

August 1991

Our Amazing Dignity: An Address to the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds

Michael J. Himes

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

Himes, Michael J. (1991) "Our Amazing Dignity: An Address to the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 58: No. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol58/iss3/6>

Our Amazing Dignity: An Address to the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds

Rev. Michael J. Himes

Father Himes, associate professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, gave this talk at the 1990 NFCPG meeting.

I am neither a physician nor an ethicist, and so I am presented with something of a quandary when I consider what I am to say to this distinguished gathering. But it occurs to me, as a theologian, that I should speak about what theologians are supposed to speak about professionally: God. Ultimately, I shall try to set your profession, healing, within the Christian tradition and to demonstrate its very deep roots in that tradition.

Speaking about God is a very tricky business. The second commandment of the Decalogue, both in the version in Exodus and that in Deuteronomy, teaches that we must not take the name of the Lord God in vain (Ex. 20:7; Dt. 5:11). Unfortunately, that commandment has too often been trivialized into a prohibition of "bad language." But it is about something far, far more important than that. It is a warning that we must be very careful and very reverent in speaking about God because we may easily find ourselves naming something "God" which is not God. That second commandment is intimately linked to the first commandment against idolatry. It warns us that we must be circumspect about talking about God lightly or conventionally. For the word "God" is a very peculiar word. The fundamental fact we must keep in mind whenever we use it is that finally we do not know what we are talking about. That may seem a strange claim, but it is in fact merely a way of reminding us that the first point which must always be made about God in the Christian tradition is that God is Mystery.

The term "mystery" is used a great deal when we speak about religious matters. We speak of the mysteries of faith, the mystery of the Church, the mysteries of life, death, and destiny of Christ. And yet we speak about them so easily and familiarly that we do not seem to have any hesitation as to our real knowledge and understanding of them at all. We speak of these mysteries as though they were not mysteries at all, as though we know and understand them quite thoroughly. And that is what the second commandment condemns: speaking about the Mystery as if it were not mysterious at all. For once one knows that "the butler did it," the mystery is solved; it ceases to be a mystery.

Few have cautioned theologians and preachers against this danger more insistently than St. Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, much of the beginning of the *prima pars* of the *Summa theologia* is a consideration of the fact that whatever we say about God is always, at least in some ways, inappropriate. Anything we say about God, although true and applicable in some ways, is false and misleading in others. Thus, St. Thomas taught, even the best, truest, and most accurate language about God is analogical, i.e., language which is neither equivocal nor simply univocal (applicable in the same way as it would be to anything else). No statement in the Christian tradition is simply and straightforwardly accurate about God — except, perhaps, that God is Mystery.

The story (perhaps apocryphal) is told of a distinguished theologian earlier in this century who had a favorite technique for introducing new students to theology at the university at which he taught. Invariably the lecture hall in which he was to teach was packed, for he was a famous scholar. On the first day of a new term, he would arrive at the podium, and a great hush would fall over the assembled students in the presence of the renowned scholar. He began by saying very solemnly, “God,” and then paused majestically. After leaving the students in suspense for several seconds, he continued, “Whatever has come into your heads when you heard the word, ‘God,’ is *not* God.”

One's Image of God

That is precisely correct: whatever image or idea the word “God” summons up in one's mind, however good, great, powerful, majestic, loving, wise, however scripturally based or traditionally sanctioned, it is not to be identified with God. Any such identification is idolatry. The best image of God is still only an *image*, and our best images of God are still only *ours*. The first commandment of the Decalogue strictly forbids the making images of God and worshipping them (Ex. 20:4-5; Dt. 5:8-9), yet we all do. We worship our own best images of God, a formula, or picture, or phrase, learned long ago from the catechism, or heard from the pulpit, or remembered from some theology or philosophy course, which we naively and unreflectively identify with God. It is our idol.

