

THE CREATURE BEFORE GOD

Part III

At the End of Every Why

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1 The Command to Love

The highest command requires what coercion cannot produce: love. Law can require that injury cease, restitution be made, and conduct be rightly ordered. Coercion can secure outward compliance—even bring an unwilling body to its knees. But it cannot make the good beloved.

Yet Moses does not merely command worship. He says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Christ repeats the command and joins to it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹ The difficulty lies inside the act itself. Love must be free, and love is owed.

A command identifies the good and binds the will; it does not cause the will to embrace the good. Freedom here is not indifference to every end. It is the will’s own adherence to a good that truly merits love.

Aquinas locates the distinction precisely. A precept concerns what is due, and union with God is the end of spiritual life. Charity, by which that union begins, may therefore be commanded. Obligation is experienced as an enemy of liberty only while the will is averse from the commanded good. The act of love itself can be rendered only willingly.²

What, then, ought the creature ultimately to want? Not merely safety, acquittal, moral competence, consoling experiences, or even the perfection of a religious self. The answer is God: not first as the giver of some other desired thing, but as the good loved for his own sake. The theological virtue by which the will begins to love him in this way is charity. In the same movement it loves the neighbor in God, because one cannot love the Beloved while learning to despise what he loves.³

Charity therefore names the will’s fundamental direction, not an intensity of feeling, indulgence, attraction, or affectionate permission for whatever the will already prefers. Feeling may accompany charity, sometimes with great force. But neither warmth nor its absence settles whether charity is present. Love can remain when delight has gone silent; delight can remain when love has curved back toward the self.

This is why the third question cannot be answered by adding one more task to the second. Concrete acts are necessary, and justice binds before affection arrives. But a list of religious acts cannot, by accumulation alone, produce the love for which the acts prepare and in which they are perfected. The precept can identify the end and bind the will. It cannot give the charity by which the will reaches that end.

If love is owed and cannot be manufactured, the command seems to leave the creature before an impossible good. The Gospel does not solve the impossibility by lowering the command. It changes the heart that must answer.

2 The Law Written Within

Jeremiah’s new covenant does not lower the demand. God promises, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts.” Ezekiel joins the gift of a “new heart” and a “new spirit” to God’s own Spirit: “I will cause you to walk in my statutes.”⁴ The promised transformation neither weakens the commandments nor substitutes inward sincerity for them. It brings the will into agreement with the good they name.

For Augustine, the law without assisting grace teaches and accuses but cannot justify. The life-giving Spirit writes it within by pouring charity into the heart. His petition in the *Confessions* expresses the relation: “Give what you command, and command what you will” (X.29.40). The command remains entire. Its fulfillment is confessed as gift.

Aquinas gathers that Augustinian claim into a definition of the New Law. What is chief in the law of the Gospel is the grace of the Holy Spirit given through faith in Christ; written teaching remains necessary because it disposes persons to receive grace and directs them in its use. The New Law does more than indicate what should be done. By grace it helps the person to do it.⁵

Charity is therefore neither an achievement assembled from repeated natural acts nor a divine feeling substituted for human willing. It is infused by the Holy Spirit because the act by which God is loved above all things for God’s own sake exceeds the proportion of created nature (ST II–II, q. 24, a. 2). Grace heals the will wounded by sin and elevates it to a supernatural end.

For Aquinas, infusion names the supernatural source of a genuinely voluntary act. God moves the will according to its voluntary mode; even the gratuitous inward motion that prepares a person for grace gives rise to a free act.⁶ Grace does not love in place of the person. It enables an act that nature cannot produce by its own power.

The human shape of such freedom appears nowhere more clearly than in Gethsemane. Christ asks, “Remove this cup from me,” and then freely says, “Yet not what I will, but what you will.” His natural human recoil before death is neither sinful nor theatrical. The will is not erased when conformed; in the Son’s anguish, human freedom reaches its height as filial adherence to the Father’s good.⁷

This does not make physical abnegation the universal proof of freedom. Conformity takes the form proper to one’s state of life: truth, care, vowed fidelity, ordinary work, resistance to abuse, necessary rest. The cup in Gethsemane is Christ’s; discipleship does not authorize anyone to invent a cross for another or mistake preventable harm for the Father’s will.

The law written within is the grace of Christ communicated through the Holy Spirit, received in faith and the sacramental life, and ordered toward acts measured by the revealed command. Its interiority is ecclesial rather than private. Grace does not silence the command. It makes willing obedience possible from within.

3 No Longer Servants

John 15 places commandment, obedience, love, and friendship in one sequence. Christ says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love”; then, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you”; and finally, “I have called you friends.”⁸ Friendship does not abolish obedience. It changes the relation in which obedience is rendered.

Irenaeus reads the same conjunction without relaxing either term. Christ does not abolish the natural precepts but extends them from external restraint to the desires of the heart. The liberated person remains subject to God; indeed, Irenaeus says the work of liberty is greater and more glorious than servile obedience. Servants and children owe piety to the same Lord, but children follow with confidence, and friends know what the Word has received from the Father.⁹

The transition benefits the creature, not God. Irenaeus immediately insists that God did not accept Abraham’s friendship out of need and does not profit from human service. The perfect God grants life to those who follow him; obedience perfects the servant rather than completing the Lord (IV.13.4; IV.14.1). Creaturely response remains asymmetric even at its most intimate.

