

## A Theology of Gift

### *The divine benefactor and universal kinship: questions and insights from theology*

Stratford Caldecott

My topic is a theological appreciation of the notion of “gift”, and how this throws light on what something *is*, which to our usual way of thinking would seem to be a matter for philosophy or science rather than theology. The sense of being as “gift” and ourselves as primarily “receivers” of this gift of existence, which carries with it – by virtue of its very gratuity – a strange kind of obligation to reciprocate, is implied by Pope Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate*, in phrases that some have found obscure.

In section 34 of that encyclical he writes: “*Charity in truth* places man before the astonishing experience of gift. Gratuitousness is present in our lives in many different forms, which often go unrecognized because of a purely consumerist and utilitarian view of life. The human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendent dimension.”

He goes on to argue that the “logic of gift” which is an expression of communion with others must be allowed a place even within economic systems and commercial enterprises, since no human activity exists in a sphere apart from God or separate from ethics. And in section 53 he adds: “Thinking of this kind requires a *deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation*. This is a task that cannot be undertaken by the social sciences alone, insofar as the contribution of disciplines such as metaphysics and theology is needed if man's transcendent dignity is to be properly understood.”

We can better appreciate what he is saying here by reference to a work that Ratzinger wrote back at the end of the 1960s, called *Introduction to Christianity*.<sup>[1]</sup> In it he described how Christianity moved decisively beyond the classical Aristotelian metaphysics by defining the persons of the Trinity as “substantial relations”. For Aristotle, *relation* belonged among the “accidents”, the incidentals or circumstances of being (and in God there are no accidents), whereas substance was the real thing itself. But for Christianity, the “dialogue” in God between the Persons, the *relatio*, “stands beside the substance as an equally primordial form of being.”<sup>[2]</sup> He calls this a “revolution in man’s view of the world: the sole dominion of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality.”<sup>[3]</sup> In this discovery of substantial relations he sees the birth of the concept of “person”, as distinct from the “individual”. It is this that lies at the root of the theology of gift, because if *God is love* the relations must be interpreted as modes of self-giving.

In all this, Pope Benedict is consistent with John Paul II, who had spoken of a new *hermeneutics of gift* or a dimension of gift “at the very heart of the mystery of creation”.<sup>[4]</sup> My own attempt to clarify what might be meant here begins not with Aristotle, nor with abstract notions of being and substance – since I accept the “revolution” in metaphysics which Ratzinger describes as a *fait accompli* – but with what we know of *love*, and with a phenomenological account of gift-giving. There is a considerable literature on which I might have drawn, in which the names Gabriel Marcel

and Jean-Luc Marion are prominent,<sup>[5]</sup> but the approach I have found most helpful is that offered by Kenneth L. Schmitz in his Aquinas Lecture of 1982, *The Gift: Creation*. A former student of Marcel, Schmitz like Marion is also an editor of the journal *Communio*, of which Pope Benedict along with Hans Urs von Balthasar was a founder, and the theology of gift has been a particular theme of this school or movement in theology. In fact it lies behind Pope Benedict's statements in his encyclical.

### Self-Gift

According to the First Letter of John, "God is love" (1 John 4: 8). That is to say, the divine fullness of existence, or the pure and eternal "act" of existing, *esse subsistens*, is an act of loving. It is not simply that God is *worthy* of love, nor just that he *demand*s love or *inspires* it, but that love is *what he is*, in himself. The doctrine of the Trinity could be described as the unfolding of that central insight.

But if love means anything in human experience, it is a seeking to become one, which can only take place by means of an entrusting of oneself to another, and a receiving of the other by the self. Thus humanly speaking, love means self-giving and receiving. We must be extremely careful if we are to make this the beginning of a theology of gift. God is already one, and does not seek to become so. Nor is there another with whom he could unite. All we can say here is that, because we know that *God is love*, the giving and receiving of the self in human experience must bear some analogy to the *way in which* God is *always already one* in himself. I hope this will become slightly clearer as we proceed.

