The Beauty of a Good Appetite in a Social Media Age

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THE BEAUTY OF A GOOD APPETITE IN A SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

by

Megan Heeder

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of the Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

THE BEAUTY OF A GOOD APPETITE IN A SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

Megan Heeder

Marquette University, 2024

This dissertation provides a theological response to eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction, particularly in light of social media’s influence on women and girls. Theologically, eating disorders may be thought of as conditions produced by a debased version of beauty, a self-transcending rather than self-negating conception of kenosis, and a distorted pursuit of goodness or “misguided moralism” that results. Paying particular attention to the feminine thin ideal and its influence on Western beauty standards, this dissertation engages Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and presentation of kenosis alongside virtue ethics to respond to society’s impoverished vision of beauty and women’s eating-disorder experiences and recovery.

Beginning with current approaches to eating disorders, the opening chapter examines various models of understanding and treating eating disorders. Mining moral, psychological, and social model of understanding eating disorders for their benefits and implications, the dissertation establishes what a theological model must be responsive to, and avoid. The theological tradition’s connection of beauty, goodness, and truth with the divine allows theological aesthetics to act as a corrective to society’s thin-idealized version of beauty and to offer women a positive vision of beauty connected to their telos. Balthasar’s linking of beauty and Christ’s kenosis, contextualized in the community of the Trinity, provides a theological means of redressing the link some women see between feminine obedience and the obedient death of Christ on the cross. It also offers a response to the sense of worthlessness that some girls and women experience when they struggle to align their bodies to what society presents as the ultimate female beauty ideal.

The dissertation concludes with Thomistic virtue ethics’s contributions to a vision of human flourishing, grounded in humanity’s telos and contextualized in grace, that considers the challenges of eating disorder recovery in the context of a thin-idealized society. Two particular contributions of virtue ethics to a theological response to eating disorders reside within its insights into the role of community and moral exemplars, especially in light of social media’s relationship with the thin ideal and the influence of both on girls and women.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have long-awaited the opportunity to acknowledge and thank the many people who have supported me as I discerned and developed in my theological vocation. One of the great joys of completing the dissertation is being able to extend a token of my gratitude to these important people, although the act of placing their names on a written page seems an impoverished way of recognizing the sacred role so many of them have had in the theological journey which has resulted in this work.

The unearned blessing of having a Dissertation Committee composed of four people who I admire not only as scholars, but as theologians striving toward holiness has been one of God’s greatest gifts to me in the past five years. Andrew Kim has been a steadfast supporter of and believer in my work, and was the first to help me explore the parallels between addiction and eating disorders when I served as a TA for a class he taught on the theology of addiction. The many hours we spent in his office discussing addiction, eating disorders, theology, life, and the relationship between all four provided the fertile ground which allowed this dissertation to take root. His incredible generosity with his time—manifested in meetings that unfailingly exceeded the block of time for which they were scheduled, feedback on this and other projects with exacting comments which sharpened my thinking and writing about the topic, and reminders that I am a scholar with something to contribute to the field of moral theology—functions as a model for how I aspire to serve my students. While I also aspire to emulate his success as a two-time (consecutive) international debate champion, his accomplishment remains unmatched to date. Kate Ward is a scholar whose work on virtue ethics in the context of difficult realities I admired since arriving at Marquette. Her guidance not only on how to do virtue ethics, but how to navigate the “behind the scenes” aspects of writing a dissertation and academia has given me the tools I needed to produce this work and progress in my academic career. She has helped Marquette feel like a home to me over the past five years. Conor Kelly possesses a knack for identifying the numerous hermeneutics one could use to explore an issue, and helped me land on the one that I wanted to prioritize in this project. My admiration for him as a person, scholar, instructor, and administrator as Department Chair is rooted in the steadfastness of his orientation to the good of those he serves, and in the thoughtful, warm hospitality he extends to the Department’s students. Jennifer Newsome Martin was one of my first, and most enduringly-admired, professors of Theology. I can still recall the awe I experienced as an undergraduate in her Program of Liberal Studies course as I marveled at her intellect, scholarship, and ability to help others see the beauty that she placed at the center of her work and classes. I am indebted to her for the gift of her mentorship, inspiration, and willingness to critique my work, as well as her wise counsel. She once told me, standing outside Notre Dame Stadium, that earning a Ph.D. required not intelligence, but determination and grit; this truth has propelled me toward the doctoral finish-line more than once.

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stuck with me on Saturday morning long runs consisting of far too much dissertation discussion) and the Our Lady of Guadalupe/St. Patrick’s Parish community, thank you.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Nancy F. Conforti (1932-2023), the nearest embodiment of a living saint I have encountered in my time on earth. To be in her presence was to be in the presence of beauty, goodness, and truth, and to be gently instructed and formed in virtue without words. A proud Milwaukee native and Marquette alumna, her passion for teaching, carried on in my mother, may well be the human source of my teaching and scholarly vocation. May her soul and the souls of all the beloved departed rest in peace, and may she continue to pray for me as I strive to faithfully pursue my vocation as a teacher and scholar.

Megan Heeder
Friday of the Second Week of Lent
National Eating Disorder Awareness Week, 2024
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .............................................................................................................. i

INTRODUCTION

I. IN PURSUIT OF INTELLECTUAL NOURISHMENT ................................................. 1

II. THE ROLE OF MORAL THEOLOGY IN STUDYING EATING DISORDERS ........................................... 3

III. PROGRESSION OF CHAPTERS ....................................................................................... 8

CHAPTER ONE: The Foundation for A Theological Response to Eating Disorders

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 12

II. MORAL MODEL OF EATING DISORDERS ............................................................... 14

A. Sin, Agency, and Responsibility ............................................................... 15

B. The Choice to Use: Social Media and the Feminine Thin Ideal ........ 20

C. Morality Within Eating Disorders ............................................................. 24

D. Benefits of the Moral Model for Eating Disorders ................................ 27

1. Agency and Attention ........................................................................ 27

2. Blame, Growth, and Recovery ............................................................... 29

E. Drawbacks of the Moral Model for Eating Disorders ....................... 30

1. External Factors’ Effects ........................................................................ 30

2. Presumed Unity ................................................................................... 31

3. Tendency Toward Guilt and Shame .................................................... 33

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF EATING DISORDERS ............................................. 35

A. Disease Model .......................................................................................... 35

1. Benefits of the Disease Model for Eating Disorders ....................... 39
2. Drawbacks of the Disease Model for Eating Disorders ........42
   a. Treatment Effectiveness.....................................42
   b. Risk of Removing Agency .....................................43
   c. Exclusivity of Diagnostic Criteria ...........................44

B. Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS) ..........................47
   1. Benefits of IFS for Eating Disorders ..........................50
      a. The Role of Relationality ....................................50
      b. Transformative Potential on a Natural Level ..............53
      c. Avoiding Pathologization and Assumed Unity ............54
   2. Drawbacks of IFS for Eating Disorders .....................55
      a. Mis-Characterization of Christian Theology ..............55
      b. Elimination of Possibility for “Higher” Integration ...56

IV. SOCIAL MODEL OF EATING DISORDERS ........................57

V. THEOLOGICAL MODEL OF EATING DISORDERS ................65

VI. CONCLUSION ................................................................68

CHAPTER TWO: Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics as an Answer to the Thin Ideal

I. INTRODUCTION ..................................................................70

II. FORM, SPLENDOR, AND SEEING IN BALTHASAR’S CRUCIFORM AESTHETICS..........................71
   A. The Relationship Between Goodness and Beauty ............71
   B. Splendor and Form ......................................................77
C. Christ, Form, and Beauty ................................................................. 79

D. Consequences of Balthasarian Beauty for Understanding the Human Person........................................................................ 82

E. Beauty and Goodness: Critiquing the Thin Ideal .......................... 86

III. RIGHTLY-ORDERED OUTPOURING: THE TRINITY’S RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST’S KENOSIS ................................................................. 92

A. The Relationship Between Trinitarian Persons .............................. 94

B. Three Insights from Balthasar ...................................................... 97

1. The Role of the Economic Trinity in Understanding Beauty ....... 97

2. Theological Anthropological Implications of the Trinity ...... 100

3. Love Calling the Other Toward Encounter ................................. 106

C. Implications of Trinitarian Nature for Eating Disorder Recovery .... 108

IV. BALTHASAR’S THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND ETHICS: LINKING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND MISSION ........................................................................ 111

A. Learning to See Differently ......................................................... 112

B. The Ethical Implications of Balthasar’s Aesthetics and the Form of Christ ................................................................................ 115

C. The Role of Human Freedom in Mission .................................... 121

V. CONCLUSION .................................................................................. 124

CHAPTER THREE: Christ’s Kenosis, Love, and Worth: Taking on the Eyes of Christ

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................ 127

II. TRINITARIAN AND CHRISTOLOGICAL KENOSIS .................... 128

A. Balthasar’s Feminist Problem ...................................................... 133

B. Self-Sacrifice ............................................................................. 136

C. Power in Vulnerability and its Relevance for Eating Disorder Recovery .................................................................................. 139
D. The Unique Nature of Christ’s Kenosis .......................................................... 141

E. Of Creation, Christ, and the Trinity: Sexual Difference as the Key to Balthasarian Kenosis .......................................................... 142

   1. Trinitarian Difference and Distance ................................................ 148

   2. Polarity and Identity ................................................................. 149

   3. The Cross in Context ............................................................... 149

III. KENOSIS, LOVE, AND WORTH: A RESPONSE TO EATING DISORDERS ................................................................................. 151

   A. The Trinity’s Communal Nature and Human Anthropology ......... 151

   B. Creation, Kenosis, and Divine Love ........................................... 153

   C. The Trinity’s Personhood, Human Community, and Eating Disorder Recovery ................................................................. 159

   D. Taking on the Eyes of Christ: The Spiritual Senses and the Thin Ideal ............................................................... 162

IV. CONCLUSION ......................................................................................... 169

CHAPTER FOUR: Flourishing, Fulfillment, and Food: The Pursuit of Virtue

I. INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 172

II. VIRTUE ETHICS AS A RESPONSE TO EATING DISORDERS IN A SOCIAL MEDIA AGE .......................................................................................... 174

   A. Why Virtue Ethics? ........................................................................ 174

   B. The Role of Desire ....................................................................... 177

      1. Moral and Theological Virtues .............................................. 179

   C. Connatural Knowledge and Habit ............................................. 184

III. GRACE AS A RESPONSE TO MISGUIDED MORALISM ............. 191

   A. Haile’s Response of Restraint ..................................................... 196
IV. THE POSSESSION OF VIRTUE AND THE THOMISTIC UNITY THESIS ................................................................................................................................. 197

A. Levels of Virtue .................................................................................................................. 199

B. The Unity Thesis, Prudence, and Temperance ................................................................. 201

   1. Thomas’s Unity Thesis .................................................................................................. 201

   2. Prudence as Guide ....................................................................................................... 203

   3. Temperance and the Appetite ...................................................................................... 204

C. Applying the Unity Thesis, Prudence, and Temperance in Recovery .............................. 207

V. THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN VIRTUE DEVELOPMENT AND RECOVERY ......................................................................................................................... 209

A. The Separation and Re-integration of the Self ............................................................... 210

B. Moral Exemplars on Earth and in Heaven ................................................................. 213

VI. CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................. 220

CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................... 223

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................. 229
INTRODUCTION

I. IN PURSUIT OF INTELLECTUAL NOURISHMENT

As an undergraduate at the University of Notre Dame, I sat down to search the library databases for academic resources that engaged the Catholic tradition to respond to eating disorders. In my first year as a collegiate athlete, I became aware of many fellow athlete’s struggles with eating disorders and disordered eating; that spring, a senior captain on my team would send the whole team a Runner’s World article on the then-new (2012) phenomenon of disordered eating, asking us all to read and reflect on it. The more I grew in relationship and intimacy with my teammates, the more willing they became to share their struggles with food, eating, and their bodies. They asked questions about how they chose to fuel their bodies (or not) were relevant to faith, and I wondered if the Christian tradition had anything to say to them. I started googling, and found a handful of religious blogs citing 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, reminding women that their bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit and should be treated (and nourished) as such.