Aquinas supplies friendship with a precise grammar. Not every love is friendship. Friendship requires willing the good of another, reciprocal love, and some communication or shared life. God communicates to creatures a participation in eternal beatitude; upon that gift a real friendship with God can be founded. This friendship is charity.¹⁰

No equality of nature follows. The communication is first given by God, charity in the soul is created, and the final good remains possessed by God as source and by the creature through participation (q. 23, a. 2; q. 24, a. 2). Christ remains Lord when he calls the disciples friends. The Creator-creature distinction is not relaxed so that communion can begin. Communion is possible because divine transcendence is not rivalry and grace can perfect a creature without making it uncreated.

What changes is the creature’s manner of willing. Fear becomes servile when punishment is treated as the chief evil; mercenary love calculates the wage. Filial fear dreads separation from the beloved; charity cleaves to divine goodness itself. Augustine says punitive fear recedes as charity grows, while chaste fear remains watchful not to lose communion with the beloved. Aquinas gives the distinction formal precision: charity casts out servility; fear of punishment may remain but diminishes as charity grows; filial fear increases.¹¹

Fear of punishment can belong to the beginning of conversion and may remain as charity grows, though servility recedes. The theological virtue itself is not measured by sensible closeness to God. Friendship names an objective participation and a stable orientation of will, lived through acts that may be costly, obscure, and dry.

Charity does not remove the command. It begins to remove the distance between the will and the good that the command protects. The friend obeys because, by grace, that good is already beginning to be loved.

4 Beyond Debt, Never Beneath Justice

Friendship with God is no graduation from rule into spontaneity. Charity perfects justice: love matures not by escaping the good but by willing it for the beloved.

Aquinas calls charity the *form of the virtues*: it directs their acts toward the last end while each retains its proper object. Justice still renders what is due. Religion still renders worship to the first principle. Charity gives those acts their final Godward orientation.¹²

Worship repairs no divine lack. Justice recognizes the Creator's excellence and the creature's received condition; charity loves the One justice acknowledges. What is due can become an act of love without becoming optional.

Charity exceeds repayment. An ordinary debt ends when an equal measure is returned. No creature can equal the gift of being, grace, or promised beatitude, and God needs no compensation. Minimal compliance seeks the settled account; love attends to the beloved. Determinate obligations remain within a changed horizon.

Religious action can conceal what it appears to express. One may attend, abstain, donate, read, or pray, then present the completed acts as proof that God may demand no more of the heart. This is spiritual laundering: objective goods are made to carry the false conclusion that performance converts possessiveness or refusal of surrender into love. The fault is their use as a shield from their own end.

The answer is not to distrust obedience until one's motives are pure. A parent who supports a child before affection matures is not pretending; the child's good is due. In Christ's parable, one son says, "I go, sir," and does not go; the other says, "I will not," but afterward "changed his mind and went." The one who acted did the father's will.¹³ If love is weak, keep the command. If contrition is imperfect, confess the sin. If worship feels mechanical, worship truthfully. Justice is not counterfeit charity; it is the floor charity refuses to fall through.

Nor does action before love authorize endless bookkeeping. Scrupulosity treats uncertainty as guilt and multiplies obligations after competent judgment has ended. Charity asks for truth, repentance, and obedience, not interior omniscience. A scrupulous reader should follow a regular confessor or qualified spiritual director and resist reopening what has been responsibly judged.¹⁴

The neighbor is the necessary test. Paul writes, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." John is more severe: "He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."¹⁵ Any mystical language that ends in fascination with one's own interior state has already failed.

Charity takes contemplative and ordinary form: adoration, fidelity, truth, restitution, mercy, forgiveness, burden-bearing, correction. These acts make love visible. They do not purchase release from God; they train the creature to receive every hour as already his.

Justice answers: *this good is due*. Charity answers: *I will it for the beloved in God*.

Love goes beyond the calculation of debt. It never falls beneath justice.

5 When Presence Is Not Felt

The most ordinary obstacle to prayer is not an argument but an absence: nothing seems to answer. God feels distant; prayer feels inert; suffering looks like neglect or punishment. The mind moves quickly from an experience to a verdict: God is not there; or he is there but does not care; or he is making me suffer because I have failed.

None of those conclusions follows from the feeling.

The first part of this series argued that the creature exists only as continuously received. If God ceased to cause a creature's act of being, there would be no abandoned thing left over to register the abandonment. At the instant in which prayer seems to strike a ceiling, the person praying is being held in existence. This ontological presence is not the same as sanctifying indwelling, sacramental communion, or sensible consolation; those must not be collapsed. But sensible dryness by itself proves neither divine absence nor loss of grace.

Sin can wound friendship with God, and known grave sin calls for repentance and sacramental Reconciliation. Yet a bare feeling of distance is not a moral diagnosis. It may accompany spiritual purification; it may also accompany grief, exhaustion, illness, distraction, depression, ordinary change in affect, or no cause that can be confidently named. To label every dryness a "dark night" can flatter the sufferer and presume to read God's particular action. To label it punishment is no safer.