In fact, I think we can even argue that the more perfect an act of giving, the more we can see it possesses a kind of "threefoldness", a faint reflection of the Trinity. Not that we can *deduce* the Trinity from the human experience of love, but we find that the doctrine of the Trinity and human experience do mutually illuminate each other. The Trinity provides us with a hermeneutical key, a reason for seeking to understand the nature of creaturely being in terms of love and gift, which proves to be rather fruitful.

### Giving

Schmitz tries to clarify what exactly we mean by a "gift" – distinguishing it from other phenomena that might be said to occupy the same spectrum, such as an exchange of presents undertaken out of social duty, a bribe intended to elicit a certain behaviour, or a commercial transaction. He highlights the dimension of gratuity and surprise that makes something a pure gift. As he says, what raises even a familiar ritual such as the giving of presents at Christmas or birthdays to the level of gift is the "personal attentiveness" that goes into it. This is what evokes our sense of surprise and joy. I might illustrate this by Galadriel's handing out of gifts to the members of the Fellowship when they leave Lothlorien in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a conventional act of benevolence, expected of a host in such a quasi-feudal society, but the fact that the gifts are carefully chosen according to the precise needs and character of the recipients makes them "gifts" in a fuller sense of the term – in fact, within the story they seem to represent something very like divine grace.

There bring us to another aspect to the gift which is extremely important. A gift is not merely gratuitous, unforced, or unexpected. Nor is it simply a thing whose ownership has changed. There is

a deeper involvement of the giver himself, which may be evidenced by the attention with which it has been chosen or packaged. A gift, we might say, *participates* in the giver, or carries the giver with it. We acknowledge that fact in everyday life by recognizing our need to give *thanks* for what is given, in order for the gift to have been properly received. If we simply grunt or sigh and shove the wretched thing in a corner, we are not treating it as a gift, and the giver may understandably feel like taking it back. It seems that to accept a gift properly opens the self of the receiver to the self of the giver, creating a oneness between them that did not necessarily exist before. It establishes a *communion* between the giver and the receiver. Thus a *true* gift is something that will ever afterwards remind us of the giver's affection. Every gift, in a sense, "has strings attached", and to a large extent human society is held together by these strings.

The reciprocity involved in pure giving, however, is of a different kind from that in purchasing or bartering, where we simply exchange things that are perceived as being of roughly equal value or desirability. In a pure gift, we feel an obligation, and yet it is paradoxically an obligation that does not "oblige" in the strict sense, because if it did we would no longer be free. Many so-called gifts, it has to be said, are not pure gifts in this sense, but attempts to place another in one's debt and thus bring about the behaviour desired by the giver. (No doubt we can all think of examples of this in our own lives.) In a pure gift, as I mentioned, there is first an obligation to return *thanks* – not a payment for the gift but its completion. A gift is not fully given until it is accepted, and it cannot be accepted without the act of thanking, which in a sense "makes room for" the gift. But there is also an obligation to give something *more than thanks* in return, and this fact merits some close attention.

To the degree a gift was *freely* given, the obligation is to give something freely in return; a gift, in other words, of the same pure type. This is where we might locate the quality of superabundance, or creative innovation, associated with giving, which Michael Black refers to as "abduction". The peculiar kind of obligation involved here resembles what Aquinas terms "fittingness" (*convenientia*) rather than necessity. It is a *gentle* obligation, because it does not compel – and indeed we often do not reciprocate at all, without feeling any ill-effects or generating any resentment. Often, direct reciprocation is either impossible or inappropriate. In such cases, we may simply feel obliged to behave in a way that proves us "worthy" of the gift, or that passes it on to others – as, for example a child may not be able to repay its own parents for everything it has received from them, except by passing on the same love to its own children in due course. In fact Schmitz concludes that human life is "impossible without the web of non-reciprocal, unique but mostly anonymous giving and receiving" that we often take for granted and that "communicates the indispensable generosity of life itself."<sup>[6]</sup>

### **Giving in God**

So, after all this, what is a gift? To "give" means intentionally to separate something from myself in order to make it someone else's. I separate it from what belongs to me, I choose it with the recipient in mind, I perhaps wrap it up nicely, and I hand it over. It is no longer mine, as soon as the other has accepted it. At the same time, as I have just explained, there is another sense in which the gift is never "separate" from me at all, even after it has been handed over. It carries me with it, thanks to the spirit of love in which it was offered and accepted. Both are true. I must interiorly detach myself from the gift in order to give it – I must give it without regret, I must not cling to it – and at one and the same time I must put *myself* into the gift.

