*, Jesus teaches us to seek the kingdom for the Father's glory—that is, for the manifestation of his goodness. For, while *righteousness* often is used in other senses, here it refers to the manifestation of the Father's goodness in completely overcoming evil.

Jesus' exhortation to seek first the kingdom implies that his disciples should intend it for God's glory as their sole ultimate end. If Christians do so, they will fulfill the love commands. For if they intend God's kingdom for his glory as their only ultimate end, they will always act for his sake. In doing that, they will love him, and in consistently doing it they will love him with their whole minds, hearts, souls, and strength. And since the kingdom will include both their own and others' fulfillment, in loving God they will also love their neighbors as themselves.

The Church teaches that the definitive kingdom is the ultimate purpose of God's creative and redemptive work: "The ultimate purpose of creation is that God 'who is the creator of all things may at last become 'all in all,' thus simultaneously assuring his own glory and our beatitude'" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 294; internal quotation from Vatican II, *Ad gentes*, 2). Since the definitive kingdom is not only the

ultimate end of Christian life but also the ultimate purpose of God's creative and redemptive work, those who follow Jesus' teaching to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness share a common good with God and work with him for it.

If one cooperates with God in that way, one intends that he receive his share in the common good—the manifestation of his goodness that is his glory. By this glory, God does not acquire anything, as Vatican I teaches (see DS 3002), and so those who live for his glory do not *thereby* benefit him. Nevertheless, seeking first God's kingdom does benefit him. For the definitive kingdom will include all things gathered up in the humanity of Christ—the rest of creation will be the “fullness of him who is filled, all in all” (Eph 1:23, *Jerusalem Bible*; see fn. *t*). Being fulfilled as man by the transformed created universe, Christ will really be benefited. And although he is benefited *as man*, the Person benefited is the divine Word. So, in seeking God's kingdom, Christians truly benefit God just as Mary did when she nursed Jesus at her breast.

Seeking the Kingdom as Jesus Did by Doing the Father's Will

Jesus himself sought first and always the Father's kingdom for his glory. The Father had sent him to proclaim the kingdom and gather people into it, and he always did the Father's will. He bore witness to the kingdom he proclaimed by his single-minded focus on it and detachment from genuine human goods short of it. He shaped his little flock into his church. At the Last Supper, he united that church with himself in committed cooperation, bodily union, and the indissoluble *communio* of his new covenant, so that its members might share in his life both as man and as God. He consummated the covenant with his own blood, and on behalf of the faithful members of the covenantal *communio* inaugurated the definitive kingdom by his resurrection and ascension. He and his Father sent the Holy Spirit to enliven and guide the church, and Jesus both remains with her and intercedes for her.

Enlightened, guided, and strengthened by the Spirit, every member of the Church is to spread the gospel and build up the *communio* of faith. Church members are to do that primarily by following Christ, by living according to his teaching that shapes life in view of the coming kingdom. They are also to give an account of their hope for the kingdom—to bear witness with words to the truth of the gospel.

While living in a way that will make it clear that they are not *of* the present world, Jesus' disciples are, in general, to live *in* it and engage in

secular activities: they are to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens and members of their family of origin, to marry and raise children, to earn their living, and so on. With lives shaped by Jesus' teaching, his faithful disciples not only spread the gospel and build up the covenantal *communio*, but reclaim secular realities for Christ by striving to heal and restore them in the light of the gospel. The sacrifices they bring to the Eucharist and offer the Father with Jesus' self-sacrifice are their lives, including all the goods they have reclaimed for Christ.

Jesus teaches his disciples to love others, to meet their needs, to serve rather than be served. He teaches his disciples to use fruitfully the gifts entrusted to them. Paul develops that teaching by explaining that the Church is one body with many members, each called not only to practice his or her faith and fulfill ecclesial responsibilities but to use his or her distinctive gifts for building up the Church (see Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 12:4–30). Every Christian is a unique divine masterpiece, recreated in Jesus for a particular life of good actions that God has prepared for him or her to live out (see Eph 2:10).

Still, God's definitive kingdom will come about only by the Holy Spirit's transforming the present universe into it. So, one cannot help build that kingdom by doing anything at all, even by living out the life of good actions God has prepared. But if one cannot help build the kingdom, how can one live for the kingdom's *sake* rather than live, for example, simply to please God and merit his gift of admission to heaven?

Since everything God does is leading up to the definitive kingdom, the life of good actions he prepares for each Christian must somehow contribute to it. God has the master plan for the coming kingdom, and Christians can be sure that carrying out their personal vocations will contribute even if they cannot see how. So, Christians can live for the kingdom's sake by consistently choosing to do what God calls them to do. As we shall explain below, doing now what God calls one to do contributes, not just to the kingdom's coming (see 2 Pt 3:12) but to its reality, by preparing material that the Holy Spirit will include in it.

Personal Vocation: Serving Others and Becoming All that One Can Be

God called to Moses from a burning bush and sent Gabriel to Mary, but generally he does not call Christians in such ways. Rather, having been taught to use their gifts in service to others, Christians usually learn God's will for their lives by considering not only their own gifts and limitations but others' needs, and by giving prayerful thought to how

they should use their gifts to meet needs. This is how one ordinarily comes to hear God's call, for he provides both gifts and opportunities to use them in service.

