Praise for *Proclaiming the Power of Christ*

"One of my earliest predecessors in the office of 'papal preacher' in the sixteenth century used to say to his students of homiletics, 'When after your preaching people crowd around you, telling you how much they have enjoyed your sermon, go to your room and cry: you failed. On the contrary, when after your sermon people leave the church in silence, pressing their hat upon their head and stealthily beating their breast, rejoice and give thanks to God: you succeeded.' After reading the sermons of Bishop Barron gathered in this book, many times I felt like one of these last ones, and I am sure many others will feel the same."

—**Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap.**, Preacher of the Papal Household

"Bishop Barron's poetic expounding of the Word through his sermons evokes a stylistic throwback to the early Fathers of the Church. His lyrical and thoughtful reflections provide context for the Scriptures in ways that both provoke and encourage us to explore more profoundly our own personal relationship with Jesus. His writing not only conveys the wisdom of our rich, storied, and sacred tradition, but prominently reminds us, without a doubt, of the true nature and heart of God's love for his people. These sermons glimmer like jewels with the fiery truths of faith and have led me to grow exponentially in my understanding of what it means to be a devoted follower of Christ."

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"Jesus Christ formed many of his disciples through the art of storytelling. Bishop Barron's sermons are effective precisely because he imitates the model of Jesus in his approach to proclaiming the Word of God. Through engaging the reader with stories about the lives of the saints and using insights from the early Church Fathers, philosophers, theologians, mystics, and artists, Barron invites the reader to a deeper intimacy with God in the Sacred Scriptures through his unique method of telling the most important story in salvation history."

—**Fr. Josh Johnson**, Director of Vocations for the Diocese of Baton Rouge, author of *Broken and Blessed*, and host of the *Ask Father Josh* podcast

"A sermon is not a lecture, but a good sermon will teach. Bishop Robert Barron's sermons do that in spades. He respects his listeners' faith and intelligence by feeding the soul while offering a feast for the mind. It's one reason his listeners include so many Protestants—today Christians of all stripes hunger for such preaching."

—**Mark Galli**, former editor in chief of *Christianity Today*

"Robert Barron's reflections on the Scriptures weave vast learning, beautiful prose, and his own vivid faith into a seamless whole. First given as homilies, they are, for the reader, authentic meditations written by an engaging and learned younger priest theologian. A model for the preacher, these pages are solid food for everyone in the household of the faith."

—**Lawrence S. Cunningham**, Professor Emeritus at University of Notre Dame

"What a treasure! This collection reminds us anew of Bishop Barron's great gift for weaving together Scripture, history, literature, and art to bring God's Word alive. Take and read—and re-read!—and experience the work of a master preacher at his best."

—**Deacon Greg Kandra**, blogger and founder of "The Deacon's Bench" and author of *A Deacon Prays*

"A great homily from a great homilist takes the greatest truths and makes them radically accessible and applicable to the hearer in a way that draws them more deeply into the mystery of Trinitarian life and divine love. Through the pages of *Proclaiming the Power of Christ*, Bishop Barron makes thousands of years of Judeo-Christian tradition and timeless truths of God's love available to those willing to read and reflect on these messages. The reflections found in these pages will certainly lead the restless heart of the reader more deeply into the peaceful mystery of Christ's redeeming love."

—**Fr. Stephen J. Gadberry**, Diocese of Little Rock and Fellow of the Word on Fire Institute

PROCLAIMING *the* POWER *of* CHRIST

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CLASSIC SERMONS

ROBERT BARRON

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To
Srs. Domicela, Theodosia, and Cecelia:
faithful servants of the Lord

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LIGHTING A FIRE ON THE EARTH

Preaching has always been one of the greatest joys of the priesthood for me. Though I have, in the course of my ministry, proclaimed the Word in front of hundreds of congregations and small gatherings, for the past several years I have had the privilege of preaching to quite a wide audience through radio and the internet. The essays that you are about to read are based upon those "radio" homilies. When I actually preached these sermons, I had a few pages of notes in front of me; for the sake of this book, I have translated the notes into more formal prose. I realize that some of my Protestant friends might smile at these comparatively brief "sermons," but they must remember that they were designed to fit within the Catholic liturgical context and hence to be no longer than about fifteen minutes. My hope is that, in this written format, the very brevity of the essays might make them a bit more digestible to the reader.