In the Hebrew tradition, the parent tradition of Christianity, a profound reason is given for the prohibition of making images of God: it is redundant. Only God can make an image of God — and God has. Indeed, in the very first chapter of Genesis, we read that God has fashioned an image of Godself: “Let us make the human being in our image and likeness” (Gn. 1:26). Therefore any other image is rendered unnecessary. The introduction of the human being as the image of God is prepared with great care in the familiar story in Genesis 1. As the text of the first of the two creation accounts (the other is Genesis 2:4b-24) has stood for 24 centuries, the creation of the universe is spread over six days, and on the seventh day God rests. Each of the first six days has the same pattern: God said, “Let there be

X, and there was X; God looked at X and saw that it was good." This recurrent pattern breaks on the afternoon of the sixth day, the last moment of the days of creation, since God will rest on the seventh day. Having set the universal stage, God now introduces the masterpiece. For the first time, the act of creation is not accomplished simply by God's speaking a command. God is depicted as deliberating: "Let us make the human being in our image and likeness." No deliberation was required for the bringing into being of light or of the firmament or of the dry land and the sea. Presumably, in the imagery of Genesis, such things do not need deliberation. But humanity is the *chef d'oeuvre* of creation. Note, too, that God uses a blueprint or model for the first time; the model is Godself. We are made on the model of Godself and so are the image of God. Consequently, as far as the Hebrew scriptures are concerned, if we seek an adequate image of God, we should look in the mirror or at the person next to us. If we fashion any other image for ourselves, however splendid, and name it "God", then we are taking the name of the Lord in vain.

Same Theme in Story of Adam and Eve

This same theme is taken up in a new way two chapters later, in the familiar story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. What a wonderful piece of story-telling it is! In fact, it is *too* good a story in some ways, for once one gets it into one's imagination, it is hard to get it out again. So some people cannot give up its literal details and insist that 4,004 years ago there were a man and a woman in a garden who had a conversation with a snake. And the tragedy is that, in doing so, they miss the amazingly profound and insightful point that the Hebrew and Christian traditions wish to make about the origins of evil. Where does evil originate, according to our religious tradition? The first answer is, "Not from God". Nor does it arise out of material creation itself. For, as we read again and again in the first creation story, everything comes from God, and God looked at it and pronounced it good (Gn. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 and emphatically in 31). Where then does evil come from? The tradition answers, "From us." But how, and why? Here the Hebrew tradition offers one of its greatest and deepest insights. The first temptation is to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree and so become "like God" (Gn. 3:5). But the first claim about being human in Genesis 1 is that we have been made *like God*. The temptation in chapter three is not to believe what we learned in chapter one. The first temptation is not to accept the goodness of our own creatureliness. Being God is good, being human is not, and therefore humanity can not be the image and likeness of God. Being like God is not a gift which God has conferred on us in the very act of creating us. Likeness to God must be wrested from God. How? Well, for a start, eat this fruit. The origin of evil according to the Hebrew and Christian traditions is not disobedience. Nor is it pride. It is despair, the rejection of the value of being what we are.

As usual, Dante had it right. Carved over the gate to hell, according to

Dante is the injunction, "Leave all hope, you who enter here" (*La Divina Commedia*, "Inferno," III, 9). The entryway to hell is hopelessness, despair. Despair of what? The goodness of being human. Evil is in its root the rejection of the goodness of finite being, according to the Hebrew and Christian traditions. It is of the greatest importance to recognize this because the Good News, the Gospel, is the proclamation of the great event which is the precise reverse of that rejection.

In his letter to the church in Rome, St. Paul wrote of the mystery hidden for ages and revealed in his time and through his ministry (Rom. 16: 25-26). That mystery hidden throughout history and revealed in Christianity may be described as God's secret ambition, which is (dare I say it?) to be exactly what I am. I recognize that this way of formulating the mystery may seem blasphemous. I admit that it is unquestionably daring. But I refer you to an even more daring way to put it. It is found astonishingly in what is perhaps the earliest statement of the Christian faith which the New Testament preserves. As is well known, the authentic letters of Paul predate the gospels, at least in the form in which we now find them, by some years or decades. In the letter to the church in Philippi, Paul seems to cite a hymn, possibly one which he assumed was known to that community. That hymn would then be earlier than the letter itself; if so, it might well be the earliest Christian statement we have. The hymn, or the section of it which Paul quoted, begins, "Although he was in the form of God, he did not deem equality with God something to which to cling, and so he emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, and became as all other human beings are" (Phil. 2:6-7). There is the extraordinary claim which lies at the heart of the Christian tradition: the *Logos* of God, the one who is God as the Father is God, did not cling to being God but has become what we are in every way like us, except sin (Heb. 4:15). This is, I suggest, the most daring statement of the Christian mystery which I know. It is also surely the most astonishing claim about the goodness and dignity of being human that has ever been advanced.

Christians Know Definition

At the risk of sounding arrogant, we might say that we Christians are the only people who know the full definition of "human being": a human being is what God becomes when God chooses to step out of the Godhead. This is, I suggest, a way of restating that most ancient of Christian proclamations, the hymn which Paul quoted so long ago in Philippians 2. And, please note, in its doctrine of the Incarnation, the Christian tradition is reversing the first temptation in Genesis 3.