We can apply this notion of gift first to God, and then to created being. In the case of God, who is self-giving love, we may describe Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as respectively the Giver, Receiver, [7] and the Gift (or the Given). But because this is *self*-giving love, and because God is the one divine Essence, we know that what is given and received in each Person is this very Essence. Giving and receiving is simply another way of describing the interior relationships that constitute the Persons, each distinct from each other though not from the Essence – the Son being “from” the Father (generation), the Spirit “from” the Father and Son as from a single principle (spiration). [8]

So it is the Father not the Essence who gives, but the Father *is* the Essence, and what is given also *is* the (same) Essence. The Father is the source of the Son and the Spirit, but he also receives, since the love he gives is reciprocated, and if it were not perfectly reciprocated it would not have been perfectly given. The Son receives the Father’s love and, as the perfect image of the Father, freely gives all that he has received, namely the one and undivided divine Essence, in love to the one from whom he receives it. In doing so he shows himself to be just as much the divine Essence as the Father is. Finally the Holy Spirit is also the Essence, one and the same Essence eternally already given and received. As a gift *for and from* the Son, and as gift *from and for* the Father, the Spirit is named “Person-Gift” by Blessed John Paul II: [9]

“It can be said that in the Holy Spirit the intimate life of the Triune God becomes totally gift, an exchange of mutual love between the divine Persons and that through the Holy Spirit God exists in the mode of gift. It is the Holy Spirit who is the personal expression of this self-giving, of this being-love. He is Person-Love. He is Person-Gift. Here we have an inexhaustible treasure of the reality and an inexpressible deepening of the concept of person in God, which only divine Revelation makes known to us.” [10]

Of course, the “Gift” is actually not the Holy Spirit but the divine Essence, the substance of God. The Essence itself is the substance of the Gift, one might say. Nevertheless, we are here talking of the Persons in relation to each other rather than of the Essence, and in this context the Spirit is distinguished as Gift, rather than as Giver or Receiver. Similarly, God or the Essence of God can be called “love”, and yet the Holy Spirit may be identified as “love” in a particular way. As John Paul says immediately before the quoted passage, “God ‘is love’, the essential love shared by the three divine Persons,” but still “personal love is the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Father and the Son,” or “uncreated Love-Gift”. And of course we know how often in Holy Scripture we hear of the Spirit being “given”.

Cardinal Ratzinger sums all this up in an article for *Communio*. He writes: “Spirit is the unity which God gives himself. In this unity, he himself gives himself. In this unity, the Father and the Son give themselves back to one another.” [11] Thus the subsistent relations in God are the source and archetype of love, which is an eternal act of self-giving and receiving. [12] The Father and Son do not “cling” to their own nature but pour it out in order to beget and to be begotten. But at the same time, as I explained, there is no real separation because the Giver remains *in* the Gift, which is precisely the gift of *self*. It is as Ratzinger says in *Introduction to Christianity*: the Father “*is* the act of begetting, of giving oneself, of streaming forth” [13] – and so in a sense we might do even better to say that the Father is not so much the “Giver” as the *act of giving*, just as the Son is not so much the “Receiver” as the *act of receiving*, and the Spirit is not the “Gift” as the *act of being given*.

## Created Gift

Of course, all of this has implications for our understanding of created nature – and here we move from theology to ontology. On the basis of a theology of relations, of love, and of gift, we can construct a relational ontology, in which the being of things is a mystery rooted in the self-giving love of the Trinity. Creation is an act of the Trinity, and existence is a participation in the Trinity – a participation in the Trinitarian act of giving, receiving, and being given. Each creature called into existence by God receives its own life as a gift. That sounds as though the entity is sitting around waiting to receive its act of being, but this is not the case. Rather as one might say of someone that he “hit the ground running”, one can say that the entity came into existence receiving. It is all part of the way in which the creature bears a faint resemblance to God. The Son does not have to exist prior to his generation from the Father in order to “be there” in readiness to receive the Father’s self-gift. Rather, his being is itself a receiving, as we have seen.