My whole life long I have been fascinated by the power of the spoken word. I can recall listening, when I was a young man, with rapt attention to the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Fulton Sheen. It was not only the content of their orations that compelled me but also the very pitch and texture of their voices. King and Kennedy especially seemed to me to be singing rather than

speaking their words. When I was a sophomore in high school, I was called upon to give a public speech in the context of English class, and I chose JFK's inaugural address, with its high rhetoric and distinctive cadences. As I spoke it in front of twenty or so of my classmates, I sensed (and to some degree participated in) the magic of it, and from that moment I knew that I wanted to be a public speaker. Through the grace of God, I've been able to fulfill that early aspiration precisely as a public speaker of God's holy Word. I hope that some of the joy and oratorical excitement that I caught as a young man comes through in these sermon-essays.

But why should you bother reading these homilies? You should do so because, in the measure that they contain God's Word, they contain the power to change you according to God's will. The authority of a real sermon comes not from the preacher—no matter how eloquent, intelligent, or spiritually insightful—but rather from the Holy Spirit. When I stand to homilize at Mass, I am wearing the formal vestments of a priest, highlighting the fact that my words are not so much mine as Christ's. If I were preaching my private opinions on the spiritual life, my congregation should give me about as much attention as they would if I were holding forth at a cocktail party. They should really attend to me precisely inasmuch as Christ is using me and my words to convey his Word. So if it is Christ who speaks in these sermon-essays and if you take the time to listen, you will change. Commenting on the return of the Magi to their home country by another route after their visit with the child Jesus, Fulton Sheen said, "No one who ever meets Christ with a good will returns the same way as he came."[1]

When I was studying the art of preaching in the seminary, I took in a method that was in vogue at the time. Rooted in Paul Tillich's theology, it advocated an experiential approach. We were encouraged to correlate general human experience to the symbols and doctrines found in the Bible, using the former as an interpretive grid for the latter. Only in this

1. Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Classics, 2018), 39.

way, our teachers assured us, would we hold the attention of a skeptical modern audience. The result was that almost all of our homilies were long on stories and anecdotes and rather short on the Scripture. Sometime in the mid-1990s, I resolved to teach a course on the Christology of the great preachers in the Christian tradition. Accordingly, I read the sermons of, among others, Origen, Augustine, Bernard, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, Karl Barth, and John Henry Newman. What struck me with a disconcerting clarity was that none of these masters of the Word used a correlational method, none of them employed experience as an interpretive grid for the Bible. Rather, to a person, they allowed the biblical Word to seize them, to rearrange their thinking, to compel them to ask different questions. Then they drew the world of ordinary experience into the biblical world, interpreting the former by means of the latter.

This realization effected a revolution in me, and I began to preach differently, placing Christ first and my own experience very much second. I learned to be patient with the Bible, allowing its distinctiveness and oddity to come to the fore, resisting the temptation to make it conform to cultural expectations and the contours of ordinary spiritual experience. Something else that I learned from the preaching masters was the ample, even exuberant, use of the Catholic tradition. Catholic preachers do not subscribe to the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone); rather, they happily take advantage of the art, music, painting, poetry, philosophy, lives of the saints, and spirituality that serve as amplifications of the biblical message. Thus, you will find in these sermons of mine much of that rich interpretive tradition.

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth!" (Luke 12:49). That fire was enkindled by the Lord's miracles, his healings, his dying and rising—and by his speech. My fondest hope is that some of the heat and light of Jesus' fiery Word comes through the words of these simple homilies.

PART ONE
The Mystery of God

THE AWFUL HOLINESS OF GOD

Isaiah 6:1–8

In the sixth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah, we find one of the most striking and illuminating biblical accounts of an encounter with God. As we've come to expect from the Scripture, this narrative is at the same time beautiful, puzzling, and deeply strange. We hear that Isaiah was in the temple when suddenly he "saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'" This vision occurs when Isaiah is in the temple precincts—perhaps even, as some scholars suggest, when he is in the Holy of Holies performing the high priestly function on the Day of Atonement. While he is praying in this sacred place, he *sees*. Here we learn something very important about the nature of prayer. Liturgy, ritual, and prayer never draw God into our presence, the way magical incantations do. But they do dispose us to experience God's presence. Why would someone in Isaiah's time go to the temple every day to pray and offer sacrifice? Why would

someone today engage in the rhythms of the Liturgy of the Hours or assist at daily Mass? They would do so in order to be ready and attentive when God chooses to disclose himself.