This is made explicit in the stories of the temptations of Jesus in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13. (Mark 1:12-13 simply states that Jesus was tempted in the desert but gives no narrative.) I find Scripture's belittling of evil's inventiveness to be delightful. The biblical understanding of evil is that it is frightfully real, very dangerous, and rather dense. Scripture allows evil

only one good line; then the devil is reduced to playing endless variations on it. The temptation of the first human beings is the same given to Jesus; in the image often employed throughout the New Testament documents, Christ is the new Adam. The temptation in Genesis 3 is to reject the goodness of finite existence, to believe that being God is alone worthwhile and that all else is worthless. In both Matthew's and Luke's accounts, the temptations begin, "If you are the Son of God . . ." (Mt. 4:3 and 6; Lk. 4:3 and 9). Human beings must go hungry in the desert, but "if you are the Son of God," you need not do so; you can snap your fingers and turn stones to bread. Being human is an unnecessary hardship; if you are God, *be God*. Then, in Matthew's gospel (Luke gives this as the third temptation), Satan takes Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem. Human beings seeking to instruct their fellows must wander the roads of Galilee and Judea, must preach and exhort and persuade, must run the risk of being misunderstood, rejected, and even betrayed. But, "if you are the Son of God", you can overwhelm your audience; leap from the pinnacle of the temple, and when angels bear you up, all Jerusalem will crowd to hear your message. Do not deal with human beings *as a human being*; *be God*. Then (in Matthew's version) the scene shifts to the highest mountain in the world from which can be seen all the kingdoms of the earth. (Note that the gospel writers think in terms of a flat earth: if one reaches a sufficient height, one can see all of it.) The claim is made that the whole earth is in Satan's grasp to be given to whomever he wishes. If the mission of the Son of God is to save the world, then let it be done by asking Satan for it. Let power meet with power; deal with evil *as God*, not as a human being. The temptations are all fundamentally directed against humanity. God is the only good; creatures are trash. And unlike the first Adam, the new Adam overcomes the temptation. He who became human like us in all things except sin will remain resolutely and triumphantly human.

The end of Luke's account of the temptations is especially poignant in this regard. Matthew ends his story with the simple statement that the devil left Jesus and angels came and ministered to Him (4:11). But Luke's conclusion is ominous; he mentions no ministering angels and instead writes that the devil left Jesus "until a more opportune time" (4:13). The signal is given to the reader that another temptation is still to come. And come it does. Lest the hearer or reader miss it, Luke does later introduce an angel who comforts Jesus. The occasion is Jesus' agonized prayer on the Mount of Olives the night before His death (Lk. 22:39-45). This is the more opportune time of which we had been forewarned. And the temptation remains the same, save that it is now put in its sharpest form: being human entails death, possibly death in a most excruciating form. Clearly, death displays the absurdity of creaturely existence. Reject being human; *be God*. And this last temptation of Christ is overcome. But it is a costly victory: Jesus sweats blood in His victory over it (22:44). Embracing finitude with all that it entails — including death — is not done easily.

Rule Given in New Testament

The fundamental rule for Christology, i.e., for thinking and speaking about Jesus' humanity, is given in the New Testament itself: if He became like us in all things except sin, then anything we can say about ourselves that is not sin, we can say about Him. Thus, Jesus could be puzzled, worried, annoyed, discouraged, frightened — for none of these are sins. I cannot imagine that there were not times when Jesus wondered how He had ever gotten *those* twelve as his disciples, when He thought that His whole mission was simply not working, when He was unsure of His next step. Jesus could even make a mistake. It is certainly not inconceivable for the Christian believer that, had Jesus and the disciples come to a fork in the road, Jesus could have decided that Capernaum was 10 miles to the left, and Peter that it was eight miles to the right, and that Peter could have been correct and Jesus wrong. For it is surely no sin to be in error about travel directions, and whatever we can say about ourselves that is not sin, we can say about Jesus. And unless the agony in the garden is to be reduced to an elaborate charade in order to impress a moral lesson on the disciples (and if any claim is blasphemous, that would be!), Jesus certainly was capable of fear and uncertainty. The New Testament is insistent: in the incarnation, God has embraced our humanity *in toto*.

