

FAITH, HOPE,  
& CHARITY



# FAITH, HOPE, & CHARITY

*A Modern Journey to God*

CARDINAL RANIERO CANTALAMESSA

WORD  on FIRE.

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# Introduction

*NOVA  
ET VETERA  
(Mt 13:52)*

THINGS BOTH  
ANCIENT AND NEW

The pagans knew the myth of the “Three Graces”; we Christians know the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Three real, not mythical, graces! The name “graces” would be even more appropriate for them than that of “virtues,” which is a category more philosophical than biblical and places emphasis on man’s effort, rather than on the gift of God.

In Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), whose painting is on the cover of this book, there is a clear spiritualization of the myth. The “Three Graces”—here unusually modest and chaste—invite us with their hands to look heavenward! Like them, the three theological virtues hold hands together because they are inseparable. Where one of them is present, there are also and necessarily the other two. It reminds us of the Trinity where, in each of the three divine persons, because of their common nature, there are also the other two. There is also a sort of *perichòresis*—that is, mutual interpenetration—between the three theological virtues, and it is interesting to know that the expression “the holy Triad”

has been used to indicate faith, hope, and charity as well as the Holy Trinity.<sup>1</sup>

Taking advantage of the ancient tradition—both patristic and medieval—in this book, a modern and existential approach is also attempted; that is, one that responds to the challenges, enrichments, and, at times, surrogates proposed to the theological virtues of Christianity. The evangelical saying on the need to keep “the new and the old” together has been the chief guide of this essay, which has all the weaknesses (but, I hope, also some of the advantages) of any attempt at synthesis. No claim of completeness and systematicity, therefore, but only answers to questions and situations that are perennially relevant or that have become such with the advent of modernity. The division of the book into short chapters, which can be read almost independently of each other, responds to the approach that written communication has taken in the digital age.

The style and the liturgical framework adopted—a spiritual journey to Bethlehem in short daily stretches in the footsteps of the Magi—were dictated by the oral origin of the book, born as a development of the sermons delivered to the Pontifical Household, in the presence of Pope John Paul II in the Advent of 1992, and of Pope Francis in the Advent of 2022. The advantage of this approach is that it does not require us to spend all our time in defining what the theological virtues are, but it helps in getting down to the present-day reality and one’s own life. The most important thing, in fact, is not to know what the theological virtues are, but rather to exercise them. We come to truly know them the same way we come to know Scripture: by practicing them!

Another advantage of this approach is that it helps to put theology within the reach of all the people of God and not just a few

1. In the quotation of sources, edition is only indicated for lesser-known writings or those not easy to find. The pontifical documents are cited from the Vatican website: <http://www.vatican.va>. “Man” stands for every human being in quotations from the Bible or past authors; “man” and “woman” are mentioned separately in every other context, according to the current standard.



“insiders”—a theology “capable of being preached,” like the one advocated by Karl Barth and put into practice by St. Augustine. In fact, there is no content of faith, however high, that cannot be made comprehensible to every intelligence open to the truth. One thing we can learn from the Church Fathers is that you can be profound without being obscure. All that is required is to use a language accessible to all, which does not disdain images, stories, parables, poetry, and even modest personal experiences.

St. Gregory the Great says that Holy Scripture is “simple and profound, like a river in which, so to speak, lambs can walk and elephants can swim.”<sup>2</sup> Our theology should be inspired by this model. Everyone should be able to find something useful in it, regardless of whether they are a beginner or an expert. Not to mention that it is often revealed to the “little ones” what remains hidden from “the wise and the learned”! (In order not to discourage anybody, some more specialized theological issues are treated in footnotes and in the two final excursus.)