The Lord God allows himself to be seen, but how unnerving, paradoxical, and disorienting this vision is, in Isaiah's day and ours. Isaiah envisions God on a high throne, but he also remarks that the train of God's garment fills the temple. This play of transcendence and immanence, distance and closeness is typical in biblical descriptions of God. Adam and Eve, as we have seen, try to grasp at God, but they are confounded by God's ungraspable otherness; then they try to hide from God, but they are blocked by God's unavoidable closeness. Moses is drawn by the beauty of the burning bush but then is rebuffed when he tries to manipulate God by seizing his name. The sacred name—which is not a name: "I Am Who I Am" (Exod. 3:14)—gestures toward this coincidence of transcendence and immanence in the God of Israel. The "one who is" must be beyond any of the particular things in the world, while at the same time he must be at the deepest ground of all created existence. "I Am Who I Am" must be utterly mysterious *and* closer to us than we are to ourselves, and this means that the revelation of God is always, at the same time, the concealing of God. The Fathers of the Fourth Lateran Council caught this biblical idea nicely when they said that even as we affirm a similitude between the world and God, we should always simultaneously affirm a greater dissimilitude.[1]

The cry of the seraphim, "Holy, Holy, Holy," which we echo at every Mass, indicates this unique form of God's difference. For biblical Israelites, "holy" meant "set apart" or "absolute." God is set apart in a unique way, for his otherness is not a conventional otherness of spatial or metaphysical distance; it is an otherness that transcends and includes

1. See Lateran Council IV, "Chapter 2: The False Doctrine of Joachim of Fiore," in *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed., ed. Heinrich Denzinger et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), no. 806: "Between Creator and Creature no similitude can be expressed without implying a greater dissimilitude."

the distinction between ordinary distance and ordinary closeness. To use theologian Kathryn Tanner's phrase, God is "otherly other."[2] And this uniquely divine strangeness is precisely what the angels are singing about.

I should like to linger with the angels a bit longer. The name "seraph" designates "fire." These singers are, therefore, the members of the heavenly court who have caught fire because they attend so closely to the throne of God. They are like burning embers that carry some of the glow and heat of the fire that originally illumined them. "I Am Who I Am" is not a particular existing thing, but rather the source and ground of all of the perfection of existence. Thus, he is not so much a just being as Justice itself, not so much a true thing as Truth itself, not so much a good person as Goodness itself. But good persons and true things and just beings reflect some of this divine intensity. They are, to varying degrees, angels or messengers of God. From the highest of the angels to ordinary rocks strewn along the floor of a quarry, all creatures are, in this sense, seraphim, on fire with the perfection of God. This is why acts of justice can transport us into the presence of the source of all justice; why decent people can bear us to that which is the source of all decency; why the perception of a truth, however basic, can trigger an experience of the source of all truth. Angels are everywhere, if we have the eyes to see.

Isaiah tells us that at the sound of the singing of the angels "the thresholds shook . . . and the house was filled with smoke." An experience of God always changes us; it never fails to shake the foundations on which we stand and rattle the walls that we trust will protect us. The true God, when he breaks into our lives, drives us out of our complacency, reconfigures us, knocks us to the ground. He is—to borrow just a few biblical images—a whirlwind, an earthquake, a conquering army, a thief in the night. Now, why does Isaiah speak of smoke? Smoke not only obscures a visible object but also undermines the very

2. Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 12.

act of seeing, causing a viewer to shut his eyes and blink back tears. The "one who is" cannot even in principle appear as an object to be studied, and his very presence confounds and frustrates every attempt to look, study, and analyze. This is why Joseph Ratzinger commented that Christian doctrines of God function at the intellectual level like the incense used at the liturgy: to some degree, they obscure the object to be known and frustrate the subject who tries to know.

After the vision, the angelic song, the shaking, and the smoke, Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me, I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." G.K. Chesterton observed that a saint is someone who knows that he is a sinner.[3] He implies that the closer one gets to God, the more aware he becomes of his own sin, just as the spots and imperfections on a windshield appear more clearly when the sunlight shines directly on it. Isaiah's self-accusation in the presence of God is almost exactly echoed in the New Testament story of the miraculous draught of fishes. In the wake of the miracle, as it begins to dawn on him just who Jesus is, Peter exclaims: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8). We are always humbled in the presence of the true God, convicted of our sin, less cocky and sure of ourselves. But this is all to the good, for what is being stripped away in that process is the false self, that perverted person who has compromised the image of God, the "man of unclean lips."