St. Teresa of Jesus calls contemplative prayer a "close sharing between friends" and the taking of time to be alone with the One who loves us. The definition is spare enough to survive an hour in which the sharing is not felt. The

Catechism immediately adds that one makes time with a determined will and does not give up because of trials or dryness.¹⁶

John of the Cross can describe passive purification with terrifying accuracy, but his doctrine is a map for discernment, not a label for every barren Tuesday. Its controlling end is union of love; its agent is God; its ordinary measure is the growth of faith, hope, charity, detachment from disorder, and concrete fidelity. The tradition does not authorize a person to neglect natural remedies or pastoral counsel because a spiritual explanation sounds more elevated.¹⁷

Thérèse of Lisieux gives a different witness. In her final trial against faith, darkness did not become evidence that prayer was false. She renewed acts of faith and interceded for unbelievers from within the darkness. Her witness does not romanticize desolation; it shows love refusing to make sensible assurance the price of fidelity.¹⁸

Prayer is therefore not a technique for generating the experience of presence. It is an enacted truth: the creature turns toward the One in whom it already exists, whom faith knows in Christ, and whom charity desires even when the emotions cannot follow. Dryness can make this act poor. It cannot make it unreal.

6 Asking the Unchanging God

A sharper objection now appears. If God knows all things and his providence is not revised by new information, what can petition possibly do? Intercession can seem to require an unstable God: first unwilling, then persuaded; first unaware, then informed.

Christian prayer requires no such change. Aquinas distinguishes the eternal divine disposition from the created means through which its effects occur. Providence ordains not only that a good will be given, but that it will be given through particular causes. Rain nourishes through soil; medicine heals through bodily powers. Such agents are *secondary causes*: real causes whose power and opportunity are themselves received. Prayer can be one of them. We ask to receive, through asking, what God eternally wills to give through that prayer.¹⁹

This does not reduce prayer to an inward exercise. The first thing laid open is the person praying: mind raised, desire named, dependence confessed, will made available. The *Catechism* calls transformation of the praying heart the “first response” to petition, not the only response. It then speaks of Christ’s prayer as efficacious and Christian prayer as cooperation with providence.²⁰

Intercession is therefore neither information supplied to omniscience nor a pious fiction. It is charity taking the form of asking. God can eternally will that one person’s healing, courage, conversion, protection, or material help be given through another’s prayer, as through a physician, friend, judge, or stranger. We often cannot identify the effect or measure our contribution. Hiddenness limits knowledge; it does not make the cause unreal. “Pray for one another,” James commands, because “the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.”²¹

Then may one ask for temporal goods? Certainly. Christ teaches, “Give us this day our daily bread.” But temporal goods must be desired under God, not as religion’s hidden final object. Aquinas permits asking for what supports bodily life and virtue; such things are sought second in importance, while union with God is sought first.²²

Prayer therefore carries no guarantee of wealth, relief, marriage, a particular vocation, repaired family relations, emotional serenity, or a decipherable sign. It cannot replace apology, treatment, deliberation, court action, study, employment, or the patient work by which many temporal goods ordinarily come. To promise these outcomes in exchange for a devotion is to turn the Giver into a mechanism and the devotion into leverage. The scandal is not merely that the promise may fail. It teaches the heart to want God as the means to something else.

The final object of prayer is the opposite. The Psalmist says, “One thing have I asked of the Lord, this will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.”²³ Petition, intercession, thanksgiving, sorrow, and praise become modes of one desire: not to drag God into my plan, but to live every created good within his.

7 The Hunger of Charity

The passage from justice to charity becomes especially delicate at the Eucharist. Christ’s command is not a metaphor awaiting a spiritual substitute. “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in

you.” He then gives the promise: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him,” and, “He who eats me will live because of me.”²⁴

There is no shame in beginning with duty. The Church’s precepts give objective shape to a creature whose desire is inconsistent. One who attends Mass or receives according to the Church’s law before feeling hunger is no hypocrite. Obedience can precede delight, just as a person may keep faith with someone before recovering the affection that once made fidelity easy. But duty is meant to guard an encounter. If it becomes evidence that the account is settled, the sacrament itself is being used against its end.

Nor does desire mature by leaving rite behind for an allegedly interior union. The sacramental sign is not a shell from which the mystic escapes. Worthy reception gives Christ himself; interior hunger moves toward the gift he chose. When grave sin has broken communion, charity does not rename presumption as intimacy: it seeks Reconciliation before receiving.²⁵

Aquinas calls the Eucharist the sacrament of charity because it perfects union with Christ who suffered. Its fruits are not passing emotions: as spiritual food it preserves and increases grace and rekindles charity; its principal fruit is intimate union with Christ, inseparable from his members.²⁶

Benedict XVI draws out the strangeness of this food. Ordinary food is assimilated into the eater; here Christ “assimilates us” to himself. This conformity does not erase individuality; it opens the person beyond egocentrism into Christ’s Body and therefore toward the difficult neighbor.²⁷

Thérèse of Lisieux expresses the same priority. She places before her longing Christ’s desire to unite himself to us and dwell within. Human desire is not passive but freed from self-display. The soul hungers because it has first been sought; even its capacity to receive is gift.²⁸

Here duty ripens into desire without being discarded. The communicant no longer asks only, *What must I do?* but, *How could I neglect the One who gives himself as food?* Yet “The Eucharist commits us to the poor.”²⁹ To receive the Body while refusing his suffering members contradicts the “Amen” spoken at the altar.