At its core (developed in the third part, dedicated to charity), the present essay intends to be a timid attempt to do theology starting not from the philosophical idea of God as “absolute being” but from the biblical revelation of God as “absolute love.” No foolish pretension whatsoever to substitute absolute love for absolute being, but rather a desire to fill an abstract and static *container* with a concrete and dynamic *content*. In other words, the need to give back to God the freedom of the wind, the ardor of the fire, and the pathos of a jealous lover that characterize him in the Hebrew Testament, as well as his paternal tenderness that only the Son who “is in the bosom of the Father” could reveal to us. What is attempted here has no other ambition than to entice others to continue it with better resources and more time before them! (A theme to be developed, closely linked to that of God as “absolute love,” is that of God as “infinite humility.”) A more

2. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, Epist. Missoria, 4 (PL 75, 515).

biblical approach does not mean giving up dialogue with modern culture; on the contrary, this essay, in its small way, wants to be a contribution to the evangelization of culture and to the enculturation of the Evangel.

Christian theology has not finished yet, I believe, with freeing the idea of God from the metaphysical cage of Aristotle and from the bandages of its own speculation that risk making God something like a mummy in the museum of the human mind! Aristotle's God moves the world without himself being moved, as the moon moves the tides; the Platonic "One," on the other hand, is Love (*Eros*) but, ignoring the Trinity, he has no one equal to him to love and be loved by, a bit like Adam before the creation of Eve. A joyless love and a wasted beauty!

What emerges in the end as the most beautiful (and for me unexpected) result of this undertaking is seeing the Christian dogma of the Trinity re-emerge in all its splendor as the solution of some never fully resolved theological knots. The revelation of the Trinity, we shall see, is what allows us to consistently say that God is Love, that he is Beauty, and that he is Happiness. The idea of making today's Christianity more palatable by putting the Trinity in brackets is like thinking you can make an athlete run faster by removing the spine from his body!

Plato and Aristotle, as well as their Christian counterparts, Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, and all the great theologians of the past up to the present day, are the "giants" on whose shoulders we must stand to see further, even if only by an inch. When questioned, however, I am convinced that they would answer us just as inanimate creatures answered St. Augustine: "*Quaere super nos!*" (Search above us!). Above all of them there is Scripture, which—as the same St. Gregory the Great says—"grows with those who read it."<sup>3</sup> It grows also as new questions and challenges are put to it.

3. *Ibid.*, 20, 1, 1: "[Scriptura] cum legentibus crescit"; *Id.*, *Hom. In Ezechiel*, 1, 7, 8.

A word, then, on the use of Scripture in this essay. To understand Scripture, is it sufficient to take into account the history of a text, the sources, the variants, and the literary genre—in a word, the most up-to-date exegetical criticism—or is something else also necessary? I think that all those means do not represent the last word, but rather a preliminary although indispensable one. Thinking that you can fully understand Scripture with the use of the most advanced scientific, historical, and philological techniques is like thinking that you can explain the Eucharist with a chemical analysis of the consecrated Host. And yet, no one is more ready to appreciate the critical work on the Bible (and is more grateful to those who dedicate their lives to it) than the one who uses it as a kind of “Instructions for Use” and as a springboard for the leap of faith.

An analogy can help us to see the problem. Scholars of the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri can go so far as to explain every word and discover every allusion and every historical or literary source of the text. Yet there will always remain something that escapes all of this and that is, however, the essential: that certain indefinable thing called poetry! This can only be grasped by the spirit of the reader, entering into tune and vibrating in unison with the spirit of the poet. Something similar happens with Scripture. “The Spirit testifies to our spirit” (Rom 8:16): this is the law that presides over every authentic reading of the Word of God, as long as it is done in communion with the Church, not individualistically and apart from Tradition.

The Bible cannot be read with the unspoken but sometimes evident assumption that it is the work of a human author, like any other religious book. There is a *historical* truth and a truth that we can call *real*, or *ontological*. Let us take Jesus’ affirmation: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). If, due to some unlikely new discovery, we would come to know that the sentence was in fact historically pronounced by the earthly Jesus, this would not

prove it is true (the person who pronounced it could be deceiving himself). What makes it “true” is that—in reality and beyond any historical contingency—he is the way, the truth, and the life.