God listens to Isaiah's humble self-assessment, but he is not dissuaded by it. We hear that one of the seraphim flew to Isaiah and touched his mouth with a burning ember taken from the altar. The effect is a cleansing of Isaiah's soul: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out," says the seraph. The God of Israel is not the least bit interested in awakening our sense of moral unworthiness so that we might wallow in it or so that he might feel superior by comparison. That might be a tactic of

3. G.K. Chesterton, *Alarms and Discursions* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1911), 281.

one of the mythological gods, but it is utterly alien to the "one who is." God wants us to acknowledge our sin (which we do inevitably when we stand in his presence), but then he wants to cleanse us and ready us for mission. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'" No one in the Bible is ever given an experience of God without being, as a result, sent on a mission. Hence, Abram hears the voice of God and is immediately sent to discover the Promised Land; Jacob dreams of a ladder connecting heaven and earth and becomes, subsequently, the bearer of the covenant; Moses sees the burning bush and is told to liberate God's enslaved people Israel; Paul is knocked to the ground by the luminous presence of Christ and is commissioned as the Apostle to the Gentiles. The biblical God graces us with his presence that we might become missionaries of that presence to others.

And this is why theology is never, for Christians, a purely contemplative exercise. It always has a transformative and missionary purpose. And so this story of Isaiah's encounter with God ends, appropriately enough, with his ecstatic response, "Here I am; send me!"

GIVING GOD THE GLORY

1 Corinthians 10:31

There is a snippet from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians that, with admirable concision, discloses the odd, counter-intuitive logic at the heart of Christianity. The Apostle tells his little Church at Corinth: "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." Your whole life, he implies, should be ordered to the end of glorifying God and not your own egos. Now, what precisely does Paul mean by "glory"? Behind the English term are the Greek word *doxa* (used, for example, in the prologue to John's Gospel, "We have seen his glory" [John 1:14]) and the Hebrew word *kabod* (used to describe the glory of God that inhabits the temple in Jerusalem). The literal sense of both *kabod* and *doxa* would be something like "shine" or even "reputation." Therefore, to give God the glory is to allow God's light to shine, to advertise God, to draw attention to him—and away from ourselves.

But how difficult this is! From the time we are infants, we study the subtle art of glorifying ourselves, and over time most of us become quite adept at it. Most of our thoughts, moves, actions, and desires are subordinated to the great purpose of highlighting

our own egos, drawing the spotlight selfward. And most of us, I imagine, would identify at least one feature of the good life to be *doxa*—that is to say, fame and good reputation. Paul is telling his company of fellow Christians that if they want to be disciples of Jesus, this tendency has to be reversed. The saint must live her life in such a way that her thoughts and actions draw attention to God's thoughts and actions. She must be, in accord with the metaphor of John of the Cross, a clear pane of glass through which the divine glory can shine.

Having heard this message, however, we face a dilemma, a conundrum that in fact was instrumental in the development of modern culture. Doesn't this principle articulated by St. Paul awaken in the human heart a sense of resentment? After all, why should God get all the glory? Are our achievements worth nothing? Do our legitimate accomplishments—moral, intellectual, technological, and scientific—not deserve at least some notice? Doesn't this talk of glorifying God at all costs indirectly denigrate the human project and lead in the direction of a sort of universal low self-esteem?

Many of the philosophers of the modern period wrestled with these questions and, under their weight, began to conceive of God as a rival to human flourishing, a reality that must, consequently, be marginalized or even eliminated altogether. Thus, deist thinkers such as John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and Isaac Newton conceived of God as a power that, spatially and chronologically distant from the present world, allows the human project to unfold on its own, with only minimal interference. This deist god, withdrawn into his radical transcendence, opened up a secular space, a playing field on which human beings could garner some glory of their own.

Now, in time, even this diffident and distant God came to be seen by some theorists as a threat to human freedom. The philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, the greatest and most influential of the distinctively modern atheists, could be summed up in this way: "The 'no'

to God is the 'yes' to man."[1] Since, for Feuerbach, God is nothing but a projection of man's idealized self-understanding, humans will be liberated once they shake off the delusion of religious belief. Once the phantom of God gets none of the glory, then human beings can bask, rightfully, in the glory of their own heroic project. Feuerbach's most famous disciple was Karl Marx. As a young man, Marx was so impressed by Feuerbach's atheist philosophy that he said that all of us must be baptized in the *Feuerbach* (in German, "the fiery brook").[2]