The hunger of charity is therefore not hunger for a religious experience. It is desire for Christ—his truth, his commandments, his sacramental gift, his members, his will—because he is Christ.

8 The Shape of the Cross

Love of Christ must eventually meet suffering, but it must first refuse a lie: suffering is not good in itself. One suffers because some good is absent, damaged, threatened, or taken. Christianity proclaims the goodness of being; it does not call ruin holy merely because ruin hurts.³⁰

Nor may suffering be read presumptively as punishment for a particular fault. God rebukes Job’s friends: “You have not spoken of me what is right.” Of the man born blind, Christ says, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.”³¹ Known sin should be repented; affliction is not proof of what the sin was.

Whatever suffering can rightly be removed should be resisted by proportionate means. The Samaritan “bound up his wounds” and “took care of him.” Love does not pass by structural cruelty, preventable disease, abuse, hunger, loneliness, or unjust law and call inaction “offering it up.” John Paul II says the Gospel negates passivity: compassion must become effective help.³²

Some suffering nevertheless cannot now be removed. It may be endured without being minimized, advertised as a spiritual credential, or made the center of identity. Seeking medical care, reporting abuse, asking for help, lamenting, and naming evil truthfully do not betray the Cross. Christ himself says, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death,” and asks that the cup pass. His final conformity is not numbness: “Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

When unavoidable suffering is united to Christ, its evil is not renamed good. Love gives the sufferer’s act a new relation to Christ’s self-offering and Body. Paul says, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake,” and, “In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.” Nothing is lacking in the worth of Christ’s Redemption; what opens is the redeemed person’s participation in it for the members of Christ.³³

Because such participation is a free act of charity within grace, it can also be meritorious. Pain merits nothing by itself, and no creature earns the first grace or adds to the Cross. Yet, by Christ’s gift, the sufferer’s act may be

offered for the graces needed for the sanctification and salvation of others—and, with charity’s universal breadth, for all—without controlling another’s freedom or guaranteeing a temporal outcome.³⁴

This possibility never licenses self-harm or imposed suffering. Voluntary penance belongs under prudence, moderation, state in life, health, duties, and competent spiritual direction. Severe asceticism belongs, if at all, only to cloistered contemplative or closely analogous vocations under competent direction; it cannot be generalized. Penance that damages bodily function or disables duty contradicts the good it claims to serve.³⁵

Most participation in Christ will be less dramatic. Work honestly done, a child’s need answered at an inconvenient hour, a grievance refused the luxury of hatred, a neighbor accompanied through illness, a sorrow borne without making others pay for it: these can become embodied prayer when charity gives them to God. Love of neighbor is not a diversion from union. When one loves the Beloved, one learns to love what the Beloved loves.

The Cross does not teach that pain is the end. It reveals what love can do when pain cannot yet be escaped. Resurrection remains the end.

9 Whole, Though Not Equal

The return does not begin where reception ends. If the creature received being and law from God but produced charity from an independent power, dependence would stop at the decisive act. The doctrine of grace denies that reserve: the answer remains genuinely the creature’s act precisely as a graced act.

The revealed order places divine initiative before the creature’s filial act. “God sent forth his Son”; then “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” The adopted child enters a communion no creature can demand or naturally reach.³⁶

Aquinas identifies the giver without collapsing gift into giver. Love is said essentially of God and personally of the Spirit as proceeding Love. Created charity is neither the divine essence nor the Person of the Spirit. It is a created participation through which the Spirit unites the creature to God and forms the creature’s own act.³⁷

Bernard of Clairvaux gives the return intimacy. In *Sermon on the Song of Songs* 83, the soul is conformed to the Word by loving because it has been loved. God is feared as Lord, honored as Father, and loved as Bridegroom; love frees fear from servility and honor from flattery. Yet a creature cannot answer divine power with power. In love it can return something like what it receives, *etsi non ex aequo*—though not on equal terms.³⁸

The inequality is not failure. The creature’s return need not equal its source in order to be whole. In Bernard’s account, the creature loves wholly by continuing to receive from the fountain. Its answer may be complete as self-gift without becoming commensurate with the uncreated gift that made the answer possible.

John of the Cross presses the truth to its mystical limit. The soul desires to love God with the love God communicates; it loves in the Holy Spirit. John can speak of conformity in love, then guards the claim: union is by communication and participation, not unity of essence.³⁹

Scripture’s phrase is daring: creatures may “become partakers of the divine nature.”⁴⁰ Participation makes the creature more fully alive as a creature. Union perfects relation; it does not cancel the terms related. Heaven is not disappearance into an infinite substance, but perfected knowledge and love of the triune God in the communion of saints.

The answer is neither autonomous nor coerced. God is first cause of the graced act; the person is a real voluntary cause. Being is wholly received, yet genuinely mine. The due is objectively binding, yet freely rendered. Charity is wholly graced, yet genuinely mine.

Faith hears the self-disclosure it could not deduce. Hope relies upon the help it cannot supply. Charity adheres to the One disclosed and hoped for, not merely as an object known from afar but as friend and final good. The creature does not climb out of reception; even the power to return is received.

10 At the End of Every Why

What ought I ultimately to want?

Not release from creaturehood. Not a clean moral account that makes further surrender unnecessary. Not a feeling by which I can verify that God is near, an outcome by which I can prove prayer effective, or suffering that displays spiritual seriousness. Not even union imagined as the extinction of the one who is united.