Here is the deepest basis for the religious sense, which comes to its perfect expression in the ritual of the Mass, in loving gratitude to God (*eucharistia*). The world is not simply an assembly of parts having external relations to each other, like a watch, or a steam engine. There is an interior relation, a “constitutive” relation, of each and every thing to God. The point is explored by David L. Schindler in a recently *Communio* article, “The Given as Gift”.<sup>[14]</sup> Thus Schindler writes:

What the creature most basically is, is a *being-given*. This being-given that is constitutive of the creature implies a receiving on the part of the creature that is just so far also constitutive. What is it that is being-given to, and being-received by, the creature? The answer is, a participation in the self-diffusive generosity of God as good. As Aquinas says, *bonum est diffusivum sui*: it is the nature of the good to diffuse or give itself. The basic truth about the creature, therefore, is its goodness.

It receives “a share in the *giving* characteristic of God’s creative act”. This makes it not only good, but true and beautiful, because all the transcendentals are rooted in this givingness (as the mutually immanent qualities of being as such). The fact that creatures are constituted in relation to God means that they are open interiorly towards an infinite mystery – so that the discovery of being (which is being-given) in a conscious creature such as ourselves takes the form of wonder.

I don’t think we reflect enough on the fact that every created thing begins and ends in God – that time is enclosed by eternity. That very fact is enough to resolve the old question of the relationship of nature and grace, nature and the supernatural. It means that everything has a *telos* or goal, from the moment of its first creation. This *telos*, as Adrian Walker argues,<sup>[15]</sup> is the cause of causes, the unity of the four causes which fold back into it after rendering the cosmos intelligible. It is the radiant “wholeness” which accompanies the creature like a star, reflecting within the particular limits of creaturehood “the inexhaustibility of the divine goodness as always more”.

The metaphysics and theology of gift thus restores a dimension to nature long since stripped away by Nominalism and its successors. It re-establishes the priority of relationship over object, of person over thing, and therefore a sense of natural interiority, of true metaphysical depth, and the wonder that is the root of philosophy.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Economics and Gift

I want to bring us back to earth with the question of what all this does to *economics*, as a way of describing the exchanges of property and changes of value that play such an important role in the social world. Does it really make any difference?

Here let me wheel out another of the *Communio* big guns, namely Cardinal Angelo Scola, who in a recent talk in Venice refers us once again to the theological dimension of *Caritas in Veritate*.<sup>[17]</sup> One of the “most original and yet least understood aspects” of the encyclical, Scola says, is that “the integral development of man must be based on an adequate anthropology in which person and society are seen from their origin, from that which precedes pure doing. Beginning with birth, there is no reality, activity, action, or human initiative whose roots are not sunk deep into an origin that precedes it, or into the ‘astonishing experience of gift’ (*Caritas in Veritate* 34), whose logic ‘as an expression of fraternity’ is not merely invoked to correct *a posteriori* the potential distortions produced by economics, but is ‘also demanded by economic logic’ (*Caritas in Veritate* 36).”

The theology and ontology of gift, applied to economics, overturns completely the model of *homo economicus* that we inherit from the Enlightenment, which is based on man understood as an individual rather than as a “person” in the relational sense. This is the radicalism of the encyclical. That model turns man into a solitary and conflictual actor in the market, an isolated and docile subject of the state, pursuing his own survival, pleasure, and power. The alternative offered by Pope Benedict recognizes man as “originally in-relation”, an “*I-in-relation*”, whose needs and therefore self-interest involve social goods founded on gift and specifically self-gift – trust, generosity, altruism, friendship, cooperation, and charity. Echoing Aristotle in the *Politics*, Cardinal Scola adds,

we could say that there is no human personal good that is not a good received as a gift from others and in turn given responsibly. It is on this compelling concept of *Koinonìa* that Aristotle founds the city, whose aim is not mere survival (as Hobbes claims, thereby precisely restricting the horizon of reason), but the good life: and it is no accident that the good life for Aristotle is at one and the same time that of the individual and that of all, otherwise there is simply no such thing.