Furthermore, Marx insisted that all valid social and economic criticism must be preceded by Feuerbach's brand of religious criticism, for until men and women shake off the fundamental alienation of religion, they will not, he felt, be capable of dealing with more concrete forms of oppression. With his customary verve and pith, Marx gave voice to a fundamentally Feuerbachian sensibility when he famously commented, "Religion . . . is the opium of the people," a drug that induces a dehumanizing stupor.[3] Another massively influential thinker standing in the Feuerbach line was the founder of psychoanalysis. In his numerous writings on religion, Sigmund Freud characterized belief in God as an infantile illusion or a wish-fulfilling fantasy, a dream from which the human race ought to awaken.[4] We want so desperately for there to be final justice, eternal life, a paradise where all human longing is satisfied, that we effectively invent the character of God, who will ground these hopes. Though comforting, this delusion effectively

1. This paraphrase of Feuerbach comes from Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, new ed., trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 29; see also Walter Kasper, *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1982), 45.

2. See Karl Marx, "Luther als Schiedsrichter zwischen Strauss und Feuerback," in *Ruge's Anekdota zur neusten deutschen Philosophie und Publicistik*, vol. 2 (Zürich: Literarisches Comptoir, 1843), 206–208.

3. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right': Introduction*, in *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right*,' trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 131.

4. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), 43.

blocks real human progress. For Freud, as for Marx and Feuerbach, as long as we are giving God the glory, we are, in the most radical manner, undermining ourselves.

But this characteristically modern dilemma is born of a fundamental misunderstanding. The gods and goddesses of the pagan religions were indeed our rivals, for they needed something from us—our praise, our obedience, our flattery. But the God of the Bible stands in need of nothing, precisely because he is the Creator of the universe in its entirety. The world neither adds nor subtracts anything from the perfection of God's being, and this means that God is utterly incapable of using, abusing, or manipulating the world for his purposes. As a consequence, God is something like a mirror that, upon receiving light from creation, reflects that light back for the illumination of the universe. To shift the metaphor: whatever we give to God breaks against the rock of God's self-sufficiency and returns to our benefit. This is why, if *God has no need*, it follows directly that *God is love*. Love is willing the good of the other as other. Since God has no need of anything, whatever he does and whatever he wills is purely for the sake of the other. The world, accordingly, is not a threat or rival to God—it is something that, in the purest sense of the word, has been loved into existence.

The god imagined by Freud, Marx, and Feuerbach is indeed involved in a desperate zero-sum game with the world: the more the god is elevated, the more the world is put down; the more the world is enhanced, the more the god is denigrated. But the true God, the "I Am" who spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, the Lord who in overwhelming power confronted Isaiah in the temple, the God and Father of Jesus Christ—this God is not party to such petty and pathetic competition with his creatures. Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel would have seen right through Feuerbach's fantasy and called it by its proper name—idolatry. And they would have gleefully turned Feuerbach's smug formula around: "The 'yes' to God is the 'yes' to man, and the 'no' to God is the 'no' to man." Authentic humanism

does not negate God, but seeks relation to the true God, the one who needs nothing from us and can therefore use the glory that we give to him for our glorification. One of the greatest ironies of our time is that disciples of Feuerbach—Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, to name the most notorious—were the ones who, under the guise of freeing humans from their oppression, opened the door to the worst violations of human dignity in the history of the race.

Therefore, if you want real joy and authentic human flourishing, look not to the bitter scholarly arguments of modern atheists, but rather to the simple formula found in the First Letter to the Corinthians: in all that you say and do, give God the glory!

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Matthew 22:34–40

It was a common practice in Jesus' time to ask a rabbi to identify the central precept among the hundreds of laws that governed Jewish life, to specify the canon within the canon that would serve to interpret the whole of the Torah. Sometimes, to assure succinctness and brevity, a rabbi was compelled to offer this summary while standing on one foot. Thus Jesus, in accord with this custom, is asked, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" And Jesus gives his famous answer: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

All of religion is finally about awakening the deepest desire of the heart and directing it toward God; it is about the ordering of love toward that which is most worthy of love. But, Jesus says, a necessary implication of this love of God is compassion for one's fellow human beings. Why are the two commandments so tightly linked? There are many different ways to answer that question, but the best response is the simplest: because of who Jesus is. Christ is not simply a human

being, and he is not simply God; rather, he is the God-man, the one in whose person divinity and humanity meet. Therefore, it is finally impossible to love him as God without loving the humanity that he has, in his own person, embraced. Therefore, the greatest commandment is an indirect Christology.