I ought to want God.

Not because every other good is unreal, but because every true created good is more truly loved when it is loved in the order of its source and end. Not because justice has become unnecessary, but because the One to whom worship is due has disclosed himself as the One who first loves. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son.” “We love, because he first loved us.”⁴¹

When this page is closed, the fact from which the series began will not pause. In that instant I will still be receiving existence. The Giver was there before I noticed, is there while I resist, and will be there at the final created moment. Yet revelation says more than metaphysics can reach. The One who holds me in being has entered human anguish, prayed with a human will, laid down a human life, risen in a human body, and gives that Body as food. The Spirit makes the creature’s answer possible from within.

Prayer can therefore become less an attempt to summon an absent God than consent to the presence upon which every attempt already depends. Work can become prayer when it is offered in charity. Communion can become hunger for the One received. Unavoidable suffering can be joined to Christ without being called good; removable suffering can be resisted for love of those he loves. Justice is not abandoned. It is caught up into friendship.

No independent ground has appeared beneath creaturehood—not even in the act of love. The will becomes steady not by finding such ground but by ceasing to demand it. Reverence remains; what recedes is alienation. Service is taken into friendship, and the infinite disproportion between Creator and creature becomes no obstacle to communion.

I give God nothing he lacks. The One whom nothing completes gives himself.

At the end of every creaturely why there is no higher law imposed upon God, no need behind his gift, no cause behind his being. There is no mechanism to master and no wage that could equal the gift. There is the Father who sends, the Son who gives himself, and the Spirit through whom the creature can finally love.

God is love.

Notes

- ¹Deut 6:4–5; Matt 22:37–40; ST II–II, q. 44, aa. 1–5. Short working-English scriptural phrases are governed by these exact loci.
- ²ST II–II, q. 44, a. 1, especially ad 2: the precept binds, and its fulfillment remains voluntary.
- ³ST II–II, q. 23, aa. 1 and 5; CCC 1822–1829. The neighbor remains a true good, never an instrument.
- ⁴Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:26–27. Interior law neither replaces revelation nor exempts the believer from command.
- ⁵ST I–II, q. 106, a. 1; CCC 1965–1974. Grace and written teaching are modes of one Gospel law, not rivals.
- ⁶ST I–II, q. 10, a. 4; q. 109, a. 6; II–II, q. 24, a. 2; CCC 1992 and 2006–2011.
- ⁷Mark 14:32–42; Benedict XVI, general audience, 1 February 2012, reading v. 36 with St. Maximus the Confessor.
- ⁸John 15:9–17. Abiding, commandment, Christ’s self-gift, friendship, and mission interpret one another.
- ⁹Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.13.1–4 and IV.14.1: friendship perfects the creature, not God.
- ¹⁰ST II–II, q. 23, a. 1. The shared good is God’s prior gift; friendship remains real and unequal.
- ¹¹Augustine, *Homilies on First John* IX.4–6; ST II–II, q. 19, aa. 10–11; CCC 1828, 1972.
- ¹²ST II–II, q. 23, a. 8; CCC 1827, 2095. “Form” orders the virtues; it does not dissolve their objects.
- ¹³Matt 21:28–32. The parable places obedience above profession; its application to action before mature affection is project synthesis.
- ¹⁴A pastoral boundary, not a diagnosis, clinical advice, or a new examination of conscience.
- ¹⁵Rom 13:8–10; 1 John 4:20–21; Augustine, *Homilies on First John* VII.8–9.
- ¹⁶CCC 2709–2719, especially 2709–2712; Teresa of Jesus, *The Book of Her Life* 8.5.
- ¹⁷John of the Cross, *Dark Night* I.8–10 and II.5–8; Benedict XVI, general audience, 16 February 2011.
- ¹⁸Francis, *C’est la confiance* (15 October 2023), nos. 25–27, receiving Thérèse’s public writings.
- ¹⁹ST II–II, q. 83, a. 2, response and replies 1–3: providence orders effects together with their created causes.
- ²⁰CCC 2735–2741, especially 2738–2741: inward transformation and efficacious petition are held together.
- ²¹Jas 5:16; 1 Tim 2:1–4; CCC 2634–2636. No particular temporal outcome is promised.
- ²²Matt 6:9–13; ST II–II, q. 83, aa. 5–6. Created goods remain goods, not the price of loving God.
- ²³Ps 27:4 (Ps 26:4 Vulgate); ST II–II, q. 83, a. 1 ad 2. “Object” means the good principally sought.
- ²⁴John 6:53–57; CCC 1382–1392. John 6 is read within the Church’s sacramental doctrine.
- ²⁵CCC 1382–1389, 1395. Questions of disposition, especially under scrupulosity, belong with a regular confessor.
- ²⁶ST III, q. 73, a. 3; q. 79, aa. 1 and 4–8; CCC 1391–1397.
- ²⁷Benedict XVI, Corpus Christi homily, 23 June 2011, drawing on Augustine, *Confessions* VII.10.16.
- ²⁸*C’est la confiance*, nos. 18–22, especially 22, receiving Thérèse’s *Act of Oblation*.
- ²⁹CCC 1397: Eucharistic union is tested in mercy and justice toward the visible neighbor.
- ³⁰John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* (11 February 1984), nos. 7–13: suffering is the experience of evil.
- ³¹Job 42:7; John 9:1–3. Divine judgment remains true; affliction alone does not disclose a particular guilt.
- ³²Luke 10:25–37; *Salvifici Doloris*, nos. 28–30, including personal, professional, institutional, and social action.
- ³³Col 1:24; *Salvifici Doloris*, nos. 19–24: participation adds nothing to Christ’s infinite redemptive worth.
- ³⁴CCC 2007–2011, especially 2010, grounds every Christian merit in God’s free initiative and teaches that, moved by the Holy Spirit and charity, one may merit for oneself and for others graces ordered to sanctification and eternal life.
- ³⁵A boundary, not an ascetical prescription: fasting and bodily or devotional burdens are not proofs of greater love.
- ³⁶Gal 4:4–7; Rom 5:5, 8:14–17; ST I, q. 43, aa. 1–3.
- ³⁷ST I, q. 37, aa. 1–2; II–II, q. 23, a. 2; CCC 1996–2000. Participation is received sharing, not partition.
- ³⁸Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 83.3–6. The nuptial idiom is not eroticized.
- ³⁹John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* B 38.2–6 and 39.4–6, second redaction.
- ⁴⁰2 Pet 1:4: sanctifying participation, not absorption, pantheism, or identity of essence.
- ⁴¹1 John 4:7–21, especially vv. 10 and 19: revealed Trinitarian and Paschal truth, never the reversal “love is God.”