The Christian theology of gift, in fact, helps us through contemplation of the Trinity and its relation to the world to rediscover a relational perspective that is both ancient and universal. Man is a relational creature, whose being is received rather than self-made, and whose fulfillment comes through loving his neighbour as himself. This does not mean that we are not also selfish and broken and corrupt, or that we may not lose sight of this fulfillment in a myriad ways, and seek it elsewhere.

In a now classic work called *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*, the poet Lewis Hyde draws attention to, among other things, the history of gift exchange and the notion of usury. Lending is a half-way house between selling and giving, because the man who lends something expects to get it back. Charging *interest* on a loan produces yet another kind of indebtedness, one based less on faith than on fear. Hyde traces the way in which the prohibition on usury was relaxed in a series of stages as the notion of brotherhood was eroded. Lending at interest was not something you could do in a community where relationships were constituted mainly by

gift – so to find a money-lender you had to go outside the community. But with the rise of individualism and the decline of a common faith, the circle of the community shrank to one's own family, or even the boundaries of one's own skin. In those circumstances, lending at least at equity rate became practically universal – and the temptation to demand much higher rates of interest almost irresistible. The problem is that “market relationships and capital let out at interest do not bear the increase-of-the-whole that gift exchange will bear. Equitable trade is not an agent of transformation, not of spiritual and social cohesion. With the vector of increase reversed, interest is self-interest: it does not join man to man except in the paper connections of contract.” [18] The further problem is one that we have seen in the acceleration of mutual indebtedness and the escalation of unrepayable loans.

It is easier to diagnose these problems than to resolve them, but what the Pope is suggesting in *Caritatis in Veritate* is that economic structures – no matter how gigantic and culturally dominant they appear to be – are artifacts, the products of a certain way of thinking and imagining. They can be changed by people who start to think and imagine differently. The more we think about the centrality of gift in our own lives and in the creation of human society, the more we realize that the assumptions of modern economic thought need to be re-examined from the ground up. [19]

We should not underestimate the intransigence of institutions that presently dominate the world. But it may be that a moment such as the present – of economic decline and uncertainty, and even the collapse of certain ideological systems – is precisely a time when new economic paradigms emerge and begin to flourish. The Pope in *Caritas in Veritate* was most concerned not only to speak at a theoretical level about such things as “love” and “gift” (a language that does not easily find its way into the boardroom, as several people have observed), but also to direct attention to some very specific examples of “alternative economic practice”, including consumer cooperatives, microfinance, and the Economy of Communion (which I have discussed further in my blog, “The Economy Project”). He writes that we need *a new way of understanding business enterprise*. “Old models are disappearing, but promising new ones are taking shape on the horizon.” [20] It has been the suggestion of this paper that this “new way” – in whatever language it comes to be expressed – will have its roots in the theology and metaphysics of gift. Nevertheless, it will only gain traction in the so-called “real world” if the business community begins to notice and to see successful enterprises which embody these ideas. Such enterprises, such new types of business, do exist, and the Pope has begun to draw attention to them. We need to do the same.

### ***Further reading:***

[www.secondspring.co.uk/economy](http://www.secondspring.co.uk/economy) and <http://theeconomyproject.blogspot.com> (see especially the commentary on *Caritas in Veritate* in the latter).

## **NOTES**

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[1] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

[2] *Ibid.*, 183.

[3] *Ibid.*, 184.

[4] General Audience 2 January 1980. See *Man and Woman He Created Them* (ed Michael Waldstein, 2006), 179.

[5] Marion seems to want a “God without being”, a God of pure grace, but it seems to me that a gift must have content, and it would make more sense to follow Aquinas in distinguishing the self-subsistent Being of God from the dependent Being of creation (*esse non subsistens*). Perhaps, as Joseph S. O’Leary suggests in Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy, *Givenness and God: Questions of Jean-Luc Marion* (Fordham, 2005), Marion’s approach leads more in the direction of Buddhism.