What does this entwined love of God and neighbor look like? To answer this question, we might turn not first to the theologians but to the saints. Rose Hawthorne was the third child of the great American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, the author of *The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables*, and some of the best short stories of the nineteenth century. Rose was born in 1851, when her father was at the height of his creative powers and enjoying a worldwide reputation. In the mid-1850s, Hawthorne, at the instigation of his friend President Franklin Pierce, was appointed US consul to Liverpool, and the writer took his family with him to England. There Rose came of age in quite sophisticated surroundings. She studied with private tutors and governesses; she mixed and mingled with the leaders of British society; and she traveled with her father to London, Paris, and Rome, where she even managed to charm Pope Pius IX.

But this idyllic existence ended rather quickly. Nathaniel Hawthorne died in 1864, when Rose was only thirteen, and her mother died seven years later, leaving the girl bereft and adrift. When she was twenty, she married a man named John Lathrop, and a few years later she gave birth to a son, whom she deeply loved. Her child died at the age of five, however, leaving his mother saddened, as she put it, "beyond words." At this time, her husband's alcoholism began to manifest itself, and their marriage fell on hard times. In her deep depression, Rose Hawthorne began a spiritual search that eventually led to an interest in Catholicism. Despite her family's rather entrenched Protestantism, she entered the Catholic Church.

A turning point in her life occurred when she read in the paper the story of a young seamstress of some means who had been diagnosed

with cancer, operated upon unsuccessfully, and then told that her case was hopeless. Squandering her entire fortune on a vain attempt to find a cure, the woman found herself utterly destitute and confined to a squalid shelter for cancer patients. The story broke Rose's heart. Getting down on her knees, she asked God to allow her to do something to help such people. In her prayer, the dynamics of the greatest commandment were operative. Her compassion for suffering humanity led her to God, and the confrontation with God led her to act on behalf of suffering humanity, the two loves joined as inextricably as the divine and human natures in Christ. And God answered her prayer. Rose enrolled herself in a nursing course and began to work at a hospital specializing in the treatment of cancer victims. On her first day at the hospital, she met Mary Watson, a woman with an advanced case of facial cancer, which rendered her so physically repulsive that even experienced nurses and doctors balked at caring for her. But Rose didn't flinch. She helped to change Mary Watson's dressing, and from that day they became friends.

Rose rented a small flat on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, living among the crowds of immigrant poor who were flooding into New York at the time. (She and her husband had separated, John having never been able to get his alcoholism under control.) She simply opened the doors of her apartment to cancer patients who had nowhere else to go, and she cared for them. Mary Watson, cruelly discharged from the hospital by doctors who considered her incurable, moved in with Rose. In time, people came from all over New York to stay with her and to find comfort in their dying days. And in accord with a basic law of the spiritual life, people began to present themselves as volunteers to help in Rose's work. We remember that when Francis of Assisi commenced to rebuild a crumbling church, he was soon joined by eleven helpers, and that when Mother Teresa of Kolkata went into the slums to aid the poor, she was joined by many of her former students. When people embrace God's work in a spirit of joy, others are drawn to them

magnetically. Given the influx of patients and volunteers, Rose and her colleagues were obliged to rent larger space, which became possible because donations had begun to arrive.

At this point, Rose's husband, John, after a long and unsuccessful struggle with alcoholism, passed away, sending Rose into another bout of deep sadness. But his death also made possible what the Spirit was prompting her to do: to become a religious. She entered the Dominican order and took the name Sr. Mary Alphonsa. As a Dominican nun, she continued her work with cancer patients and in time managed to supervise the building of a large hospital in the country. Finally, with a number of other sisters, she formed a new branch of the Dominican order, dedicated specially to this much-needed and challenging work. This community of nursing sisters—now called the Hawthorne Dominicans—exists to this day and continues, with joyful devotion, to care for those suffering from incurable cancer.

Rose Hawthorne died in 1926. At the time of her death, her life story was published in a New York newspaper, where it was read by a young intellectual named Dorothy Day. Day was living on the Lower East Side and struggling to eke out a career as a journalist. She was also a spiritual seeker, and the encounter with Rose's story helped focus her energies and prompt her in the direction of a more radical love. Just a few years later, she founded the Catholic Worker Movement, an organization dedicated to the intertwining of the love of God and the love of the poor, the hungry, the ignorant, and those forced to the margins of society. A seed sown by Rose Hawthorne took root in the receptive soil of Dorothy Day's soul.

Those who know Christ Jesus, fully divine and fully human, realize that the love of God necessarily draws us to a love for the human race. They grasp the logical consistency and spiritual integrity of the greatest commandment.