In this deeper and more important sense, each and every statement that Jesus utters in John’s Gospel is true, including his solemn declaration: “Before Abraham came to be, I AM” (Jn 8:58). “Truth” (*aletheia*) is almost synonymous with “reality” in the fourth Gospel! The classic definition of truth is “perfect correspondence between a thing and the idea of it” (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*); revealed truth is a perfect correspondence between a reality and the revealed word that expresses it (taking into account, of course, the context and the literary genre). The use of Scripture in this essay is inspired by these convictions. It has its model in the way Jesus, Paul, and the entire New Testament use the Scriptures. (Not always, though, in the way Church Fathers and medieval authors do!)

A remark also about biblical quotations. Translations of the Bible into modern languages are taking place nowadays at a pace of little more than ten years. Thanks to the progress of studies and changing linguistic tendencies (but also, in part, to justify their own existence!), translations continually change words and expressions that in the liturgy and in the life of the Church have been enriched, in the meantime, with harmonics that are lost. For this reason, while usually following the official translation of the American Catholic Church (NABRE), I allow myself, on some occasions, to use a translation or an adaptation that is more coherent, even grammatically, with the context of the discourse (as the Church does in its liturgy!), without resorting each time to the monotonous repetition of the initials “cf.” or “see.” (I suppose that every reader has a Bible available to verify if the quote is pertinent or not!) I shy away from an aseptic, mechanical, and almost chemical use of the Word of God. You cannot study the words of Scripture as you study fossils in sterile environments and

with latex gloves. I fully agree with the following remark, which, though expressed by a poet, is no less valid theologically:

Jesus did not give us dead words  
 That we must close in small boxes  
 And that we must keep in rancid oil . . .  
 He gave us living words to feed . . .  
 The words of life  
 You can't keep them if not alive . . .  
 We are called to nourish the word of the Son of God.  
 It belongs to us, it depends on us  
 To make it understood forever and ever,  
 To make it resound.<sup>4</sup>

With joy and humility, in preparation for the second millenary of our Redemption in 2033, I offer this book on our common heritage to all fellow Christian believers—and to every person who in our modern society is longing for something “totally other.”

#### Note to the present edition

What I have the honor and pleasure to present here to my English-speaking readers is a translation of the second revised and expanded Italian edition of the book released in 2024 by Edizioni San Paolo with the title *Fede, Speranza e Carità*. I express my deep gratitude to Dr. Liam Temple of Durham University, UK, for carefully reviewing, from a linguistic point of view, my own English translation, and to the editors of Word on Fire for the many intelligent suggestions.

#### The Author

4. Ch. Péguy, *Le porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu*, in *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 587.

# Biblical Abbreviations

## HEBREW TESTAMENT

Amos	Am	1 Kings	1 Kgs
Baruch	Bar	2 Kings	2 Kgs
1 Chronicles	1 Chr	Lamentations	Lam
2 Chronicles	2 Chr	Leviticus	Lv
Daniel	Dn	1 Maccabees	1 Mc
Deuteronomy	Dt	2 Maccabees	2 Mc
Ecclesiastes	Eccl	Malachi	Mal
Esther	Est	Micah	Mi
Exodus	Ex	Nahum	Na
Ezra	Ezr	Nehemiah	Neh
Ezekiel	Ez	Numbers	Nm
Genesis	Gn	Obadiah	Ob
Habakkuk	Hb	Proverbs	Prv
Haggai	Hag	Psalms	Ps
Hosea	Hos	Ruth	Ru
Isaiah	Is	1 Samuel	1 Sm
Jeremiah	Jer	2 Samuel	2 Sm
Job	Jb	Sirach	Sir
Joel	Jl	Song of Songs	Sg
Jonah	Jon	Tobit	Tb
Joshua	Jos	Wisdom	Wis
Judges	Jgs	Zechariah	Zec
Judith	Jdt	Zephaniah	Zep