A Scope, Method, and Qualifications

A.1 Reader, question, and method

This is Part III of *The Creature Before God*, a discursive moral- and spiritual-theological article for a serious general reader. The trilogy moves from what the creature is, through what the creature must do in justice, to whom the creature ought finally to want. This part argues that the answer is God loved for God's own sake: infused charity as filial friendship, conformity, and union by participation, never absorption.

The article remains independently intelligible, but it assumes the earlier parts' central claims that created existence is continuously received and that justice requires concrete response before affection is mature. It neither retracts those claims nor treats duty as spiritually inferior. Its question is how justice can be perfected without being discarded, how obedience can cease to function as a limiting transaction, and how prayer, sacramental communion, suffering, work, and love of neighbor can become acts of friendship with God.

Source class	Function in the article	Governing boundary
Sacred Scripture	Governs commanded love, the inward law, Gethsemane, friendship, petition, Eucharistic communion, suffering, adoption, participation, and the final Johannine confession.	Scriptural phrases are quoted in the argument; no isolated verse is made to supply a later technical distinction.
Authoritative Catholic teaching	Governs charity and grace, the New Law, prayer and providence, Eucharistic union, suffering and merit within grace, and ecclesial reception of selected saints.	Authority establishes doctrinal boundaries without replacing the article's obligation to argue or turning a prudential application into dogma.
Patristic and Thomistic theology	Supplies law and grace, liberty and friendship, charity as form, filial fear, petition as a providential cause, sacramental effects, and participation.	Exact loci govern; adopted theological syntheses remain distinguished from definitions where Catholic theology permits further schools.
Monastic and mystical witness	Gives lived and literary form to prayer in dryness, unequal reciprocity, Eucharistic hunger, and participated conformity in love.	No extraordinary phenomenon, eroticized report, locution, or contested private revelation is used as evidence.
Project synthesis	Orders the sources around spiritual laundering, objective presence amid dryness, instrumental prayer, duty ripening into desire, and the trilogy's final answer.	These formulations are editorial syntheses and create no new doctrine, private obligation, or diagnostic category.

A.2 Included and excluded scope

Included are the command and infusion of charity; the New Law; Christ's human freedom in Gethsemane; friendship and filial fear; charity's perfection of justice; action before mature affection; a terse boundary for scrupulosity; dryness and the feeling of divine distance; petition, intercession, immutable providence, and secondary causality; the Eucharist as duty, gift, and desired union; suffering, punishment, resistance to removable evil, participation in Christ, merit only within grace and charity, and offering for others without control of their freedom or a guaranteed temporal outcome; ascetical limits; love of neighbor as the expected fruit of love of God; and union as created participation rather than identity of essence.

Excluded are complete treatises on grace, justification, predestination, assurance, providence, the sacraments, moral culpability, spiritual direction, asceticism, the discernment of spirits, mental illness, theodicy, social ethics, or mystical theology. The article does not catalogue ecclesiastical precepts, diagnose a dark night, prescribe penances, decide a

reader's state of grace, promise a temporal answer to prayer, or replace medical, psychological, legal, pastoral, or sacramental counsel.