Searching for something more, I decided to search the many theology and religion databases to which the Hesburgh Library afforded access. Despite using increasingly general terms, trying a variety of keywords, and progressing through each of the available databases, my searches returned zero results. Frustrated, with the starry night sky visible through the windows, I resolved to look again “when I had time,” though my work load prevented this for years.

Returning to this question nearly six years later at Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry as I pursued my M.T.S., I realized that it was not my database-searching skills that were lacking, but rather that a lacuna existed within the Catholic
theological landscape. In the years that separated my undergraduate career at Notre Dame and my doctorate at Marquette, young girls’ and women’s struggle to reconcile their bodies with cultural beauty standards has intensified as smartphones and social media apps exploded in popularity, becoming ubiquitous parts of daily life. The Covid-19 pandemic intensified things further, featuring both a rise in teenagers’ eating disorder rates and social media use, particularly what researchers identified as problematic social media use.¹ Current data indicates that 51% of teenage girls spend at least four hours on social media each day; older teens spend up to 5.8 hours daily on it.² The amount of time people spend on their phones, especially young people, demands that theology take seriously the influence of images and social media engagement on human flourishing.

Before recently being surpassed by opiate addiction, eating disorders were the deadliest mental illness in the United States. I believe that the Catholic intellectual tradition boasts a rich, plentiful store of resources to shape a theological response to eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction (which is both its own challenge and often contributes to eating-disorder formation) in a digital age. This dissertation represents an initial Catholic theological response to eating disorders that upholds the Tradition’s rich complexity and beauty while responding to the contemporary, media-driven experiences of girls and women as it relates to eating, food, and their bodies.

II. THE ROLE OF MORAL THEOLOGY IN STUDYING EATING DISORDERS

Studying the theology of addiction in my doctoral coursework made me aware of the similarities between eating disorders and addiction, and introduced me to the possibility that virtue ethics could respond to the challenges that girls and women face in recovering from eating disorders. I was particularly intrigued by the potential contributions of virtue ethics to a theological response to eating disorders in light of the fact that unlike other addictions, an abstinence model is impossible. To further complicate recovery, girls and women must continue to live in a society that prioritizes thinness such that seeing images of women embodying extreme thinness is likewise impossible. It is even less possible to scroll a social media app (or in many cases use the internet) as a young woman without algorithms, having identified one’s sex and age, suggesting weight-loss ads, videos by influencers hawking the latest diet aid or talking about their experience losing weight with Ozempic, or encouraging one to consider trying a new fitness craze. What are girls and women to do in such a toxic environment? How should they live so as to defend themselves from an environment that wants to convince them that the thinner they are, the prettier they are? Or, perhaps more realistically, how are they to cultivate virtue after internalizing messages about their bodies, food, and eating which have led them to a state of unease within their own bodies, and perhaps to one degree or another of body dissatisfaction, unhealthy exercise routines, or eating disorder symptomatology?

Reading Beth Haile’s dissertation, “A Good Appetite: A Thomistic Approach to the Study of Eating Disorders and Body Dissatisfaction in American Women” convinced me of the relevance of virtue ethics to the realities of girls and women striving to live
within what eating disorder researchers term a “thin-idealized culture” in which an unhealthy standard of thinness is the ideal for beauty. However, Haile’s dissertation was published before it was normative for everyone, including teenagers with developing and impressionable brains, to have smartphones, and prior to the explosion of social media now a ubiquitous part of daily life. Considering the implications of social media use on girls and women, especially in a thin-idealized society, necessitated building upon and rethinking some of Haile’s conclusions centering on developing virtue by carefully moderating what one sees. Managing what one sees as one scrolls through social media is a near-impossibility, and a social-media or internet abstinence model is at best impractical and isolating, and at worst impossible.

Using moral theology as the primary lens for developing a response to eating disorders within a social-media age requires identifying the role of agency, sin, and responsibility therein. Eating disorders are complex, spanning the field of medicine, genetics, psychology, trauma studies, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, among others. Bringing a moral lens to a challenge like eating disorders, which threatens the lives of some and the ability to flourish of everyone who struggles with them requires exactitude and an awareness of the pastoral implications of this theological undertaking. However, bringing a moral lens to eating disorders is not unprecedented; Simona Giordano’s *Understanding Eating Disorders: Conceptual and Ethical Issues in the Treatment of Anorexia and Bulimia* brings an ethical lens to clinical

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3 Haile’s 2011 dissertation represents the only explicitly Catholic theological insights on eating disorders I’ve identified to date. I remain deeply indebted to her for her truly groundbreaking work, and the beautiful witness of her life as a moral theologian. May she rest in peace.

eating disorder treatment paradigms. She critiques the “strong paternalism” present in hospitals wherein doctors make decisions based on the assumption that eating-disorder patients lack full autonomy, but her text is limited to eating disorder treatment within a clinical framework. Giordano’s clinical context is limiting, especially when considering the proliferation of disordered eating wherein women or girls present eating disorder symptomatology at levels below clinical threshold. Disordered eating behaviors, despite not meeting eating-disorder symptom thresholds, nonetheless impact women and girls’ health or quality of life; in addition, it is important to realize that most women and girls with eating disorders or disordered eating will never seek or receive clinical treatment. A medical or clinical framework fails to account for these and other parts of the experience of eating disorder development or disordered eating, including the role of community in eating-disorder development and recovery, faith or spirituality, or one’s purpose and values.

Spirituality is central to Michelle Mary Lelwica’s book *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimension of Eating Problems Among American Girls and Women*, which identifies spiritual fulfillment as the central desire behind women and girls’ focus on thinness and eating. Her work views eating disorders and disordered eating as existing on a continuum, an insight that Giordano’s text lacks, and her argument addresses the complex relationship between the behaviors of girls and women and the influence of contemporary culture on those behaviors. Giordano and Lelwica’s texts, as well as Haile’s engagement with them, help to establish the foundation for a moral theological

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response to eating disorders in a social media age. Taken together, their work presents a vision of eating disorders that involves personal volition, not as mental illnesses that are wholly unwilled or involuntary, thereby meriting moral engagement. Addressing the role and influence of beauty ideals, especially within a thin-idealized society, is imperative to this ethical project.

It is clear that addressing eating disorders requires moving beyond hospitals, clinics, and even therapeutic practices into the daily realities of living in a culture that prioritizes thinness and fitness, and the interior lives of girls and women. Haile takes the first step in addressing this, pre-social media, but this project also requires interrogating the societal standard of beauty which girls and women long to embody. Asking what true beauty is, and what embodied beauty looks like for girls and women is necessary to live virtuously in a thin-idealized society. In other words, I believe that rightly understanding and being moved by the truly beautiful is a healing balm for girls and women struggling with eating disorders. I also believe that beauty is intimately connected to one’s telos, the flourishing that human persons desire, and both eating disorder recovery and learning how to exist as a woman in a world that over-emphasizes physical appearance. These beliefs make it necessary to turn to theological aesthetics in order to identify who and what Beauty is, and how orienting one’s life to Him changes both the way one sees the world around them, and themselves. This then changes how one lives.

The most well-developed theological aesthetics in the Catholic intellectual tradition is found within the prolific writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar. He identifies beauty as the starting place for his Trilogy, wherein he argues that beauty is the entry point for understanding goodness, truth, and the relationship between all three
transcendentals. While not a moral framework, Balthasar’s theological aesthetics offers a foundation for understanding beauty and redressing society’s thin-idealization. In addition to reorienting people to an understanding of beauty grounded in God’s glory, his Trinitarian theology also grounds it in God’s Being. This work has implications for the role of relationship and community in developing a moral theological response to eating disorders. His presentation of kenosis clarifies the deep love at the heart of God’s outpouring of self, both within the Trinity and in the Incarnation and Christ’s death on the cross. The theological exploration of the love behind the kenosis of creation, the Trinity, and the Paschal Mystery is intellectually responsive to the experience of worthlessness that many women grapple with in light of failed weight-loss attempts or the thin-idealized narrative that they are worth less if their bodies do not reflect the extreme-thinness of contemporary beauty standards. Balthasar’s treatment of the spiritual senses within his theological aesthetics offers a concrete articulation of how orienting oneself toward Christ within the context of relationship can affect one’s physical senses, such that one begins to see the world around them in a different manner. Each of these features of Balthasar’s theology contributes to a theological means of both understanding and responding to the experiences of girls and women with eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction within the context of a thin-idealized, digital-driven society.

Bringing Balthasarian insights on beauty, kenosis, and the spiritual senses into the context of moral theology provides new insights to the field of moral theology and supplies a foundation to develop principles for how girls and women might exist in a thin-idealized world and how they might progress in their journey of recovery from
eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction. Understanding eating disorders as a psychosocial phenomenon with a moral dimension offers those who struggle with them a new way of understanding their experiences and unique tools for recovery. It expands the field of moral theology as it engages other disciplines’ contributions to a theological response to eating disorders, and how eating disorders shed light on the pursuit of virtue in the context of a structure of sin like a thin-idealized society. I propose in this dissertation that Thomas Aquinas’s virtue ethics, particularly his thesis on the unity of the virtues, offers valuable resources for understanding the nature of flourishing within sinful structures and eating disorder recovery. Together, theological aesthetics and virtue ethics illuminate new contributions to the study of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, in addition to offering more general insights about the morality of social media and internet use and how both affect human flourishing.

III. PROGRESSION OF CHAPTERS

Chapter One: The Foundation for A Theological Response to Eating Disorders

This interdisciplinary dissertation takes seriously the contributions of other fields, especially addiction studies, in its development of a theological approach to eating disorders. The goal is not to supplant all other approaches to eating disorders, nor to supply a theological “silver bullet” solution for eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in a social media age. The first chapter provides an overview of the benefits and drawbacks of three models for understanding eating disorders (the moral, psychological, and social model) in order to establish what a theological model for understanding eating disorders must both prioritize and avoid. This chapter frames eating disorders as existing on a continuum ranging from intermittent engagement with disordered eating or struggles
with body dissatisfaction (which may or may not preclude changes in one’s relationship to food) to eating disorders like anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa which may result in hospitalization.

Chapter Two: Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics as an Answer to the Thin Ideal

The second chapter provides an overview of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and the relationship between beauty and God’s Being. It identifies the role of splendor and form in Balthasar’s presentation of beauty, which not only undergirds his sense of the relationship between beauty and God’s glory, but also provides tools for critiquing contemporary, thin-idealized conceptions of beauty. Balthasar’s presentation of the link between true beauty and God’s glory, the summit of which he identifies as Christ’s death on the cross, also requires examining the nature of the Trinity and its connection to Christological kenosis. The nature of the relationship between Trinitarian persons and Christ in his death on the cross provides theological insights into the experiences of isolation from others frequently experienced by women struggling with eating disorders or disordered eating. The role of encounter and relationship with Christ is both responsive to the isolation which results from eating disorders, and offers Christ’s own experience of forsakenness by the Father as a means by which women’s experiences are encompassed by divine life, and by which they witness the great love of the Trinity. The final section’s treatment of the relationship between Christian identity and mission explores how divine glory functions not only as a source of beauty, but as an ethical framework which transforms how one sees and thereby lives in the world.
Chapter Three: Christ’s Kenosis, Love, and Worth: Taking on the Eyes of Christ

Transitioning from the kenotic nature of the Trinity to the Christological, this chapter focuses on Christ’s kenosis. Placing Christ’s death and self-outpouring at the center of theological response to women and girls’ experiences of eating disorders necessitates addressing the challenges that feminist scholars pose in regards to Balthasar’s theology of sex and gender, as well as his claim that Christ’s obedient suffering on the cross is the glory of God. Understanding the vulnerability present in Christ’s kenosis provides an avenue toward responding to these feminist critiques, as does establishing the uniqueness of the Christological kenosis of the cross. The work of Jennifer Newsome Martin establishes a more robust set of implications of Christological kenosis: the unique goodness of the created body, the difference which makes relationality possible, and the nature of the cross as a kenotic mode of divine love to provide a threefold, balanced response to feminist scholars’ concerns about Balthasar’s work.