Nor is that embrace finished. That is the point of a familiar image in the tradition — the ascension. Few feasts in the Church's liturgical year are so poorly and unimaginatively celebrated as that of the ascension. Too often it is trivialized into a liturgical "bon voyage" party. The ascension is not about Jesus' departure, for He is with us "all days, even to the end of time" (Mt. 28:20). The key point in the ascension is that it is *not* a disincarnation. Having taken on the form of a servant and become like all other human beings are, Christ did not shed His human nature and return to pure divinity. Rather, He brought His risen humanity into the full glory of the Godhead forever. Employing the familiar imagery of the creed, what "now sits at the right hand of the Father in glory" is a human being like us in all things except sin. The ascension is the feast of the glorification of humanity.

We Christians advance an even more daring claim than the Hebrew insistence that images of God are prohibited because humanity is the divinely fashioned image of God. We claim that we have humanity in common with God, thanks to the incarnation. We share human nature with the second Person of the Trinity. If we wish to become "like God," to become holy, to be more and more fully one with God, then we must be as fully human as we can, for humanity is what we share with God.

Having referred to Dante once, let me turn your attention to the climax of the third section of *La Divina Comedia*, the "Paradiso." When Beatrice leads Dante to the highest heavenly sphere, he is instructed by Bernard of Clairvaux, the great 12th century theologian and spiritual master, who directs his gaze to Mary (XXXII, 85-87). As Dante joyfully looks at Mary, he sees that her eyes are fixed upward and, following her example, he comes

to the climax of the great poem (XXXIII, 40-48). He attempts what no poet can succeed in doing and fails, perhaps a little less than most: he describes the beautiful vision. Awestruck, he writes of the eternal Light which seemed to be three circles whose colors played back and forth among them with the third drawing its light from both of the first two (XXXIII, 1150120). But most wonderful of all to Dante, as he gazed enraptured into the three circles of the eternal Light, he writes that he saw within it what seemed to be "our image" (131). In the beautiful vision, Dante discovered the image of the human being. In seeing God, he discovers what true humanity is. When we see God, we know who we are. The last canto of the "Paradiso" is the height of Christian humanism, the roots of which reach all the way back to the hymn in Philippians 2.

Theologian's Statement

Thirteen years ago a well-known Catholic theologian wrote this remarkable statement: "The name for this deep amazement before the value and dignity of the human person is the Gospel, that is, the Good News. It is also called Christianity." Is it not extraordinary that this theologian here defines the term "Christianity" without making any explicit reference to God? The meaning of the term is, this theologian maintains, an attitude of "deep amazement before the value and dignity of the human person." Now, you may say, this is merely one theologian's opinion; what does it matter? But this theologian happens to be the pope. The quotation is from Pope John Paul II's first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis* (2, 10). Is it not even more extraordinary to find the pope explaining the term "Christianity" without explicitly mentioning God or Christ? But the pope's words are fairly within the Catholic tradition's insistence on the radical reality of the Incarnation.

I must now draw the conclusions to which I have tried to lead you throughout my comments. Central to the Hebrew and Christian traditions is the reverent recognition that God is the absolute Mystery which undergirds and supports all that exists. Only an image fashioned by God can reveal the Mystery. The image which supplants and renders unnecessary all other images of God made by hands is the human being. The root and source of evil in the world is the refusal to believe that high dignity and worth of the human being. The ultimate and unsurpassable affirmation of the human being as the image of God is the free and loving decision of God to express the divine self in becoming one with the image; this is what we Christians call the Incarnation. In the incarnate Lord the fullness of divinity *and* the fullness of humanity are revealed, and sin is both exposed and overcome. Christianity is, therefore, well described as deep amazement before the dignity of the human person. And we are justified, I think, in claiming that it is through our humanity which God has assumed into the Godhead in the Incarnation, that we are united with God, the absolute Mystery. Thus, to become more like God, we must become more and more truly and deeply and richly human.

What a terrible distortion of the Gospel, then, if those around us see Christianity as dehumanizing. That thoroughly non-Christian but immensely witty observer of Christians, Mark Twain, remarked that the reason he was not a Christian was that Christians claimed to be redeemed and he had never met one who looked it. Sadly, the witticism cuts very close to the bone. If we are believers in the Incarnation, we must be people who work constantly and tirelessly for our own full humanization and that of all our fellows. Being Christian is being human publicly, an open affirmation of the depth and amazing worth of human life. This embraces not only all persons but all aspects of human life. Indeed, that is one of the meanings of calling ourselves "catholic" and professing faith in the catholicity of the Church. The faith is catholic not only in reaching out to all persons everywhere at all times, but also to all cultures and in all the dimensions and facets of life in those cultures. No aspect of human life can be remote from the Gospel. In a famous line, the Roman poet, Terence, wrote, "Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto" (*Heauton timorumenos*, 77) - "I am human, and I regard nothing human as alien to me." I suggest that we Christians should recite that line more truly and devoutly than the pagan poet, for we know that being human is what links us with God.