BIBLICAL ABBREVIATIONS

NEW TESTAMENT

Acts of the Apostles	Acts	Mark	Mk
Colossians	Col	Matthew	Mt
1 Corinthians	1 Cor	1 Peter	1 Pt
2 Corinthians	2 Cor	2 Peter	2 Pt
Ephesians	Eph	Philemon	Phlm
Galatians	Gal	Philippians	Phil
Hebrews	Heb	Revelation	Rv
James	Jas	Romans	Rom
John	Jn	1 Thessalonians	1 Thes
1 John	1 Jn	2 Thessalonians	2 Thes
2 John	2 Jn	1 Timothy	1 Tm
3 John	3 Jn	2 Timothy	2 Tm
Jude	Jude	Titus	Ti
Luke	Lk		





# Part One

## THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HIS NAME

### The Gate of Faith



# 1. Lift Up Your Heads, O Gates!

There is a Psalm that has always had a great resonance in Christian prayer. It says:

Lift up your heads, O gates;  
be lifted, you ancient portals,  
that the king of glory may enter.  
Who is this king of glory?  
The LORD, strong and mighty,  
the LORD, mighty in war. (Ps 24:7–8)

One hypothesis about the origin of this question-and-answer Psalm is that it refers to the moment when the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem and placed in a temporary location, perhaps a pre-existing place of worship of a local divinity. The building had too narrow doors for the ark to pass through, so it was necessary to raise the front and widen the opening. The dialogue of the Psalm (recited, perhaps, on the anniversary of the event) would reproduce, in a liturgical and responsorial key, the exchange of words between those who accompanied the ark and those who were inside waiting for it. More simply, however, the Psalm could refer to the doors of the temple that open to welcome the God of Israel who, on solemn occasions, enters it with all his glory.

In the liturgy of the Church, the “doors” are those that open to welcome Jesus in his presentation in the Temple; or those of Hades at the Savior’s descent into hell; or those of heaven that open to welcome the Risen One in his Ascension. In the spiritual interpretation of the Fathers, the gates spoken of in the Psalm are those of the human heart: “Blessed is the one at whose door Christ knocks,” commented St. Ambrose. “Our door is faith. . . . If you want to lift up the gates of your faith, the king of glory will come to you.”<sup>1</sup>

The door is not just an opening in the wall; it is a reality full of symbolic meanings. As a passage from outside to inside, it evokes hospitality, intimacy, and recollection. As a passage from inside to outside, it suggests liberation from prison, freedom, reaching out to others. Theological virtues realize both these symbolic meanings. They are doors through which God enters into us and through which we go out of ourselves toward God and our neighbor. The mystic significance of the door reaches its climax in the words the Risen One addresses to the Church:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock.  
If anyone hears my voice and opens the door,  
[then] I will enter his house and dine with him,  
and he with me. (Rv 3:20)

The great door that we can open—or close—to Christ is one, and it is called freedom. “Freedom”—it has been written—“must move toward grace. Man is a besieged city and sin is the perfectly executed blockade. Grace is the king’s army that comes to help. But man’s freedom must make a sortie and go out to meet the liberating army. If the fortress does not receive help it is lost; but if it does not help itself through that sortie, it is equally lost.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Ambrose of Milan, *Commentary on Psalm 118*, XII, 14.

2. Charles Péguy, *Note conjointe sur Bergson*, in *Œuvres en prose*, 2, Paris, Gallimard, 1961.

Freedom cannot precede grace; it would be heresy to think so; it must be open and eager to welcome grace. “Everything proceeds from God, but not leaving us as sleepy, reluctant to any effort and almost unwilling. . . . The one who created you without you, will not save you without you.”<sup>3</sup> Advent is the liturgical sign of this mystery: we move to meet someone who is on his way toward us.