Foregrounding Trinitarian love in the context of the cross responds to the worthlessness with which many women struggle. Martin’s contributions underscore theological anthropological claims about the body’s goodness and the role of difference in the Trinity, which continue to develop the prior chapter’s insights on the theological role of relationship in eating disorder recovery. The chapter concludes by exploring Balthasar’s conception of the spiritual senses, their relationship to the physical senses, and the manner in which engaging that relationship might contribute to both eating disorder recovery and the development of virtue within a thin-idealized society.
Chapter Four: Flourishing, Fulfillment, and Food: The Pursuit of Virtue

Finally, building on the aesthetic and kenotic implications of Balthasar’s theology in the context of women and girls’ struggles with and recovery from eating disorders, the final chapter turns to the contributions of Thomistic virtue ethics toward developing a theological response to eating disorders. After examining how women can desire something that they know to be misaligned with their telos or harmful to their health and exploring the contributions of Aquinas’s treatment of desire and connatural knowledge to understanding this intellectual paradox, the chapter turns to a consideration of grace’s role in virtue. The necessity of grace for developing virtue is responsive to the paradigm of “misguided moralism” in eating disorders, which describes women’s pursuit of goodness through thinness or controlling their food intake. Aquinas’s belief that grace is necessary to grow in virtue frees women from the belief that they can earn goodness through thinness. His unity thesis also offers a practical manner for women struggling with eating disorders to grow in temperance by means of developing the other virtues. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the role of community in developing virtue in the context of eating disorders, specifically how community helps one to know themselves in light of their telos, and the role of moral exemplars in virtue ethics and eating disorder recovery.
CHAPTER ONE:
The Foundation for A Theological Response to Eating Disorders

I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to establish what a moral, psychological, and social approach to eating disorders contributes to the development of a theological approach to eating disorders. A theological approach to eating disorders adopts some aspects of each of these models, utilizing them in different ways, while rejecting others; the goal of this chapter’s sections is to establish the basics of each model, what will be utilized and left behind, and why.

The context of this exploration is one in which thinness can be considered as a near-ubiquitous American religion. American women are obsessed with losing weight and transforming their bodies. Roberta Seid indicates that diet books are the highest-selling book genre, the Bible notwithstanding, and reflect a new religious creed: “Watch your weight, eat right, and exercise.”¹ The desire for thinness is creating what Kim Chernin calls a “tyranny of slenderness,” and Seid names as a new and threatening societal aesthetic:

Behind the growing dominance of the exercise regime and health (and health-food) consciousness were new standards of beauty, far more exacting and more body aware than ever before. A woman now had to be thin and boast a firm body with all adipose tissue taut and shaped. Paradoxically, in this decade of change—of permissiveness and personal liberation, of reverence for the natural, of resistance to superficiality and conformism, and especially, of Women’s Liberation, when all traditional notions about women were challenged—a compelling standard of female beauty emerged, one that locked women into war

with their own bodies. The health and exercise ethic sanctified and intensified their preoccupation with fat, food, and fitness—and with physical perfection.²

Ascribing to Seid’s picture of female beauty is the default for American girls and women, and begins early.

While one approach to this problem might be an education that counters such an irrational presentation of beauty, knowledge alone proves insufficient. Data indicates that interventions, even those begun in elementary school, are ineffective at challenging a cultural beauty narrative that demonizes fat. Women’s bodies are biologically ordered toward procreation, which means that the healthy female body must have enough fat or adipose tissue to support proper hormonal function and maintain the health of mother and baby. Smolak, et. al. educated elementary-age students on how to assess media messages, coupled with nutritional and diet information and self-esteem and obesity-stigma resources with the goal of addressing their negative view of fat.³ This intervention had little effect on students’ body image or their eating behaviors and attitudes. An approach beyond the intellectual or knowledge-based is necessary to address the challenge of eating disorders, disordered eating habits, and body dissatisfaction.

A theological approach is capable of recognizing the human person’s moral and rational dimensions, but in a manner that avoids the reductionism of merely rationalistic or moralistic approaches. The present chapter develops a personalist Catholic theological approach in four parts. Sections II through IV present three models (moral, psychological, and social) commonly referenced in addiction literature, engaging them in

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² Roberta Seid, *Never Too Thin*, 211.

light of eating disorders. Considering the benefits and limitations of each approach informs a balanced theological approach to eating disorders. In Section V, I cast the problem of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction theologically, exploring how such an approach is transformative for women, girls, and the field of theology. A moral theology which is attentive to the life of grace can shed light on the problem of eating disorders and be responsive in ways that other paradigms cannot.

II. MORAL MODEL OF EATING DISORDERS

In this section, I examine the benefits and drawbacks of applying a moral model to eating disorders. An approach to eating disorders informed by a moral model places responsibility and culpability for developing an eating disorder on the individual. According to the moral model, the activity leading to the formation of an eating disorder is to some degree morally blameworthy; similarly, if the individual decides to be healthy and stop restricting, binging, over-exercising, or engaging in myriad other strategies to exert control over their relationship with food, then they have the moral power and agency to do so in this view. At the crux of the moral model is the individual agent’s ability to decide to change, detach from their unhealthy devotion to eating disorder behaviors, and pursue a healthy relationship with food on the road to recovery.

This section details three theological benefits and drawbacks in a moral approach to eating disorders. The first benefit is that the moral agent retains his or her agency, and is not made a victim of circumstance, genetics, or other factors in regards to how their eating disorder developed and their ability to recover. Second, the agency of the individual can be applied in the realm of attention, which is particularly important in light of social media and the thin ideal’s role in forming desire. Finally, if one adopts an
understanding of agency that is attenuated, then the moral model’s implications align with Mike W. Martin’s claim that there is room for a healthy understanding of blame in growth and recovery. The three drawbacks of the moral model provide insights into what a theological approach to eating disorders must prioritize and address. First, the moral model takes insufficient consideration of external factors’ effects on the likelihood of developing an eating disorder. Second, a purely moral model does not accurately account for the disunity of the human person. Third, applying the moral model to its full extent results in a framing of blame and its relationship to responsibility which is likely to impede recovery.

A. Sin, Agency, and Responsibility

While the moral model is not necessarily informed by theological presuppositions, a moral theological approach to eating disorders requires a well-formed conception of sin and understanding of its relationship to both agency and responsibility. William McDonough points out the challenges of Christian conversations about sin. Referencing Servais Pinckaers, McDonough notes that the moral theological approach of recent centuries has focused on obedience and obligation, developing an understanding of sin shaped by legalism.4 James Keenan names the challenge of moral theological approaches to sin as being located in the classical Christian ethic’s lack of a distinction between a wrong act and bad motivation that results in sin.5 Timothy McMahan King explores the question of what to do with the concept of sin in relationship to addiction

which remarkably parallels eating disorders. He notes that when applying a moral model to addiction, agency over sin is located with the individual struggling with addiction. “Why don’t people just choose to get better?” is a commonly heard refrain amongst those whose view of addiction is informed by the moral model. If recovery is conceived of as a conscious choice, an individual struggling with addiction or an eating disorder is actively choosing to either continue with their unhealthy behavioral pattern or to seek to recover. This choice may take place repeatedly, day-by-day or minute-by-minute, within a difficult context.

Free will is privileged over hard or soft determinism in this view. As King points out grappling with the moral model, addiction according to moral model proponents is fundamentally “a choice that we make to become addicted and a choice we must make to overcome.” King’s presentation of the moral agent’s responsibility within the moral model contrasts with the idea that attenuated free will can reduce or even remove culpability depending on the degree of attenuation. In other words, free will’s function can be understood as a light switch (acting rightly or not as in King’s earlier description of the moral model) or a dimmer switch (in which free will can be more or less free depending on interior or exterior circumstances which impact the measure of responsibility for a moral choice). The moral model holds that choices one made which

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6 Some addiction researchers identify eating disorders as types of addictions. Regardless of whether one classifies eating disorders as addictions or not, there are significant similarities and overlaps in the experiences of addiction and eating disorders which makes the models used for researching and understanding addiction helpful in the quest to do the same for eating disorders.


8 King, *Addiction Nation*, 156.

led to the development of an eating disorder or addiction likely led to the formation of a habit, which is admittedly difficult to re-form. But, under the moral model, the agent’s free will was exercised in the initial choices that led to the point at which a habit has been established. Thus, the agent is responsible for those choices, many of them classified as sins, and the results of them, including the habits those choices formed. In short, sin has consequences, and one of those consequences can be addiction.

While a moral model may seem a puritanical remnant of outdated approaches to addiction, McDonough’s analysis of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) reveals the moral model at work therein, pointing to the prevalence of this manner of thinking about moral responsibility and blame today. In The Big Book (written in 1939 by co-founder Bill Wilson), which guides participants through the process of recovery, AA recognizes that the addict has lost control of their actions. This recognition is shared by the Catechism, which will be discussed more extensively at the end of this section. However, AA frames this lack of control as a response to life’s difficulties for which the individual is responsible. McDonough cites AA’s framing of the alcoholic’s situation in this way:

Having responded (culpably!) to her life’s difficulties with self-pity and resentment, the alcoholic reaches a point after which she has lost control of some of her actions. In taking her ‘moral inventory’ (AA's fourth step) the alcoholic is not urged to focus on her drinking, over which she has become powerless, but instead to go back to its ‘root,’ the deadly sins through which she began to lose control of her life, and ask for help there.

While AA does not identify alcoholism as sinful, it holds that where addiction is present, deadly sins exist behind it. Moral failure is found not in addiction, but elsewhere, in

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actions that precede the addiction; AA’s view is that addictions are non-sinful symptoms of sinful acts. AA claims that regaining an understanding of one’s self as not-God, and in need of help from a higher power is the first step in recovery, in moving away from sin and toward the ability to regain power over one’s own life.

A moral approach to addiction is a part of the AA recovery paradigm and is also apparent in accounts women offer when recounting social commentary on their experiences of eating disorders. Women struggling with binge eating disorder or bulimia are counseled to engage their willpower and make the choice to eat healthier, and their problematic relationships to junk food, unhealthy/fast food, or binging will go away. Understanding eating disorders as a choice that is rooted in the exertion of free will echoes the patterns McDonough identifies in AA literature and King cites in his text on the phenomena of addiction in the United States, as well as the ancient logic of sin found in John 9:2: “His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” A moral approach to eating disorders is similarly present in the experiences of women struggling with eating disorders in American society, and also carries implications for the role of the feminine thin ideal in eating disorder formation.