Catholicism Interested in Philosophy

If nothing human is alien to us, it is not surprising that Catholicism is and has long been deeply interested in philosophy. And it should also be interested in physics and chemistry and biology, in general and astronomy and cosmology. Of course, Catholicism should be a support and eager observer of poetry and music, of painting and sculpture and architecture, of dance and drama. And how could Catholicism not be deeply concerned with psychology and sociology and anthropology? All these fields contribute to the enrichment of our humanity, and therefore all are of importance to the realization of the Gospel and the fulfillment of the Church's mission. For Catholicism reverences the whole person.

And so, obviously, Catholic Christianity must see medicine and health care as integral to its mission. How could it not? Care for the sick is not only a "corporal work of mercy," if by that phrase is meant a good deed which is done as a supplement or addendum to our faith. It is not a kind practice superadded to Christianity. Reverent care for the sick and suffering and dying is at the core of the Gospel because the Gospel is an attitude of amazement before the dignity of the human person. I suggest to you as a fundamental rule deeply grounded in our radically incarnational faith that whatever humanizes divinizes, i.e., whatever makes one more fully and authentically human, makes one more "like God," in the terms of Genesis 1. As we seek to honor, enrich, and defend the humanity of others, we become more thoroughly human ourselves.

Therefore, your work as physicians is profoundly Christian, rooted at the very heart of the Gospel, and is salvific. For in your reverence for the humanity of your patients, you deepen your own own humanity and so

grow more and more into the likeness of God. By faithfully living your vocation as physicians, you become ever more fully the image of God in the flesh and so ever more conformed to Christ, the incarnate image of God.

Plunging into humanity means that we will frequently have to deal with partial answers, insufficiently realized truths, unclear solutions. I began by asking you to consider that we are engaged in speaking about Mystery, and so it should not be surprising if we conclude that, as human beings we are always engaged in discovering the implications of our faith in ever new situations. We must never fall into the idolatrous trap of thinking that our best way of formulating the Gospel is *the* only way of formulating it. At the end of his life, St. Thomas Aquinas described everything he had written as "straw," for he knew that all his theology was inadequate to the depth of the Mystery. I find it interesting that Thomas's only subsequent production was his commentary on the Song of Songs. How splendid that at the close of his extraordinary theological career he knew that finally the only response to the absolute Mystery which we name "God" is not finished answers and formulae but a love song.

Our witness to the truth of the Gospel is not supplying absolute answers to questions our contemporaries may or may not ask. Our witness to the Gospel, the attitude of amazement at the dignity of the human person, is to honor that dignity. That may well mean that we are called to share with our contemporaries their struggle for clarity and truth. If you know Robert Bolt's play and film, "A Man for All Seasons", you may recall a statement made by St. Thomas More to his daughter in the second act: "God made angels to show him splendor, as he made plants for their simplicity and animals for their innocence. But he made man to serve him wittily in the tangle of his mind." I think that Bolt has caught the wisdom of that great Christian humanist, Thomas More. We are not made to be splendid or simple or innocent; we are made to serve God by plunging with all our wits into the tangle of our minds. We fail at that service if we deny that our minds are tangled, for certainly our world is, as few know better than physicians. We must enter fully into that murky, sloppy puzzle that is human existence. However much we may long for neat and clear blacks and white, we dwell in a world made up of shades of gray.

And when you find yourself wanting to withdraw from the tangle of human life to a world of certitudes and finished answers, listen very closely and you may hear a slight reptilian hiss. And then you will know that, once again, the ancient temptation is being offered you: do not be human - it is a messy business! be God. I can offer you only the advice of a theologian: resist the temptation. For only in the tangle of our minds, in the murky uncertainty of human life, is God truly served by human beings who resolutely insist on the value and dignity of being human because it is that which unites them with God. In our day, who deals with finer shades of gray than physicians? Who more often find themselves in the tangle of human life? And so, who have a greater opportunity to serve God in the way most proper to human beings? That is an extraordinary vocation. All I can do is applaud you for your embracing it.