The unique door of freedom can be opened, however, in three different ways, or according to three different kinds of decisions, that we can consider as three distinct doors: faith, hope, and charity. These are doors that open from inside and outside at the same time: with two keys, one of which is in our hand, the other in the hand of God. We *cannot* open them without the help of God, and God *does not want* to open them without our cooperation. When a baby is born, its small lungs start functioning when they come into contact with the oxygen of the air. Without oxygen, the lungs would not be activated and it would mean death; but if the lungs are not activated it would be death all the same. This is what happens also in the relationship between grace and freedom.

Faith, hope, and charity are the three virtues most of God and, at the same time, most of ourselves. They are most of ourselves because in them our freedom is especially committed, and most of God because they are infused by him through the Holy Spirit, like germs that must blossom. This is how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines them:

The theological virtues relate directly to God. They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity. They have the One and Triune God for their origin, motive, and object. The theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues. They are

3. Augustine, *Sermons*, 169, 11, 13.

infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life. They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being. (CCC, §§1812–1813)

An Advent preface of our Italian Missal perfectly expresses the thought that the three theological virtues are the ways and doors to be opened to Christ who comes on Holy Christmas:

Now he comes to us  
in every man and at every time,  
so that we welcome him in *faith*  
and testify in *love*  
the blessed *hope* of his kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

Faith, hope, and charity are the gold, frankincense, and myrrh that we, “wise men *coming from the West*,” want to bring as a gift to God who comes to save us.

4. Advent Preface I/A.

## 2.

# Jesus Christ, the Leader and Perfecter of Faith

Let's start our journey to Bethlehem with the first of the three theological virtues, faith. Faith is the great entrance door to the kingdom: "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). God—we read in the Acts of the Apostles—"had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). God opens the door of faith in that he gives the possibility of believing by sending those who preach the Good News; we open the door of faith by accepting God's offer.

With the coming of Christ, there is a leap in quality with regard to faith—not in its *nature* but in its *content*. Now it is no longer a question of a generic faith in God but of faith in Christ, who was born, died, and was risen for us. The Letter to the Hebrews gives a long list of believers—"By faith Abel . . . By faith Abraham . . . By faith Isaac . . . By faith Jacob . . . By faith Moses"—but concludes by saying: "Yet all these, though approved because of their faith, did not receive what had been promised" (Heb 11:39). What was missing? Jesus was missing, who—as the same letter says—is "the leader and perfecter of faith" (Heb 12:2).

The Christian faith does not only consist in believing that God "exists and rewards those who seek him" (Heb 11:6), it also consists in believing in the one whom God has sent. This is the

faith that Jesus means when he says: “Have faith in God and also have faith in me” (Jn 14:1). The great sin of which the Paraclete will convince the world is that it did not believe in him (Jn 16:9). When, before performing a miracle, Jesus asks “Do you believe?” and, after having accomplished it, he affirms “Your faith has saved you,” he does not refer to a generic faith in God (this was taken for granted in every Israelite). Rather, he refers to faith in him and in the divine power granted to him. This is now the door of the “great faith,” the faith that justifies the wicked (Rom 3:21–26), the faith that “conquers the world” (1 Jn 5:5).

For St. Paul, the saving faith has the Paschal Mystery of Christ as its specific object. It consists in believing that “Christ died for our sins and rose for our justification” (Rom 4:25). John, for his part, sees faith as embracing the whole mystery of the person of Christ, starting from his coming in the flesh. Speaking of the Word he says:

To those who did accept him  
he gave power to become children of God,  
to those who believe in his name (Jn 1:12).

Accepting the Word means something more than just believing in his divinity, in what he is in himself. In the context of Christmas, faith, unfortunately, tends to be reduced solely to its ontological dimension—that is, to faith in the *being* of Christ, more than in his salvific *operation*. This is due to the heresies that marked and conditioned the reflection of the Church at the beginning—that is, Gnosticism, Docetism, Arianism, Monophysitism, and Nestorianism. All these heresies, in one way or another, pushed the Church to deal with the question: Who is Jesus? To what extent is he a man and to what extent is he God? Is he a human person or a divine person? The soteriological and kerygmatic



content, by which Christmas points already to the Paschal Mystery, has remained somewhat in the shadows.