In From Morality to Mental Health Mike W. Martin presents a middle way, arguing that moral and therapeutic approaches are best engaged together. His integrated, moral-therapeutic perspective is based on three claims: that “(1) sound morality is healthy; (2) we are responsible for our health, mental as well as physical; and (3) moral

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14 Those struggling with anorexia report being confronted with the question, “Why don’t you just eat?” or overhearing, “Why doesn’t someone buy her a hamburger and fries?” on a regular basis.
values permeate psychotherapy and conceptions of mental health.”\textsuperscript{15} Martin clarifies that the therapeutic trend so prevalent in American culture is morally ambiguous. Sometimes, he notes, “it encourages individuals to accept greater responsibility for their wrongdoing by seeking and cooperating with therapeutic help. Other times it fosters a victim mentality and encourages the idea that sickness is an automatic excuse for wrongdoing.”\textsuperscript{16} However, Martin argues that the capacities that define psychological health are not just prerequisites for developing virtue. Rather, when informed by the virtues (which themselves encourage healthy habits), Martin indicates that people come to realize that “basic responsibility embodies a level of moral decency that tacitly shapes conceptions of psychological health.”\textsuperscript{17} He concludes that moral and therapeutic reasoning ultimately merge to encourage individuals to accept responsibility while inspiring compassion, hope, and self-respect.\textsuperscript{18} He suggests that blame can play a role in growth, and that rather than banishing blame, “moral judgements should take account of how justice and compassion interact in different contexts.”\textsuperscript{19} Ultimately, Martin argues, any dichotomy established between therapeutic approaches and moral responsibility is false; instead, people should recognize how assumptions and explicit claims about virtue shape the norms and diagnoses around mental health, and allow blame, guilt, and responsibility to play a role in the therapeutic process—both for the emotional health of those seeking treatment, and for their growth in virtue.

\textsuperscript{15} Mike W. Martin, \textit{From Mortality to Mental Health: Virtue and Vice in a Therapeutic Culture}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

\textsuperscript{16} Martin, \textit{From Mortality to Mental Health}, 4.

\textsuperscript{17} Martin, \textit{From Mortality to Mental Health}, 12.

\textsuperscript{18} Martin, \textit{From Mortality to Mental Health}, 83.

\textsuperscript{19} Martin, \textit{From Mortality to Mental Health}, 83.
In contrast to an untempered moral model, which if fully assumed attributes full responsibility to the moral agent, the Catechism of the Catholic Church offers the possibility of an attenuated view of sin and its relationship to habit formation. This view contains important implications for how, and to what degree, responsibility is assigned to those who struggle with eating disorders. §2352 states, “To form an equitable judgment about the subjects’ moral responsibility and to guide pastoral action, one must take into account the affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety or other psychological or social factors that lessen, if not even reduce to a minimum, moral culpability.”

Allocating moral responsibility is a complex task. As the Catechism indicates, taking into account the role of habit, maturity, and other conditions is imperative when considering the degree of control one has over their actions.

Recognition of the physical changes that accompany eating disorders, like the reduction of the brain’s gray matter, bring into clear relief the importance of considering outside factors when evaluating the degree to which a moral agent is responsible for their actions, especially in regards to cases of repeated actions which over time have become habituated.

B. The Choice to Use: Social Media and the Feminine Thin Ideal

The choice to use social media and the manner in which one uses it is a moral one, especially in light of the feminine thin-ideal’s influence on contemporary Western beauty standards and girls and women’s well-being. Understanding the thin ideal’s

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21 How one evaluates responsibility and culpability in regards to social media use is an important theological question, and one which will be explored in this chapter, and the concluding chapter on virtue ethics.
power to form girls and women and its pervasiveness on social media is foundational to developing a theological response, and also makes the choice to use it a morally-valenced one. One must account for the influence of the feminine thin ideal, social media use, and habit formation as one considers the relevance of the moral model to the development of a theological response to eating disorders.

The feminine thin ideal represents Western beauty’s normative, yet unrealistic, standard of thinness for women. Models who walk runways, feature in advertisements, and are idolized as a result of their attractiveness and thinness (almost-always intertwined) represent the highest ideal of beauty. While some models are genetically predisposed to be slender and simultaneously maintain eating patterns which contribute to their thinness, many models undertake drastic measures to align their bodies with the extreme, unrealistic levels of thinness that constitute Western beauty standards. What women, and in particular impressionable young girls see goes beyond even what women genetically predisposed to be thinner than most women can attain and remain healthy. Beyond the manipulation possible through the creative use of camera angles and other tools of the modeling trade, the images and videos featured in print and online are heavily edited. Most, if not all, images in advertisements or on social media are edited to the extent that they are no longer authentic representations of reality, yet still possess the air of effortless-nonchalance and accessibility that accompanies the everyday. By seeming to

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22 This is particularly problematic for young girls. With 40-60% of elementary-age girls concerned about their weight, and data reliably demonstrating that by the age of 8 girls are knowledgeable about the meaning and methods of weight loss (dieting, exercise, food choice), the influence of society and culture on body satisfaction, developing unhealthy eating patterns/exercise habits, and the formation of eating disorders is no longer deniable. Data taken from Ellen A. Schur, Mary Sanders and Hans Steiner, "Body Dissatisfaction and Dieting in Young Children," The International Journal of Eating Disorders 27, no. 1 (Jan, 2000): 78.
represent “normal life,” these images or videos invite viewers to compare themselves to the models or influencers paid to market their product—products that function as a means to help women and girls attain and embody the ideals of beauty that elude them. And while most users of social media realize that what they see is not real, its idyllic nature, sheer pervasiveness, and the manner in which it taps into the human desire to be beautiful or attractive forms the imaginations of those who see it, sharing the message that to be beautiful, they must align as closely as possible to what they see.  

A 2019 study of the influence of thin-ideal internalization indicates that “thin-ideal internalization is one of the few identified risk factors with sufficient empirical evidence to support its proposed role as a causal risk factor for disordered eating.” The researchers also note that the data indicates that thin-ideal internalization frequently continues into the recovery process, and can predict a heightened risk of relapse.  

Given the aforementioned data, it is clear that the choice to use social media has formative implications. Women and girls’ relationships with their bodies are irrevocably impacted by the thin ideal, in no medium more explicitly than that of social media.

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23 Beth Haile presents this concept through Aquinas’ understanding of connatural knowledge in “A Good Appetite: A Thomistic Approach to the Study of Eating Disorders and Body Dissatisfaction in American Women.”


25 Schaefer, Burke, and Thompson, "Thin-Ideal Internalization: How Much is Too Much?,” 933.


Jasmine Fardouly and Lenny R. Vartanian’s "Social Media and Body Image Concerns: Current Research and Future Directions" *Current Opinion in Psychology* 9 (June 2016): 1 looked at pre-teen girls and high-school-aged females and found that Facebook users specifically report “more drive for thinness, internalization of the thin-ideal, body surveillance, self-objectification, and appearance comparisons than non-users.” They indicated that when pre-teen girls, female high school students, and undergraduate
Engaging the paradigm of the moral model to evaluate the moral implications of social media use indicates that the choice to direct attention to the thin ideal in the form of social media posts, videos, photos, or even thinness-elevating communities is morally problematic. According to the moral model’s logic, the thin ideal’s negative effects on women and girls through social media use are documented, increasing body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Therefore, the moral agent (potentially motivated by covetous desire) should not direct their attention to thin-ideal idols present on social media; they should prudentially limit, or abstain from using social media as a result of its negative effect. If women and girls choose to use social media, and be negatively affected by their use-patterns, then they as moral agents are responsible for the resulting

women increase the time that they spend on Facebook, their reported propensity to diet is increased, as is each of the side-effects mentioned above. Similar findings on the relationship between time spent on social media and increases in body dissatisfaction and eating disorders is found in Sara Santarossa and Sarah J. Woodruff, "#SocialMedia: Exploring the Relationship of Social Networking Sites on Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Eating Disorders," Social Media + Society 3, no. 2 (May 2017): 1.

Evaluating the effects of specific apps or social media sites, Santarossa and Woodruff found when young adult Facebook users seek out negative evaluations and engage in social comparison online, they present with an increase in negative eating pathology like bulimic symptoms or overeating. Instagram is also complicit in the formation of negative eating pathologies. Marks, De Foe, and Collett’s "The Pursuit of Wellness: Social Media, Body Image and Eating Disorders" which explored the phenomenon of orthorexia (disordered eating patterns due to an individual’s obsession with healthy eating) found that those who used Instagram presented more symptoms than those who did not. Similar tendencies have been found in studies done with men as well. While not enough data is present to establish cause and effect, correlational tendencies are present in much of the research on social media use, the internalization of the thin ideal, and the development or increase in body dissatisfaction and/or eating disorders.

Online communities that elevate thinness, and often provide inspiration for girls and women to strive for their thinness goals (regardless of whether they are healthy goals or not) or continue eating disorder behaviors in secret are known as thinspiration communities. Fitspiration communities also exist, with a focus on fitness more broadly, but studies indicate that the similarities between the two endorse problematic attitudes toward fitness, body image, and restrictive eating as participants strive toward a fit-and-thin body ideal.

For more, see Angela S. Alberga, Samantha J. Withnell, and Kristin M. von Ranson, “Fitspiration and thinspiration: a comparison across three social networking sites,” Journal of Eating Disorders 39, no. 6 (November 2018): 1-10.

For more on Beth Haile’s suggestion in this vein, see “A Good Appetite: A Thomistic Approach to the Study of Eating Disorders and Body Dissatisfaction in American Women.”
effects in the form of heightened body dissatisfaction and possibly eating disorder formation. A moral model that does not conceive of agency as attenuated fails to leave room for the subsequent attenuation of culpability, such as that which might be assigned in light of the tempered degree of freedom that the *Catechism* links to habituation.

C. Morality Within Eating Disorders

The theme of morality as related to eating disorders is prominent in the work of anthropologists Richard O’Connor and Penny Esterik. While studying people struggling with anorexia, O’Connor and Esterik came to identify them as “misguided moralists.”29 O’Connor and Esterik argue that restricting food intake is more than an effort to be thin and beautiful, and is rather an effort to attain goodness. Therefore, they claim, the eating practices of an individual with anorexia becomes for the agent (and frequently those observing them) a moral choice—one in which avoiding fat and engaging in exercise is virtuous and eating food and gaining weight is vicious. Both anthropologists note that the construction of this eating-oriented moral system is not a “fringe view,” but rather one which is furthered by the language that is commonplace in discussions of food and eating choices:

On the contrary, our informants echo how contemporary culture moralizes eating. Witness the popular prejudice whereby fat people, seen as ‘letting themselves go’, are stigmatized as weak or even bad, while slim people, perceived as strict with themselves, exemplify strength and goodness. Or consider how people readily judge their own eating, speaking of “sinning” with dessert, “being good” with veggies, or “confessing” a late-night binge. What is at stake here is virtue, not beauty. Over the last century or so, as the body has increasingly become a moral arena, eating and exercise have come to test our moral fiber.30


The moral valencing of food, eating habits, and exercise language is so routine in American society that it is hardly noteworthy. Why is chocolate cake “bad”? Why is kale “good”? Why does one say, “This brownie is so good it is sinful”? For no reason, when one considers food as fuel that maintains the body and brings delight to the senses; for every reason when food is considered through the lens of diet and fitness culture. The aforementioned quest for spiritual fulfillment in pursuit of weight, thinness, and fitness is complexified by the moral goodness that is sought through a strict diet and exercise regime.

The attentiveness to diet and one’s body in some ways mirrors the ascetic pursuit of desert monks, though in pursuit of a very different goal and outcome. Friends and

31 For a theologian’s real-life experience in a weight-loss group as a means of exploring this and other aspects of feminist theological exploration of diet culture, see Hannah Bacon, Feminist Theology and Contemporary Dieting Culture (London: T.&T. Clark Ltd, 2019).