A.3 Material qualifications

1. Charity can be commanded because union with God is the due end of spiritual life. Coercion does not infuse charity; the commanded act must be voluntary (ST II-II, q. 44, a. 1).
2. Charity is an infused theological virtue and a created habit, not natural affection, emotional intensity, the divine essence, or the Person of the Holy Spirit (ST II-II, q. 23, a. 2; q. 24, a. 2).
3. The New Law is chiefly the grace of the Holy Spirit and secondarily written teaching that disposes persons to grace and directs its use (ST I-II, q. 106, a. 1). "Interior" does not mean private, subjective, or independent of Christ, Scripture, sacrament, and Church.
4. Grace neither bypasses nor coerces the will. God moves voluntary causes according to their voluntary mode; a graced act can be wholly dependent and genuinely the person's act (ST I-II, q. 10, a. 4; q. 109, a. 6).
5. Gethsemane manifests Christ's true human will freely conformed to the Father's will. It does not teach emotional suppression, the goodness of pain as pain, universal physical abnegation, or permission to impose a cross.
6. Friendship with God rests on God's gratuitous communication of beatitude. It implies neither equality of nature nor satisfaction of a divine need (ST II-II, q. 23, a. 1).
7. Charity removes servility, not divine lordship, determinate obligation, or filial reverence. Fear of punishment may remain while filial fear grows; uninterrupted sensible security is not promised.
8. Charity is the form of the virtues because it directs their acts to the supernatural end. It does not erase justice, prudence, religion, their proper objects, or morally relevant circumstances (ST II-II, q. 23, a. 8).
9. "Spiritual laundering" names the project's account of using objectively good actions to claim exemption from conversion. It does not impugn acts performed in justice before affection matures.
10. The parable of the two sons places deed above profession. The article applies that witness to action before mature affection without making interior conversion, right intention, or charity unnecessary.
11. The scrupulosity paragraph is a terse pastoral boundary. It neither diagnoses a disorder nor authorizes disregard of certain obligation; it directs recurrent doubt toward stable, competent judgment.
12. Ontological presence, sanctifying indwelling, sacramental communion, and sensible consolation are distinct. Dryness alone proves neither divine absence nor loss of grace.
13. John of the Cross's dark-night doctrine is used to resist premature self-diagnosis. Dryness may have spiritual, moral, bodily, psychological, or ordinary causes requiring different forms of care.
14. Prayer does not inform omniscience or revise the divine disposition. Providence can eternally ordain prayer as a real created cause of effects (ST II-II, q. 83, a. 2).
15. Transformation of the praying heart is the first response to petition, not necessarily its only effect. Intercession can have real effects outside the person praying while remaining wholly within immutable providence (CCC 2738-2741).
16. Temporal goods may be asked as subordinate goods. No devotion guarantees wealth, relief, marriage, vocation, repaired relationships, or another determinate temporal result, and prayer does not replace proportionate human action.
17. Eucharistic duty and desire are not rivals. Interior hunger neither replaces sacramental communion nor makes external reception fruitful without the dispositions the Church requires.
18. John 6 is read within the Church's sacramental interpretation and the whole Eucharistic doctrine. Reconciliation is mentioned only as the ordinary remedy when serious sin has broken communion.
19. Eucharistic conformity does not erase individuality. Union with Christ opens the person beyond egocentrism toward his ecclesial Body and the suffering neighbor.
20. Suffering is an experience of evil and is not presumptively a punishment for a particular fault. Its possible participation in Christ does not make suffering good in itself.

21. Removable personal and social suffering should be resisted by proportionate human virtue, skill, institutions, and work. Christian participation in suffering is not passivity before preventable evil.
22. Unavoidable suffering may be freely united to Christ without adding to the infinite worth of his Redemption. Seeking help, lamenting, reporting abuse, and receiving care are compatible with that union.
23. Pain has no merit in itself. Christian merit is itself a gift and belongs only to a free act proceeding in grace and charity through participation in Christ. No creature merits the first grace. Such an act may merit for oneself and for others graces ordered to sanctification and eternal life, but it neither controls another's freedom nor guarantees any temporal outcome (CCC 2007–2011, especially 2010).
24. Voluntary penance is bounded by prudence, moderation, health, state in life, duties to others, legitimate authority, and competent spiritual direction. Severe asceticism is treated, if at all, as proper only to cloistered contemplative or closely analogous vocations under competent direction and is never generalized to ordinary Christian life. This is a conservative prudential boundary, not an ascetical prescription or a claim that severity demonstrates holiness.
25. Union with God is a created participation in Trinitarian life, not partition, emanation, pantheism, annihilation, absorption, identity of essence, or loss of personal distinction.
26. Bernard's unequal reciprocity and John of the Cross's conformity in love are compatible: the creature receives the very capacity by which it answers. "Whole" does not mean equal in essence, source, power, or causal priority.
27. "God is love" occurs at 1 John 4:8 and 4:16. It is not reversed into "love is God" or detached from the Father's initiative, the Son's mission, the Spirit, the Cross, the commandment, and the visible neighbor.

A.4 Notes, translations, rights, currentness, and review

The numbered Notes carry citations, exact loci, translation cautions, and qualifications that would interrupt the main movement. They do not contain a missing premise. Scripture appears in short traditional or working-English phrases. Public-domain ANF, NPNF, Eales, and Lewis–Zimmerman witnesses were used as aids for patristic and mystical texts; governing works and exact loci take precedence over web wording. Official Holy See English texts govern citations to the *Catechism* and papal documents. Scripture, official texts, patristic and mystical wording, and third-party translations remain outside the project's CC BY 4.0 grant.

The online witnesses and claim-to-source record were checked through 23 July 2026, including the exact Buffalo 1887 ANF facsimile and raw OCR for the cited Irenaeus passages. No mutable legal discipline or jurisdiction-specific conclusion governs the central argument. This revision received internal source, doctrinal-boundary, merit-within-grace, ascetical-boundary, argumentative, literary, Scripture-quotation, and record-consistency review. Production and artifact evidence for the current source is recorded in the repository research scope. The installed snapshot remains on hold pending renewed exact-snapshot authorization. Independent patristic, dogmatic, moral-theological, Thomistic, mystical-theological, sacramental, pastoral, literary, and ecclesiastical review remains outstanding; no release clearance, imprimatur, nihil obstat, or ecclesiastical approval is claimed.