Significant, in this regard, is the different attention accorded to two verses of the prologue of John's Gospel: "To those who welcomed him he gave the power to become children of God" (v. 12) and "the Word became flesh" (v. 14). The first was as if relegated to the shadows by his more illustrious neighbor.<sup>1</sup> Yet this verse is no less important to the Evangelist than the other. Indeed, if becoming flesh represents the means, making men children of God through faith represents the end of the divine plan. "God became human"—the Fathers used to say—"so that humans would become divine."<sup>2</sup>

On this point, John is even bolder than Paul. He speaks of a true generation, of a birth from God; those who believed in Christ "were begotten of God" (Jn 1:13); in Baptism, we are born "from the Spirit," "reborn from above" (Jn 3:5–6); and believers in Christ are not just "called" children of God, but rather they truly are such (1 Jn 3:1). Paul uses the idea of adoption: "God sent his Son . . . so that we might receive adoption" (Gal 4:4–5); "He destined us for adoption to himself" (Eph 1:5). Human adoption, however, is simply a legal fact. The adopted child assumes the surname, citizenship, and residence of the adopting parents but does not share their blood and their DNA. For us it is not so. Not only does God transmit to us the name and rights of children but also his intimate life, the Holy Spirit, which, so to speak, is God's DNA in us. The difference between the two is only of language, though, because for Paul, too, it is the Holy Spirit who makes us children of God.

Christmas is the beginning of salvation, and as such, it already reveals its profound nature. It contains, albeit in embryo,

1. During the third century, the second of the two verses is cited 203 times, the first only 19 times. And the gap becomes much wider in the following centuries as the great Christological controversies develop.

2. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 54.

the whole Good News of the Gospel. It says that in the fullness of time, God made his kingdom and his salvation come freely among us in the person of Jesus his Son. Like the five wise virgins, let us go out to meet the Bridegroom with the well-lit lamps of our faith.

### 3.

## What Does Faith Give You?

Let us focus on the initial moment and the constitutive act of the theological virtue of faith, which is Baptism. The following short dialogue takes place at the back of the church between the minister and the candidate for baptism:

—Minister: “What do you ask of the Church of God?”

—Candidate (or parents): “Faith!”

—Minister: “What does faith give you?”

—Candidate (or parents): “Eternal life!”

The current Roman Ritual provides for the possibility of other responses equivalent to “Eternal life!”; for example, “The grace of Christ!” Suppose that the one to be baptized is an adult who comes to faith after a long journey in search for the truth, or of active atheism. To the question “What does faith give you?” I would suggest (and I would advise others to suggest) an even simpler answer: “God!” Faith gives you God!

There is an affirmation that only one person can make in the entire universe: “*I am God!*” (Is 45:22). On the lips of any other being it would be no less a blasphemy than that of Lucifer. Right below this affirmation, there is another that faith allows every human creature to pronounce: “*I have God!*” The difference between the Creator and the creature, thanks to faith, is reduced to what exists between *being* and *having*. God *is* God; the human creature *has* God! Faith makes God “my” God. How many times

in the Bible do we hear this truth proclaimed: “O God, you are my God,” and God, in turn, saying to Israel, “I will be your God and you shall be my people.”

We will see later how these possessive adjectives are to be understood. For the moment, let us try to grasp what is paradoxical and breathtaking in all of this—namely, the happiness of not being God in order to have God. Think of a woman in love: she is happy not to be a man so that she can have a man; think of a man in love: he is happy not to be a woman so that he can have a woman. I am about to say something that sounds foolish. We humans are, in a certain sense, luckier than God! God does not have a God to love, to admire, and to share his joy with . . . we do. Soon, however, we discover that we are utterly wrong, because even God has a God to love, to admire, and to share his joy with. The Father has the Son, the Son has the Father, both have the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit has both! What a stupendous mystery the Trinity! The reconciliation of everything takes place in it, even that of *being* and *having*, so difficult to achieve among us human beings.