Susan Bordo also discusses the incidences of this language in advertisements over time in her Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, 10th anniversary ed., (Oakland: University of California Press, 2003).

32 The tradition of ascetic practices in Catholic history, in particular fasting, can complicate explorations of eating disorders. On the surface, fasting can appear like unhealthy eating disorder behaviors—restricting food intake, foregoing indulgences, and focusing one’s attention on the amount of food one is taking in over the course of a day.

While an exploration of the relationship between fasting, eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction is beyond the scope of this dissertation, there are a number of substantive differences that I wish to highlight here. First, fasting traditionally took place in the context of a world in which food was broadly scarce, wherein people had healthy relationships with food as sustenance, and their bodies as something which functioned to move them through the world. Eating disorders’ explicit connection to beauty ideals supports this argument, and our contemporary context raises the valid question of how to fast, especially as a woman, and if in the contemporary age, female fasting is a healthy undertaking even with spiritual ends firmly in mind.

Secondly, good arguments exist for resisting the tendency to apply today’s psychiatric categories to the experiences of medieval women with food. Literature exists which takes a variety of readings on how medieval, often religious, women’s relationship with food, the Eucharist, religious practice, power, and agency are interrelated. I agree with Caroline Bynum, who argues that women today are not seeking to grow closer to God by modifying their behavior around food, but rather using food as a means to become more attractive and beautiful. Medieval women sought to use food and their bodies to shape their immediate realities and enter into closer union with God. For more, see Caroline Walker Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Sacrifice of Food to Medieval Women (Oakland: University of California Press, 1988). For an opinion that differs from Bynum, and argues for applying contemporary psychological theory to medieval religious women’s experiences, see Rudolph Bell, Holy Anorexia.
family surrounding someone undertaking a lifestyle change or developing an eating disorder are often very complimentary; praise directed toward one’s appearance and weight-loss is often encouraging. But of even greater significance is the way that people view their discipline and character. Comments about the intensity of their workouts, commitment to getting to the gym, willpower to eat well or little, and glory of their progress toward their weight-loss goal trigger dopamine releases, and establish a reputation of almost super-human proportions among friends and family who often share a desire to lose weight or get fit.

People with eating disorders, especially anorexia, speak of their fear of letting go of the appearance of being a dietary and/or exercise paragon of virtue. They cling to the regard they garner from others about their low body weight, rigid eating habits, and strict exercise regimes. Releasing their personal sense of achievement to move toward recovery—“regression” in the eyes of someone guided by the misguided moral maxims of anorexia—is often incomprehensible. To release this belief is to let go of the false promise of bliss found in the idol of a lower weight and smaller body as well as the social praise and appreciation that comes from being thin. Doing so requires focusing one’s attention elsewhere, on a different ideal with a distinct mode of evaluating one’s worthiness in which attaining goodness is not linked with achieving thinness, but is ordered toward one’s flourishing as a complete human person.

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D. Benefits of the Moral Model for Eating Disorders

1. Agency and Attention

How one directs one’s attention is a moral act, and where and to what persons direct their attention is formative. A moral model takes this claim seriously, as would King and McDonough, recognizing that individuals have agency over where and to what they direct their attention, and that directing one’s attention to idols can lead to or encourage the malformation of desire and coveting. McDonough identifies AA’s view of addiction as non-sinful symptoms of sinful acts; similarly, applying the full force of the moral model to the connection between the thin ideal’s presence on social media and the increased likelihood of body dissatisfaction or eating disorders could create a parallel mode of understanding eating disorders, in some cases, as ‘non-sinful symptoms of sinful acts.’

This claim is also reflected in the plea of Psalm 119:37, “Avert my eyes from what is worthless; by your way give me life.” Some aspects of the temporal sphere are worthless, unworthy of the dignity of the human gaze. The objects, relationships, and people who mediate grace or invite the individual into God’s truth and goodness give life—a way of life that leads to fulfillment and flourishing, not a way of life tied to the numbers on the scale or oriented around unhealthy eating habits. Galatians 5:16-25 is more explicit:

I say, then: live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want. But if you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that


34 This translation, and all others unless noted, is from the New American Bible (Revised Edition).
those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ [Jesus] have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit.

“Living by the Spirit” includes directing one’s attention to what is of God, not simply of the flesh. While a great deal of fruitful exegetical work could be done with this passage, my primary purpose for including it here is to offer Scriptural support for the claim that attention is a moral act. Galatians makes clear that where one directs one’s attention has formative, moral implications; that the flesh often desires that which is contrary to the Spirit, so attentive discernment is necessary; that “works of the flesh” are characterized by idolatry, jealousy, selfishness, envy, “and the like,” which are often featured in the lives of those who struggle with eating disorders; and that the fruits of the Spirit align with the hallmarks of someone living in contemporary society who is not only pursuing holiness, but in so doing is at peace with their bodies, themselves, and is surrounded by a loving, supportive community that encourages them in their striving toward holistic wellness and virtue.35 The moral model’s attention to the morality of decision-making and directing one’s attention is a helpful insight in forming a Catholic moral theological response to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction; its blanket-moralizing of most, if not all, decisions is not, nor is its lack of consideration of external and internal factors

35 I do not intend to make claims about the morality of idolatry, jealousy, selfishness, envy, and other ills in the lives of those struggling with eating disorders; I have noted in this section, and will go on to expand on the claim that their ability to exercise their free will is attenuated and limited by the condition of being compelled by an eating disorder and body dissatisfaction. However, I do think it worth noting that women often speak retrospectively about these aforementioned characteristics in their experiences of struggling with an eating disorder, and that their experiences provisionally align with the content of St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians.
that predispose an individual to develop an eating disorder or substantive degree of body dissatisfaction.

2. Blame, Growth, and Recovery

Finally, the implications of the moral model align with Martin’s insights that there is room for a healthy understanding of blame in growth and recovery. As previously discussed in this section, the ongoing American therapeutic trend is morally ambiguous, sometimes encouraging agents to accept responsibility for what they have done wrong and to cooperate with aid offered therapeutically. Other times, it inspires a victim mentality in which illness becomes an excuse. In Martin’s words, “basic responsibility embodies a level of moral decency that tacitly shapes conceptions of psychological health.”³⁶ Combining moral and therapeutic reasoning encourages the acceptance of responsibility and the inspiration of compassion, hope, and self-respect.³⁷ In order to enable this acceptance and inspiration, blame should not be banished, but rather “moral judgements should take account of how justice and compassion interact in different contexts.”³⁸ Martin’s union between therapeutic approaches and moral responsibility creates space for a theological response wherein blame, guilt, and responsibility can be considered within the moral realm and the therapeutic process. Leaving room for these emotions and realities not only avoids the adoption of a victim mentality that derails recovery, but can encourage emotional health and integration as well as growth in virtue.

³⁶ Martin, *From Mortality to Mental Health*, 12.
³⁷ Martin, *From Mortality to Mental Health*, 83.
³⁸ Martin, *From Mortality to Mental Health*, 83.
E. Drawbacks of the Moral Model for Eating Disorders

1. External Factors’ Effects

The moral model has three primary drawbacks. The first is that the effect of external factors, in particular the thin ideal’s influence, is insufficiently considered or completely unaccounted for. Ignoring the influence of outside factors or nevertheless assigning full responsibility and culpability to the moral agent in light of them aligns with the moral model’s privileging of free will as reflected in King and McDonough’s paradigms; applying the moral model to its full extent does not align with the Catechism’s attenuated view of sin in light of habituation. While a moral approach to social media’s role in the development of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction points out the significance of individual agency, the drawback is that it takes insufficient notice of external factors’ role in eating disorder development. Individuals have distinct personal and psychological outfits and experiences which contribute to varied likelihoods of developing eating disorders which include genetics, home environment, or exposure to trauma. Accounting for the influence of these and other factors necessitates the recognition of free will’s attenuation, which a full-embraced moral model does not consider. This is a significant limitation of the moral model, especially when one considers the environment in which most, if not all American girls and women grow up. This cultural milieu ties women’s beauty and thinness to their value as persons to a degree which is not healthy, creating a context in which ubiquitous cultural beauty standards (specifically the proliferation of the thin ideal) demonstrably impact the rate at which eating disorders develop.
2. Presumed Unity

The second drawback of the moral model is that it does not align with the accounts of the experiences of women who struggle with eating disorders, in particular their accounts of the disunity between their will, desire, and actions in recovery. If the moral model is accurate, and like addiction, eating disorders reflect “a choice that we make to become addicted and a choice we must make to overcome [them],” then truly desiring to overcome an eating disorder should at the very least reflect an initial, substantive step on the path to recovery. Or, in McDonough’s analysis of the moral model at work in AA, addressing the deadly sins at the root of the eating disorder should begin to address the non-sinful symptom (the eating disorder) of those sinful acts. Importantly, however, this is not the experience of many women. Claire, in her description of the undulating process of her recovery from bulimia and anorexia, notes that when she got a job and was able to eat normally during the day, it “gave me a glimpse of what it would be like to be fully recovered, and it wasn’t as terrifying as I’d imagined.” Though she still spent her evenings binging, during the day she began “to wonder why I ever binged at all.” In both her experience of normal eating during the workday and her wondering as to why she continued to binge, Claire has begun to recognize that healthy eating habits are possible, and even desirable. Yet, despite wondering why she continues to binge, Claire was unable to stop doing so until after her first child was born—even in light of her worries about how frequent pregnancy binges

41 Bodywhys, “Claire’s Story.”
would affect her baby’s health. A lack of unity existed between her desires, will, and actions in her recovery trajectory, yet the moral model would presume a clean alignment between all three.

Claire’s account, reflective of the experiences of many women, reflects the incongruence of the moral model’s claim that the moral agent has complete power to both address and resolve the root cause or sin of an addictive behavior. Claire mentions the role of habituation, which the *Catechism* notes and the moral model pays too little attention to, as complicating her desire to recover: “I think so much of my behaviour was just habit. It was so engrained, so much part of my life that it seemed incongruous that there would ever be a time when I wouldn’t spend at least some of the day locked in the practice of bingeing and vomiting.”

Habituation interrupted or prevented Claire from being able to address her binging, even when she realized the potential goodness of discontinuing this behavior, recognizing the disunity between her will and actions.

In addition, Claire indicates that the birth of her daughter inexplicably resolved her eating disorder—a recovery that the moral paradigm fails to explain. From the day of her daughter’s birth, Claire observes that “all my bulimic feelings, tendencies and behaviours have all but disappeared. I can’t explain what changed in those few hours following my daughter’s birth but the joy she brought filled whatever gaps I had been trying to fill with food for years.” Not only did the eating disorder’s symptoms resolve, but Claire observes that her relationship to food and eating was healed and restored in a nearly-miraculous manner: “Most amazingly of all is my impossibly normal attitude to

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42 Bodywhys, “Claire’s Story.”
43 Bodywhys, “Claire’s Story.”
food now. I could never have believed how unmoved I’d be by a cream cake, tub of ice-cream or chocolate bar. I spend so little time thinking about what I’ll eat but I eat whenever I feel like it. Most importantly, I don’t weigh myself. Ever."

Claire’s initial desire to recover yet her inability to do so, coupled with her eating disorder’s complete resolution after the birth of her child reflects one of many accounts of recovery that an application of the moral model fails to explain as it presumes unity of desire, will, and action.