B References

Sacred Scripture

- Deut 6:4–5; Job 1–2 and 42:7–9; Ps 27:4; Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:26–27; Matt 6:9–13, 21:28–32, and 22:37–40; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 10:25–37; John 6:53–57, 9:1–3, and 15:9–17; Rom 5:5, 8:14–17, and 13:8–10; Gal 4:4–7; Col 1:24; 1 Tim 2:1–4; Jas 5:16; 2 Pet 1:4; and 1 John 4:7–21.
- The confession "God is love" occurs at 1 John 4:8 and 4:16, not in the Gospel of John. It is read within the complete unit's account of the Father's initiative, the Son's mission, the Spirit, the Cross, prior divine love, the commandment, and the visible neighbor; working English witness.

Authoritative Catholic witnesses

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1812–1829 (theological virtues, infused charity, friendship, commandment, form of the virtues, and spiritual freedom), official English; 1965–1974 (the inward New Law), official English; 1992 (justification), official English; 1996–2005 (grace and participation), official English; 2006–2011 (merit within grace), official English; and 2095–2097 (charity informing religion and adoration), official English.
- CCC 2634–2636 (intercession), official English; 2709–2719 (contemplative prayer, Teresa of Jesus, dryness, communion, and acts), official English; and 2735–2741 (petition, filial trust, providence, first transformation, and efficacy), official English.

- CCC 1382–1397 (Eucharistic communion, worthy reception, Reconciliation, intimate union, charity, ecclesial unity, and the poor), official English.
- St. John Paul II, apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* (11 February 1984), especially nos. 7–13, 19–24, and 28–30, on suffering as the experience of evil, innocent suffering, participation in Christ, and effective aid; official English.
- Benedict XVI, general audience of 16 February 2011, on St. John of the Cross, purification, union, and the saint’s concrete Christian life; official English.
- Benedict XVI, homily for Corpus Christi (23 June 2011), on Eucharistic assimilation to Christ, individuality opened beyond egocentrism, ecclesial unity, and love of the suffering neighbor; official English.
- Benedict XVI, general audience of 1 February 2012, on Christ’s prayer and true human freedom in Gethsemane, with reference to St. Maximus the Confessor; official English.
- Francis, apostolic exhortation *C’est la confiance* (15 October 2023), especially nos. 18–27, on Thérèse’s trust, Eucharistic desire, and faith within darkness; official English.

Patristic witnesses

- St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* IV.13.1–4, on fulfillment of the natural precepts, the greater obedience of liberty, and servants made friends; IV.14.1, on service benefitting the creature rather than the God who needs nothing. The Roberts–Rambaut English as printed in ANF volume 1 (Buffalo, 1887) was checked in the exact facsimile; New Advent supplies a distinct revised web presentation: IV.13 and IV.14.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, *On the Spirit and the Letter* 32–36, on external precept, the inward Spirit, and charity fulfilling the law, NPNF working English; *Confessions* X.29.40, for the brief petition asking God to give what he commands; and VII.10.16, as the source received in Benedict XVI’s Eucharistic assimilation account.
- Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John* VII.8–9, on correction, mercy, and acts proceeding from charity, working English; IX.4–6, on fear of punishment and chaste fear within love, working English.

Thomistic framework

- St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 10, a. 4 (divine motion according to the voluntary mode); q. 106, a. 1 (the New Law chiefly as grace); q. 109, a. 6 (gratuitous motion in the free turning toward grace).
- Aquinas, ST II–II, q. 19, aa. 10–11 (servile and filial fear); q. 23, aa. 1–2, 5, and 8 (friendship, created charity, neighbor, and form of the virtues); q. 24, a. 2 (infusion); q. 44, a. 1, especially ad 2 (commanded love and liberty); and q. 83, aa. 1–7, especially a. 2 (prayer, immutable providence, union, temporal goods, and intercession).
- Aquinas, ST III, q. 73, a. 3 (the Eucharist as sacrament of charity); q. 79, aa. 1 and 4–8 (grace, union, charity, and the effects of communion).
- Aquinas, ST I, q. 37, aa. 1–2 (Love as essential and personal name) and q. 43, aa. 1–3 (missions and eternal processions).
- Latin loci checked in the Corpus Thomisticum Leonine-text corpus; the New Advent Summa was used as a working public English index. Work, question, article, and reply take precedence over either site’s wording.

Monastic and mystical witnesses

- St. Teresa of Jesus, *The Book of Her Life* 8.5, on prayer as close sharing with the One who loves us, used through the Church’s reception in CCC 2709.
- St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 83.3–6, on love returning to its source, freedom from servility, and the creature’s unequal answer. Latin witness: Sermon 83; Samuel J. Eales’s 1895 English was used only as a public-domain aid.
- St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night* I.8–10 and II.5–8, on the discernment and passive purification of dryness, with a public-domain working English witness to I.9; and *Spiritual Canticle* B, stanza 38.2–6 and 39.4–6, second redaction, on love in the Holy Spirit and union by participation rather than identity of essence, stanza 38 and stanza 39.

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