God's callings to each Christian are of several different kinds. Some are to do particular good deeds; others are to make commitments, for instance, to undertake a particular state of life or way of making a living. Often, only these latter are called "vocations," while the fact that every Christian's entire life should respond to God's calling is ignored or, at best, unnoticed. Even in parts of one's life shaped by a vocational commitment, however, one needs to listen for God's call about how to carry out the commitment. Moreover, as elements of the Father's plan for one's life, one should accept the things one cannot control. And, of course, Christians are always called to fulfill various common responsibilities, not least to repent their sins, try to make up for them, and forgive others. All these callings together constitute for each Christian his or her unique personal vocation.

All Christians are called to holiness, and one fully responds to that call by consistently striving to hear and carry out one's personal vocation. Central to the personal vocations of some Christians is a calling to clerical and/or consecrated service and life. Deacons, presbyters, and bishops are ordained to act in Jesus' person—to make his salvific acts present, for the good of all, and to promote the fruitfulness of those acts. All those who commit themselves to celibacy or virginity for the kingdom's sake, which includes most diocesan clerics, are thereby *consecrated* to bear especially perspicuous witness to the kingdom. They are also thereby freed from other responsibilities so that they can provide that witness by imitating very closely Jesus' whole manner of life.

Still, those with personal vocations that include celibacy or virginity *for the kingdom's sake* become holy not by being clerics and/or consecrated persons but by consistently choosing to do what God calls them to do, no matter what that may be. No other human person has had or ever will have a state of life greater than Mary's. Yet Jesus himself paradoxically taught that Mary was his mother less by being his mother than by doing the Father's will (see Mt 12:46–50, Mk 3:31–35; Lk 8:19–21).

Seeking God's kingdom for his glory and responding to his call for selfless service to others is the way Christians can most perfectly fulfill themselves. As God, Jesus gains nothing for himself from the cooperation of those who live out their personal vocations, and God could in other ways bring about whatever their service yields for other people. But

God's mother, Mary, would not be who and what she now is—and will be forever in the kingdom—had she not responded to God's call as she did during her life in this world. The same holds true for every Christian.

The Elimination of Evils and the Recovery of Goods

The greatness of human beings depends on how they deal with challenges and live worthwhile lives. The *Exultet* sung during the Easter Vigil calls original sin a “happy fault” because it “gained for us so great a Redeemer.” Had God not permitted the sin from which Jesus redeemed us, he would not, *as man*, have been so great. Similarly, if God did not permit the evils he calls human persons to deal rightly with, they would never become the great saints he empowers them to be. Therefore, although Jesus conquered sin and death, God still allows evils during the present age.

Even if all Christians fully lived out the lives of good deeds God prepares for them, the struggle against evil would continue until Jesus returns, as his teachings about the end time confirm. Since the definitive kingdom will be complete only when Jesus has overcome every evil and the entire created universe is dissolved and transformed into the new heaven and new earth, human efforts will never change the present world into God's kingdom. So, while Christians who live out their personal vocations do overcome some evils and promote some human goods, they do not, strictly speaking, build God's kingdom. Rather, as Vatican II teaches, they prepare material for it (see *Gaudium et spes*, 38).

The Council goes on to explain that those who, cooperating with the Spirit's grace and following Jesus' teaching, promote in the present age “the goods of human dignity, familial communion, and liberty—that is to say, all the good fruits of our nature and effort—” will “find them once more, but cleansed of all dirt, lit up, and transformed, when Christ gives back to the Father an eternal and universal kingdom” (*Gaudium et spes*, 39). Christians can be confident, then, that none of the good they bring about in living out their vocations will be lost. Defects and lack of success, evils mixed with that good, will pass away. But the Holy Spirit will recover all the human goods faithful Christians have realized and will integrate them into the definitive kingdom.

Those who enter that everlasting kingdom not only will find there every good they promoted during the present age but also will have each of those goods as a starting point for ever-increasing human fulfillment.

A Theology of the Kingdom for the New Evangelization?

The Catholic Church remains the covenantal *communio* Christ established in this world. People who do not recognize her as such and share her faith can be saved if two conditions are met: (i) they seek religious truth and are not culpable for lacking Catholic faith; and (ii) aided by God's grace, they persevere until death in living in accord with what they blamelessly hold to be truth (see Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 16; *Ad gentes*, 7; *Gaudium et spes*, 22). Such people are linked to Christ and his Church in such a way that after purgation, if it is needed, they will find themselves in God's kingdom. Somewhat similarly, Catholics who never seek God's kingdom for his glory but who, aided by God's grace, practice their faith as they understand it and persevere in love until death, will, after purgation if it is needed, be welcomed into the kingdom.

With God, all things are possible. But without awareness of and hope for God's kingdom, will many people in this fallen world persevere until death in living the truth in love? Vatican II teaches that "very often" people are culpably enmeshed in falsity about God or "are exposed to ultimate despair," and that the Church bears in mind the Lord's command to preach the gospel to the whole creation (*Lumen gentium*, 16).

Catholics who share Jesus' integral message about God's kingdom with others while bearing witness to that gospel's truth by holy lives will move many hearers to accept the gospel's divine proposal. Nothing else can afford people living in darkness and the shadow of death the *shalom* they naturally desire, and the kingdom will provide it super-abundantly—ongoing and ever-increasing fulfillment, unimpeded by evil, in every sort of genuine human good. It will also provide the greatest of the Father's gifts, the beatific vision, a share in divine intimacy that created persons cannot naturally desire but that the Father, even before the first day of creation, meant for those who would become sons and daughters in his Son.