[6] Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Marquette University Press, 1982), 56.

[7] It should become clear that the Son is not simply “Receiver” without also being a “Giver”. It might be more accurate, though it is more cumbersome, to say that the Father is “Giver-Receiver” and the Son is “Receiver-Giver”.

[8] To expand this slightly: the Son and Spirit proceed from the Father, the one by generation and the other by spiration. Each is nothing other than the divine essence, none of them is other than God, and each can only be distinguished by his relations to the others. They are not three *individuals*, because that would imply the possibility of lining them up to count, positing an external relation to them that cannot exist. The details of this account are in Augustine and Aquinas and are presupposed by Eckhart.

[9] I might add that the necessary separation of gift from giver in order to be given corresponds in the logic of the Trinity to the Spirit’s “otherness” as Person from the Father and the Son – that is, to his being “another Person”. The “superabundance” of true gift is rooted in the ever-greater infinity of God’s Essence and the otherness within the Essence of the three Persons. Thus Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr dare to talk of gratitude and even “surprise” in God – God *surprises* himself.

[10] *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 1986, 10.

[11] Joseph Ratzinger, “The Holy Spirit as Communion: Concerning the Relationship of Pneumatology and Spirituality in Augustine”, *Communio*, Summer 1998, 327. See also [www.communio-icr.com/articles/PDF/ratzinger25-2.pdf](http://www.communio-icr.com/articles/PDF/ratzinger25-2.pdf).

[12] It is worth noting that this theology is controversial in Thomist circles, not least because of the notion that there is “receptivity” in God. But as David L. Schindler and Norris Clark have shown, receptivity here is not an imperfection, and not to be confused with passivity or potentiality. It is in fact a kind of activity. See, e.g., W. Norris Clarke SJ, “Reply to Steven Long”, *The Thomist* 61 (1997), 617-24, where he cites the scriptural sources: “All that I have I have received from my Father” (or, “I have from my Father”); “All that the Father has he has given me.”

[13] *Op. cit.*, 184.

[14] David L. Schindler, “The Given as Gift: Creation and Disciplinary Abstraction in Science”, *Communio* 38 (Spring 2011), 52-102. The quotation that follows is from p. 82. See also the same author’s “The Embodied Person as Gift and the Cultural task in America: Status Quaestionis”, *Communio* 35 (Fall 2008), 397-431.

[15] Adrian Walker, “Original Wholeness: Reflections on the Unity of the Living Being” (unpublished paper, 2011).

[16] Heidegger’s influential critique of medieval “onto-theology” is really a critique of the separation of nature and grace, nature and the supernatural, that took place in late Scholasticism in reaction to nominalism and voluntarism and laid the foundations for the disenchanting, graceless cosmos of modernity. The approach I am trying to describe reintegrates nature and the supernatural by allowing theology to illuminate and reveal the true nature of the “God of the philosophers”, avoiding the misinterpretations of Plato and Aquinas that have become all too common in the literature of postmodernism.

[17] “Good Reasons for a Broader Reason”, given to the ASSET Summer School, Venice, September 2011.

[18] Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (Random House, 1979), 139.

[19] If modernity in its negative aspect is associated with a tendency to favour an active and aggressive attitude over a receptive and contemplative one, then the theology of gift has implications in all the areas where we perceive the fruits of that tendency, and not just in economics. This includes environment and conservation, sexuality and bioethics. It even helps us respond to the challenges of secularism and inter-religious dialogue, and the contemporary crisis in education. It does all this by restoring our vision of nature (including our own nature) as a gift to be appreciated, cultivated, and respected. The theology of gift signifies openness to being, to the whole of reality. This openness lies at the heart of religious experience. Various interpretations, it is expressed in the many cultural traditions we attempt to transmit to future generations. If we are indeed creatures of gift, who find ourselves only by striving to love, then our political and economic structures, our ethics and philosophy, have a single goal: *solidarity through communion*, the common good of humanity in harmony with nature.

[20] *Caritas in Veritate*, section 40.