Here, we see the tragic aspect hidden in atheism, especially in that form of atheism, or pantheism, which consists of putting oneself in the place of God and of making oneself God. Wanting to be God, one ends up not being God *and* not having him!<sup>1</sup> It is so beautiful not to be God if that is the condition for having God! Even God would not be happy if he did not have a God to love and that is—as I have just said—if the Father did not have the Son, the Son did not have the Father, both didn't have the Holy

1. “We are God!” has sometimes been the slogan of the New Age movement. The suspicion that has always accompanied the so-called “mysticism of the divine essence” of Meister Eckhart and others is that the final goal of creatures is not the full possession of God but simply and purely becoming God, one being and one essence with him. The paradox of some Western followers of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite is to linguistically exasperate God's transcendence while practically denying it with a pantheistic end-result. I think that “the infinite qualitative difference between the Creator and the creature” can never be totally abolished, not even in eternal life. This is not a limitation for us creatures, but the condition for the unending newness of our happiness.

Spirit, and the Holy Spirit did not have both. Each divine person finds in the other two his own complacency—that is, his own joy.

We Christians fully agree with the popular tale of the salt doll in Zen Buddhism; we just end it a little differently. The story tells us about a salt doll who wants to know what the sea is like. “To get to know me, touch me!” the sea says to her. She dips her hands in the water and her hands disappear; she dips her feet into the sea and finds herself without feet. The doll suffers and protests at losing part of herself, but when she is finally all melted, she jubilantly exclaims: “The sea, it’s me!”

The “moral” that we Christians draw from the story is not “God, it’s me!” but “God is mine!” The doll has discovered what the sea is; she has not discovered what water is and the “nature” of it! The sea is not *something* (nature, emptiness, nothingness, or whatever you want to call it); it is *Someone* who draws us to himself and who became flesh to be able to say to us what the sea says to the salt doll: “Touch me!”

But now we need to go back, as promised, to the meaning of the possessive pronouns “mine,” “ours,” and “yours.” They can be taken in a “weak” sense and then they only mean that the creature “recognizes” God as the God in whom one believes. In the Bible, this first meaning is deepened, thanks to the concept of “covenant.” The formula “I will be *your* God and you will be *my* people” not only indicates the relationship between God and the people but also the mutual belonging. For the Israelites, Yahweh is *their* God because he has united them to him in a formal covenant, and in every covenant, the resources of one side are shared by the other. This mutual belonging acquires a new dimension when the prophets begin to speak of the covenant in nuptial terms. “My lover belongs to me and I to him,” says the bride of the Canticle (Sg 2:16). God is the bridegroom and his people are the bride. “On that day—oracle of the Lord—you shall call me ‘my husband’” (Hos 2:16).

With the Incarnation, “that day” has become “today” (*hodie*); the marriage between God and humanity has been “consummated.” They now belong to each other in a total and irreversible way: no longer as “betrothed” but as groom and bride. Jesus presents himself as the Bridegroom and his coming as the time in which the “King” celebrates the wedding banquet for his Son. The Apostle Paul (or whoever wrote the Letter to the Ephesians reproducing and developing his thoughts) presents Christ and the Church as the symbol and model of every human marriage. We can repeat in a much stronger sense the words of the Psalm: “O God, you are *my* God” because faith makes us children of God and children possess their own father; nothing and no one belongs to them more than he does. We should remember this when we say “*Our* Father.”

There is more to this mystery but let us postpone further consequences until we talk about the third theological virtue, charity. There we will see to what extent, through faith, hope, and charity, God becomes “ours,” his holiness becomes ours, and his Trinitarian love becomes ours. Yes, God is ours and we are his. With one difference, though: we belong to him *by right* (since he created and redeemed us), he belongs to us *by grace*!