3. Tendency Toward Shame and Guilt

Finally, while blame can be understood through and integrated into a healthy, growth-oriented therapeutic and moral approach, if the moral model is taken in part, applying the moral model to its full extent—as King and McDonough portray it—results in a framing of blame and its relationship to responsibility which is harmful to the individual and subsequently impedes recovery. Understanding how blame might fit into the development of an eating disorder, disordered eating habits, an unhealthy relationship with food or body dissatisfaction requires nuance, as Martin notes. Guilt and shame often accompanies blame, and require guidance to process, understand, and to grow from. If the moral model attributes responsibility wholly to the moral agent, and locates the ability to recover completely within their purview, the individual will almost-certainly struggle with guilt and shame. Guilt and shame are likely first because the moral agent is viewed as wholly responsible for their eating disorder, without the attenuation that the Catechism’s valuation of habituation provides, and second because recovery is frequently initially unsuccessful (not to mention the possibility of relapse). Recovery frequently

44 Bodywhys, “Claire’s Story.”
takes multiple attempts, and ongoing conversation in medical approaches to eating disorders wonder if full recovery is possible (given that an abstinence model is impossible). Martin’s vision of an integrated therapeutic and moral approach which rightly values blame is one which encourages individuals to accept responsibility for their situation and struggles while inspiring hope, compassion, and self-respect; this outcome seems at best unlikely and most likely not-possible if the logical outcome of the moral model as presented by King and McDonough is applied without moderation.

Take as an example the prophet Zephaniah’s proclamation to Israel that God is with them, invoking them not to fear harm of any kind. Their God delights in them; because of God’s great love, God will rejoice over them in song—even after they abandoned their covenantal relationship and how God called them to live (Zeph 3:15-17). God promises honor and praise for those who have suffered shame—a message of transformative hope for those grappling with these emotions that accompany an eating disorder, disordered eating behaviors, or body dissatisfaction (Zeph 3:19). God’s goodness, grace, and love are gifts that can help transform these aspects of painful suffering, working with psychology and other therapeutic approaches to transform the lives of those who struggle. The positive effects of such an approach are severely curtailed if the agent retains full culpability for the development of and continued struggle with an eating disorder.

In sum, the moral model should not be uncritically adopted within a theological response to eating disorders. A moral model takes agency seriously, establishes a foundation for the claim that individuals have agency over where and to what they direct their attention, and offers the opportunity to integrate blame healthily on an emotional
and moral level. However, if applied to its full extent, the moral model does not account for the influence of external factors, locating full culpability—and the ability to decide to recover at any time—with the individual. It also fails to account for the lack of unity between desire, will, and action evident in Claire’s account. Finally, while a tempered moral model allows for a healthy integration of blame in the recovery process on a moral and emotional level, if logically taken to its full extent, the moral model arrives at an understanding of blame which is pitfall-laden and, due to its connection to shame and guilt, is spiritually and emotionally unhealthy. A theological approach to eating disorders must, like the moral model, take agency seriously; it must not, however, eclipse the influence of external factors or arrive at an unhealthy and unhelpful over-valuation of one’s ability to recover through mere exertion of will.

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF EATING DISORDERS

A. Disease Model of Eating Disorders

Approaching eating disorders through a disease model accounts for the effects of external influences and internal, non-moral factors on the formation of eating disorders, both of which impede and influence individual agency. King, treating the disease model in his text on addiction, notes that in 2011 the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) adopted a new definition of addiction which classified it as a “primary, chronic disease.” 45 When introducing the ASAM’s new definition of addiction, the ASAM chair stated, “The disease creates distortions in thinking, feelings, and perceptions, which drive people to behave in ways that are not understandable to others around them. Simply put, addiction is not a choice. Addictive behaviors are a manifestation of the disease, not a

45 King, Addiction Nation, 32.
cause.\textsuperscript{46} Like the moral model, this medicalized, disease-based approach and the manner of approaching the experience of one struggling with addiction can also be reframed theologically. Romans 7:19-25 states,

\begin{quote}
For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want. Now if [I] do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. So, then, I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand. For I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, I myself, with my mind, serve the law of God but, with my flesh, the law of sin.
\end{quote}

As addiction creates distortions in how one thinks, feels, and perceives, they do not do the good that they want to do, but the evil they do not want to do. Something else has come to dwell within them, rooting itself there and prompting them to act sinfully, even when they desire to do what is right. People struggling with addiction make decisions that are incomprehensible to those around them, and frequently to themselves; though they may delight in goodness, or in God’s law, the other principles at war in their mind prompts them to act contrary to it. St. Paul’s description of sin and its persuasiveness captures the realities of people’s experiences with addiction, and the disease-based approach that the ASAM adopted: addiction is compelling in a manner that mitigates free will, and compels individuals to do that which they both know is wrong and frequently do not desire to do.

King notes that the concept of addiction as a disease has pushed its way into the contemporary narrative, becoming the primary lens for understanding and treating addiction. The disease model presumes that addiction is not caused by a lack of self-

\textsuperscript{46}King, \textit{Addiction Nation}, 32.
control (the moral model’s claim), but rather that addiction itself causes a lack of self-control. King indicates that in the medical realm, addiction is compared to type 2 diabetes or heart disease, in which lifestyle and individual choices matter, but things like genetics affect the likelihood that a person develops the disease. While the disease model brings many benefits to understanding addiction, it also carries implicit limitations that echo into the realm of eating disorders.

McDonough, in his account of the connection between sin and addiction, agrees with King’s assessment that the disease model has grown in popularity. McDonough notes the manner in which contemporary Western culture has tended to “replace the theological language of sin with the therapeutic language of addiction,” noting the agreement of Charles Taylor with his claim as Taylor writes that a move from sin to sickness “seems to involve an enhancement of human dignity, but can actually end up abasing it.” An account of the progression of eating disorders from a recent story in the *New York Times* which uses medical, addiction-adjacent language to describe the development and experience of having an eating disorder, exemplifies McDonough and Taylor’s claim in contemporary eating disorder characterizations:

In the slim populations they have studied, psychologists have observed a grim momentum to the illness: Sufferers lose just a few pounds and then, all of the sudden, they compulsively want to lose more, as if a mental switch flips. Genetic predispositions may explain why some people lose weight and their minds tip into disordered eating while others do not. Immediate female family members of a patient with anorexia nervosa are 11 times as likely to develop it as females in the general population, according to one study. In the short term, resisting hunger pangs can make people feel powerful and even euphoric. But soon the effects of

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47 King, *Addiction Nation*, 34. Here King is referencing the previously-mentioned ASAM’s presentation of addiction.

48 King, *Addiction Nation*, 34.

starvation on the brain set in: mental fog, difficulty concentrating, memory issues. People become secretive, irritable and inflexible in their thinking. The gray matter of the brain shrinks, and it appears that the neural pathways related to rewards can be reversed. (It’s not clear if that’s a pre-existing trait or an effect of the illness.) Food that typically results in a dopamine hit now inspires dread. The crippling fear of weight gain begins to outcompete the biological urge to eat, spiraling downward into more weight loss and distorted thinking.\(^{50}\)

As one might describe the development of a disease, the aforementioned description casts eating disorder symptoms as beginning relatively harmlessly with an impulse to exercise a bit more, clean up one’s diet, or even because one gets sick and loses a few pounds. Then, “like a mental switch flips,” the desire to lose weight becomes akin to an irresistible siren-call, frequently paralleling the experiences of other family members and potentially rooted in genetic similarities. The “euphoric” (an adjective often associated with the high of drug-induced happiness) experience of control often becomes addictive, driven by or related to genetic influences, even as the negative effects of starving oneself impose themselves on the brain. The brain-power that might help someone suffering reason toward a more logical way of eating is drastically reduced by the lack of fuel for the brain due to calorie restriction, and fear of weight-gain outcompetes the biological desire to eat. Silber’s medical characterization of the experience of someone with an eating disorder highlights the prevalence of medical and psychological characteristics present in contemporary eating disorder discourse and provides an empirical account of McDonough and Taylor’s claim.

In short, there is a causation difference in a moral model versus a disease model. Within a moral model, distorted thinking (which the agent is presumed to be able to

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direct, and which therefore carries moral implications) leads to distorted acts, which over time create a pattern of habitual sin. As noted after Silber’s characterization, if approached through a disease model, an eating disorder’s trajectory begins with the disease and results in disordered acts, or symptoms of the disease (binging and purging, severely restricting calories, exercising to the point of exhaustion, etc.). These actions contribute to, or cause, distorted thinking as a result of the reduction of gray matter in the brain, lack of glycogen for brain function, etc. Within a disease model, it is clear that free will is attenuated.

1. Benefits of the Disease Model for Eating Disorders
   a. Risk Factors

   The disease model offers three helpful tools for understanding and approaching eating disorders, the first of which is the manner in which it accounts for risk factors. Understanding that risk factors can influence eating disorder formation is helpful in both treating them, and in determining who might be likely to experience eating disorders and watching for early symptoms. The DSM-5 identifies a number of risk factors in the development of anorexia, including anxiety disorders, obsessional childhood traits, cultural/occupation/avocation (hobby) valuation of thinness, or a first-degree biological relative having an eating disorder.51 Similarly, obesity in childhood and an early onset of menstrual periods both increase the risk of developing bulimia nervosa, as does familial diagnoses and genetic predisposition. Generally, the internalization of a thin body ideal increases the risk for individuals’ weight concerns, as does the experience of childhood


The data that follows in this paragraph is also found in this section of the DSM-5.
sexual or physical abuse as well as childhood trauma more generally. Weight concerns, low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, social anxiety disorder, and overanxious disorder in childhood also tends to create an increased risk for bulimia.\textsuperscript{52} Genetics also play a role in eating-disorder development.\textsuperscript{53}

b. Attenuated Free Will

Adopting a disease model to address eating disorders recognizes that free will is attenuated, especially in light of the above-mentioned risk factors. While a moral model approach presumes that the individual has unattenuated free will and that they are wholly responsible for their decisions and actions, the disease model recognizes that such a view obscures external factors’ influence. Like diseases made worse by environmental factors, genetics, or family of origin behavior (amongst other factors), eating disorder formation is influenced by countless external factors.\textsuperscript{54} The aforementioned data makes clear that there can be genetic predispositions that influence eating disorder formation, and serves as one example of how external factors shape eating disorder formation and attenuates free will. If eating disorders are a disease, then like cancer or pancreatitis the patient is

\textsuperscript{52} Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 348.

\textsuperscript{53} Genetic loci associated with eating disorders have been identified which has led researchers to theorize about the potential of treating eating disorders through genomically-informed therapies. As noted in Cynthia M. Bulik, Lauren Blake, and Jehannine Austin, “Genetics of Eating Disorders: What the Clinician Needs to Know,” Psychiatric Clinics of North America 42, no. 1 (March 2019): 59-73, genetic links between anorexia and other metabolic traits have led researchers to suggest that anorexia should be re-conceptualized as a metabolic and psychiatric condition. While this trend may not be helpful on the whole, genetic explanations for eating disorders help validate the experiences of those who struggle with eating disorders; they can help alleviate unhealthy levels of self-blame, legitimize the behavioral/symptomalogical struggle that those who suffer with eating disorders experience, and offer some degree of explanation behind the suffering one is enduring.

\textsuperscript{54} NEDA (National Eating Disorder Association) categorizes risk factors into biological, psychological, and social categories; they span from genetics to perfectionism to acculturation. See the following for their full list: “Risk Factors,” National Eating Disorder Association, accessed June 13, 2023, https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/risk-factors.
not responsible (or substantively less responsible) for experiencing that disease. The disease model’s view of agency in light of free will’s attenuation also avoids much of the shame associated with a moral model-driven approach to eating disorders, freeing those who struggle from the burden of shame.

c. Path Toward Recovery

The third benefit of the disease model flows from its attenuated view of free will, which results in a nuanced, though ultimately incomplete, pathway toward recovery. Whereas the moral model would encourage someone suffering with an eating disorder to stop their eating-disorder behaviors through sheer willpower, there is a helpful way to engage the disease model. Such a model might be akin to how some providers approach heart disease or diabetes. Genetic predispositions, habits learned in one’s family of origin, diet, lifestyle, and other factors can contribute to the development of poor heart health or Type II diabetes. The sole responsibility for developing either condition does not lie with the individual, much like with eating disorders. Having an eating disorder, OSFED, or struggling with body dissatisfaction does not make an individual weak-willed, morally damaged, or necessitate shame. Rather, understanding that factors beyond one’s control can increase the likelihood of developing an eating disorder, but do not cause it, is imperative to locating agency within the individual.

Retaining individual agency not only results in improved recovery outcomes, but is essential to retaining the free will and dignity due to an individual as a moral agent. However, even a nuanced disease model does not address a number of operative factors—the general cultural milieu that creates an environment where eating disorders or unhealthy relationships to food and one’s body flourish; the temptation to follow social
media accounts that encourage an unhealthy relationship with food, over-exercising, or eating disorder behaviors (which will be unique to each individual and evade blanket recommendations)—nor does it provide a holistic vision of human flourishing outside the realm of medical-wellness. While helpful in understanding and moving forward in recovery from an eating disorder, the disease model does not account nor provide for the whole picture.

2. Drawbacks of the Disease Model for Eating Disorders

a. Treatment Effectiveness

There are three primary limitations of the disease model which should be considered in devising a theological account of eating disorders. The first limitation is that it is incomplete; approaching eating disorders as a disease through a medical model is imprecise and does not result in a treatment plan that is proven to consistently lead to recovery. One cannot predict who will struggle with eating disorders, even when risk factors are accounted for, and treating eating disorders through a medical paradigm has varied, unpredictable results. Fewer than half of adults who are diagnosed with anorexia or bulimia achieve recovery, and debate of whether true recovery is possible is ongoing; many women continue to struggle with eating disorder symptoms and unhealthy thought-patterns, and a cyclical pattern of relapse and recovery is common for people who experience an eating disorder at some point in their life.\textsuperscript{55} Eating disorders are frequently ranked as the first or second-deadliest mental illness, with ongoing advances in medical treatment unable to mitigate the substantial (10-20 years) decreases in life expectancy.

that reflect eating disorders’ elevated mortality risks.\textsuperscript{56} Similarly, genetic researchers indicate that genes cannot account fully for eating-disorder development, and to rely solely on them fails to account for the complex interplay between genes and the environment. In research advising clinicians on how to integrate genetic data into eating-disorder-patient interaction, the authors note that the role of genes in eating disorders can have a potentially negative effect like increased feelings of guilt for those who passed on the “bad genes” or fear of fatalism (feeling “doomed to develop an eating disorder”).\textsuperscript{57}

This fear of fatalism connects to the second drawback: the potential to remove agency from the recovery process.

b. Risk of Removing Agency

Adopting a disease model approach to eating disorders risks removing agency from the recovery process. Studies indicate that hope and agency are factors that positively affect short- and long-term recovery in addiction.\textsuperscript{58} If agency is removed or severely limited by conceiving of eating disorders as a disease caused primarily by external, biological, or internal non-moral factors, then the agent is likely to fall into a fear of fatalism or the sense of helplessness that comes from having a disease that lacks a clear treatment trajectory. Feeling helpless in the face of an illness encourages individuals


The authors found that agency scores were significant predictors of alcohol abstinence at baseline, and that there was a stronger relationship between having hope and avoiding the use of drugs than alcohol in the long-term within a residential, drug-free setting.
to consider themselves as victims of ill-begotten genes, bad luck, and a future that they cannot control. A victim mentality prompts individuals to move away from the belief that there are aspects of their struggle and recovery that they can control, and over which they exert agency. Growth in these areas, even if they are small at first, inspire hope for future progress or can initiate a positive feedback loop of growth and recovery. But, if addiction is purely or primarily a disease that needs to be cured by medication, treatments, gene therapy, or doctors, then the individual has little control over the outcome, or responsibility for the decisions they made to arrive at the place in which they find themselves.

c. Exclusivity of Diagnostic Criteria

A third limitation is present in the exclusive nature of guidelines and diagnostic criteria for eating disorder diagnoses, in particular BMI (Body Mass Index), and its consequences, many of which relate to justice. The specifications of minute criteria (such as an event occurring a certain number of times a week, or not having enough symptoms to be considered a diagnosable eating disorder) can present an obstacle for those grappling with whether they have a “real” eating disorder and encourage them to dismiss or minimize the severity of their struggle.\(^{59}\) One problematic and primary diagnostic

\(^{59}\) A similar anxiety is present in those diagnosed with Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder (OSFED) as a category in the most recent edition of the DSM. This designation, previously known as “eating disorders not otherwise specified” (EDNOS) in earlier editions of the DSM, exists for individuals who experience eating disorder symptoms that are “subclinical” or do not meet the full criteria of anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder. As indicated in NEDA’s “Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder” statistics, while it may seem that not meeting the criteria for an “official” eating disorder diagnosis means that one’s eating patterns are less worrisome or life-threatening, this is not the case. Children who were hospitalized for OSFEDs had an equivalent amount of medical complications as those who were hospitalized for anorexia. Adults with ‘atypical’ or ‘subclinical’ anorexia and/or bulimia scored at the same rates when evaluated on measures of eating disorder thoughts/behaviors as those with anorexia and bulimia that met the DSM’s diagnosis standards. People with OSFEDs were equally as likely to die from their eating disorder as those who received other eating disorder diagnoses. While diagnostic criteria can offer clarity to medical professionals and those struggling with disordered eating or eating disorders, they can
criteria for eating disorder diagnoses is BMI, which measures an individual’s weight against their height, and the resulting ratio is used to establish an approximate body fat percentage which is used to give an indicator of health. Theoretically, this measurement gives doctors a quantitative measurement of who is over- or under-weight, and to what degree. However, it presents five problems in regards to eating disorder diagnoses: first, BMI is an almost-ubiquitous determiner of who qualifies for medical treatments, medications, and procedures, but the cutoffs for determining who is and is not “overweight” were not established in light of disease outcomes, but rather calculations for insurance companies to determine mortality risk without the data necessary to ensure that the measurement is either the best predictor of that statistic or that it is universally applicable. Second, the BMI tables do not take into account the difference in body proportions between people of different heights; tall individuals with longer limbs and narrower bodies have a higher lean-mass-to-fat-mass ratio than those who are short. Third, BMI does not reflect body composition. The relationship between height and weight does not account for men or women who may have higher weights but lower body fat percentages due to large amounts of muscle mass, which per unit weighs more than

also have the opposite effect: discounting the struggles of those with “subclinical” eating disorders, or OSFEDs.


The five following points are adapted from this text, and additional detail on each can be found in the pages cited above.

61 Gjata and Phillips, Food, We Need to Talk, 91-92.

62 Gjata and Phillips, Food, We Need to Talk, 91.

The text invokes the reader to imagine Simone Biles standing next to Michael Phelps for a helpful visual illustration of this concept.
Fourth, BMI does not account for where weight is stored; large amounts of adipose tissue around the waist is more dangerous in regards to heart health and cancer risk than if fat tissue is distributed around the body evenly. Counter to that, fat around the lower body may be protective in regards to disease. Fifth, BMI was developed for white populations without accounting for the specific health outcomes of other ethnic groups. In addition, routine use of the BMI can negatively impact the psychopathy of young girls, prompting them to lose weight in order to fit into “healthy” categories as determined by the flawed measurement. This takes place to such an egregious degree that it has prompted local laws to be passed limiting its use in determining eating disorder treatment. The disease model’s reliance on impersonal diagnostic criteria like the BMI and biases that affect perceived eating disorder rates is a substantial limitation, and something to which a personalist theological model can be responsive.

63 Gjata and Phillips, Food, We Need to Talk, 92.

One challenge of using BMI as a criteria for eating disorder diagnoses is detailed in Silber’s “‘You Don’t Look Anorexic’.” Some women present with eating disorder symptomology but do not possess a BMI which corresponds to eating disorder diagnostic guidelines, leaving them unable to receive treatment or have that treatment covered by insurance.

64 Gjata and Phillips, Food, We Need to Talk, 93.

65 Gjata and Phillips, Food, We Need to Talk, 93. Some ethnic groups may be diagnosed too late for many diseases due to the cutoffs established by the monolithic, white population whose data has been used to establish BMI guidelines. In addition, the DSM identifies the most commonly affected eating-disorder populations as those living in post-industrial, high-income countries, and also notes that anorexia appears to be less common in BIPOC populations. The DSM notes that this statistic may be inaccurate, and attributable to the fact that members of these populations tend to seek mental health support at a lower rate than white communities (DSM, 42). The role of the disease model in forming cultural assumptions about who gets eating disorders, which in turn influences the rates at which those outside those established cultural norms are diagnosed, perpetuates the cycle of underdiagnosing BIPOC populations, men, and other under-represented populations with eating disorders. The use of this diagnostic criteria not only does not accurately capture what is going on with patients, but is a justice issue.

In summary, while the disease model is fundamentally incomplete, combining it with insights from the moral model foregrounds a number of characteristics essential to developing a theological approach to eating disorders. The correct degree of moral agency must be attributed to individuals, both for the good of their recovery and to reflect theological anthropology’s fundamental claims. Hanna Pickard’s “responsibility without blame” model, which retains agency with the individual yet avoids the harmful effects of shame and guilt, is an excellent example of this, leaving room for influence from external forces, structures, and norms while recognizing that agents participate in recovery.\(^67\) In addition, like a psychological approach at its best, a theological model for eating disorders will take seriously the culture and context. Considering the influence and pervasiveness of Western cultural beauty assumptions will be explored further in section four (on social models of eating disorders).

B. Internal Family Systems (IFS)

Internal Family Systems therapy (IFS) contributes to the development of a theological response to eating disorders due to the manner in which it addresses precisely the problem of worthlessness. The accounts of those who struggle with eating disorders are often characterized by a lack of worthiness. Some believe they will be worthy of love or of being considered “good” when they have reached a certain weight, successfully consumed a certain amount of calories for a given number of days without erring, cut out a food or macronutrient (like fat) from their diet, or not engaged in a disordered-eating practice that they are trying to leave behind (like purging).\(^68\) Often, attaining the goal the

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\(^67\) For more on this model, see Hanna Pickard, “Responsibility without Blame for Addiction,” \textit{Neuroethics} 10, (no. 1), (January 2017): 169-180.

\(^68\) Recall here the work of O’Connor and Esterik on their characterization of those struggling with anorexia as misguided moralists in their pursuit of goodness through thinness, and their understanding of their food.
individual connects to earning or proving their worthiness eludes him or her, either because it proves impossible to achieve (stringing together multiple days without a binging and purging episode, or reaching a weight which is below what one’s body can attain) or because the individual becomes trapped in a cycle of moving that goal such that they are constantly in pursuit of a new standard (i.e. beginning with the goal of losing ten pounds, and because of the “thrill” of seeing numbers on the scale decrease and seeing the changes in one’s body as well as the positive reinforcement voiced by those around him or her, making the weight-loss goal fifteen pounds, etc.).

Theologically, the struggle to rightly regard one’s worth is grounded in the inherent contradiction of human existence: being made in the image of God, so glorious that as C.S. Lewis says, if humans saw themselves as God sees them, they would be inclined toward worship; yet, being crippled by the reality of original sin in which, in the words of St. Paul, humans do not understand what they do because they do not do the good that they want to do, but rather do what they hate and do not desire to do (Romans 7:15-20). Living within this contradiction, in which God’s love for humanity and desire

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69 This insight is from a sermon that C.S. Lewis preached and can be found in his text, *The Weight of Glory*. The quote reads: “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”
to redeem led to death on a cross, has been difficult for humans throughout history.\textsuperscript{70} Today, this struggle is compounded by myriad influences, of which the thin ideal functions as a substantive, formative force; pursuing goodness through beauty, which our culture locates in conformity to the thin ideal is a misguided, but logical response to the cultural norms of the twenty first-century Western world.

For someone struggling with an eating disorder who feels a powerful sense of worthlessness, especially one that is linked to past experiences of abuse or trauma, addressing the individual’s psychological well-being is imperative to recovery. Many types of psychological treatment are possible, and these approaches are both distinct from but can also be connected to the claims of theological anthropology which undergird Catholic theology. One of the primary claims of theological anthropology is that humans are made in God’s image, which carries a number of implications for those struggling with eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction. First, God is Goodness, Truth, and Beauty; subsequently, humans (incompletely, but importantly) reflect God’s own goodness, truth, and beauty. Second, the Trinitarian God is a community which means humans, too, are relational. Third, the exchange of persons that is the Trinity is underpinned by love; Augustine offered the image of the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love that flows between them as a Trinitarian analogy. Humans are made to give and receive love in relationship with God and others. But this is freely given and received, not earned, or seized. It is not connected to achieving an ego ideal.

Internal Family Systems therapy serves as a psychological approach that helps to address the problem of unworthiness which is characteristic of people struggling with

\textsuperscript{70} See Augustine’s \textit{Confessions} for an early example.
eating disorders and compliments theological anthropology’s vision of the role of relationship at the heart of the human person in three ways. First, IFS understands the human person as existing in relationship both internally and externally. Second, it offers a way to simultaneously work on realizing oneself as being worthy of love on a psychological level that does not presuppose faith, yet has a transformative effect on a natural level that can, in turn, be transformed by love. Third, IFS offers a non-pathologizing approach which counters the disease model’s limitations and does not presuppose a unified moral agent, which the moral model posits and the disease model assumes on the level of a unified, pathologized agent. However, while a theological approach cannot serve as a substitute for the psychological, there are two significant limitations to IFS: first, its own mis-characterization of Christian theology which leads to a dismissal of the faith, and second, that as a result of this dismissal it fails to account for a “higher” integration of self wherein one’s orientation to God in the person of Christ or as the True, Good, and Beautiful offers both a fulfillment beyond what is possible on the natural level as a result of grace.

1. Benefits of IFS for Eating Disorders

   a. The Role of Relationality

   IFS understands the human person as an ecosystem of relationships, both in regards to their families and within themselves. In the opening pages of the second edition of *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, the authors foreground relationship systematically, conceptually, and within the therapeutic experience: “IFS invites therapists to relate to every level of the human system—the intrapsychic, familial, communal, cultural, and social—with ecologically-sensitive concepts and methods that
focus on understanding and respecting the network of relationships among members.”

Relationship and the fundamental nature of the human person as relational lies at the core of IFS, and reflects the theological anthropological vision of the human person.

Understanding the Self and the parts is essential to understanding IFS’s claim that the human person contains an internal ecosystem which has consequences for the theological resonances of this therapeutic approach. Internal parts are not emotional states or patterns of thought; rather, they are “discrete autonomous mental systems, each with their own idiosyncratic range of emotion, style of expression, abilities, desires, and views of the world.” IFS holds that each of us contains a family of people, in which internal parts are often forced into undesired roles to aid survival amidst challenging circumstances. Specifically, in response to danger, people within a human system take on one of three roles: that of the manager, exile, or firefighter. The managers are protective, strategize, and want to control the environment around them for the sake of keeping everything safe. The exiles are the most sensitive ‘people’ in the system, and if they feel injured or hurt, managers will banish them in order to protect the group. Firefighters “fight the flames of exiled emotion” and try to stifle or distract from the sensitive feelings of the exiles, reacting powerfully in a manner that lacks attention to the

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It is worth noting that Schwartz and Sweezy cite the field’s recognition of IFS’s effectiveness; “IFS is rated effective for improving general functioning and wellbeing on the National Registry for Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREFF) by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA)...” (5).


IFS defines “parts” like inner family members, often requiring the stimulation of inner dialogue within the Self’s network of interior relationships.

consequences of such a response. This causes distress both to the firefighters themselves, and the managers.⁷⁴ The internal ecosystem or community of the person wants to contribute to the survival of the individual, but perceived threats frequently alter the homeostasis of the internal ecosystem. Managers, exiles, and firefighters are activated in response to particular kinds of threats or past experiences in an attempt to help the person persist through the stressors they are facing, but often do so in ways that manifest undesirable responses or behaviors.

The Self is distinct from its parts, a seat of consciousness which lies at the core of the human person.⁷⁵ The aforementioned parts are organized to protect the Self and in response to trauma, help it avoid danger such that the mental health symptoms which are present depend upon which group of parts is most prominent. “Managers, for example, often dominate the systems of people who are chronically depressed, exiles dominate in those who experience bouts of intense sadness or fear, and firefighters dominate people who have problems with addiction.”⁷⁶ However, in their attempts to override the systems of the internal community, the inner system of the parts is left alone with the extreme thoughts and feelings which are identified in this system as “burdens.” The concept of burdens reflects the experiences of worthlessness reflected in the experiences of those struggling with eating disorders. IFS says that commonly, burdens are (or are rooted in) worthlessness, the belief that one is unlovable, and being too much or too little; trauma often prompts people to disdain their vulnerability and prompts internal parts to act as

protectors. While this protective action may be misguided, it is rooted in the belief that one “must be perfect to be accepted.” It is clear that when burdens are present and trigger the actions of the three internal parts, the internal ecosystem of persons is not functioning healthily.

b. Transformative Potential on a Natural Level

Worthlessness is identified as a common burden in IFS and in the anecdotes of those who struggle with eating disorders. IFS offers a therapeutic means for coming to believe that one is worthy of love on a psychological level. When addressing this problem through a theological lens, the issue of worthlessness is rooted in one’s relationship to God, and ability to accept the (undeserved) gift of salvation (which presents further complications, as recognizing one’s simultaneous unworthiness yet belovedness by God is often a life-long journey for Christians). While IFS’s approach does not presuppose faith, it has a transformative effect on a natural level that can, in turn, be transformed by love. By addressing the weight of worthlessness, which Schwartz and Sweezy identify as either the common burden people endure, or the root of the other burdens that they experience, therapists challenge the belief that one is unlovable, that one is either too much or too little. Combatting this belief through the process of IFS, people who struggle with worthlessness—a frequent and key struggle for those grappling with eating disorders, engaging in eating disorder behaviors, or body dissatisfaction—can

79 See Chapter Four’s presentation of Kent Dunnington’s analysis of the ego ideal for an example of addiction literature’s engagement of this theme.
experience a transformation in their manner of thinking and their relationship with themselves on a natural level. IFS is a natural (i.e. not supernatural) means to do so. However, a theological response to worthlessness is both necessary to developing a mortal theological response to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, and can transform the good work begun on a psychological level by IFS or other therapeutic approaches through the power of God’s love.\footnote{Such an approach will be developed in the coming chapters, and hinge on God’s revelation of love for humanity in the Incarnation, Christ’s passion and death, and resurrection. Chapters Two and Three will take up the gift of this love, and the potentiality for the transformation of the pain of human worthlessness into the belief that each person is a beloved creature made in God’s image, even amidst the struggles of human existence and sin. It is also worth stating that while grace is treated as part of the recovery process in later chapters, it should not be thought of as a strategy for recovery, i.e. “I’ll try IFS therapy, and then I will try grace.” Grace can enable a recovery that is not possible on one’s own, through natural means, but is not a “recovery strategy.”}

c. Avoiding Pathologization and Assumed Unity

The challenge of pathologizing individuals seeking treatment for eating disorders or presuming their internal unity is a key drawback of the disease model, and is linked to the lack of agency those struggling with eating disorders are viewed as having under such a model. IFS offers a non-pathologizing approach which counters specific limitations of the disease model and moral model, and does not presuppose a unified moral agent, which the moral model posits and the disease model assumes as it claims to treat a united, pathologized patient. People struggling with eating disorders often struggle against a voice in their head that tells them that engaging in an eating disorder behavior is a response that will help relieve the anxiety that they are experiencing, or is necessary to achieve the goals that they have set (goals which they hope will bring them peace with their bodies, the approval they seek from themselves or others, or help them attain the “goodness” they desire, a la O’Connor and Esterick). There is frequently part of the
person who wants to engage in the behavior to bring about the relief that they seek, or because they feel they must; there is another part who wishes that they did not feel compelled to do such a thing, or want to be thinner, or any number of other musings that counter the desire to engage in an eating disorder behavior. While they feel compelled to beat themselves down because their bodies are unacceptable, often a part of them wishes they could be content with who they are, at peace with their appearance, and be less critical; IFS recognizes this complicated experience of disunity in a manner that the moral and disease models do not.

2. Drawbacks of IFS for Eating Disorders

   a. Mis-Characterization of Christian Theology

The authors of Internal Family Systems Therapy mis-characterize Christian theology, which leads them to dismiss faith and its transformative potential. Schwartz and Sweezy consider it to be one of various negative views of human nature which has extended throughout Western culture, “particularly after St. Augustine asserted that desire is a curse embedded in human nature” and continue on to blame him for shifting the paradigm of earlier Christian theological history from one in which they believed that humans were born blessed to one in which original sin and desire drive “humans from blissful ignorance to powerless suffering.”[^82] They attack Augustine for his sexual sins and point to therapy to solve the challenges resulting from bad parenting, saying that “We are doomed to remain broken until we have some kind of corrective reparenting experience from a therapist or significant other.”[^83]

[^82]: Schwartz and Sweezy, Internal Family Systems Therapy, 48; 48-49.
[^83]: Schwartz and Sweezy, Internal Family Systems Therapy, 49.
that such dependence on a therapist is unhealthy, they point to IFS as a space in which the individual relies “on the relationship with the therapist to help us release our already developed and undamaged Self so that we can Self—regulate and Self—nurture, as we are equipped to do.” 84 IFS’s misunderstanding of Christianity both misrepresents it to readers and ignores the transformative beauty of rightly understanding Christianity.

b. Elimination of Possibility for “Higher” Integration

As a result of the dismissal of the Christian faith, Schwartz and Sweezy fail to account for the possibility of a “higher” integration of self. Rightly ordering the self in a theological view means ordering the self toward God, in Whom true beauty, goodness, and truth are found and through Whom virtue is realized. Being involved in a life-giving community which supports one’s recovery and helps one strive toward virtue mediates Christ’s grace, which is central both to sanctification and to overcoming an eating disorder in the Christian view. The fulfillment and self-realization possible through grace exists in a manner beyond what is possible on the natural level. While IFS contains helpful insights in the psychological realm, its presentation by Schwartz and Sweezy as the singular solution for the problem of worthlessness and burdens limits the possibility of transformation by grace, or a self-integration that extends beyond what is possible through psychological training or human effort. The internal life of the human person as communal in IFS echoes the communion of persons in the Trinity, as well as the claim from theological anthropology that the human person is made to exist in community as a result of being made in God’s image. However, relying solely on a psychological model such as IFS limits the possibilities of understanding eating disorders as anything beyond

84 Schwartz and Sweezy, Internal Family Systems Therapy, 49.
that which be treated psychologically. Such a view denies and ignores many other possible ways of understanding eating disorders or pursuing recovery, especially the possibility of transformation through relationship with God.

IV. SOCIAL MODEL OF EATING DISORDERS

It is clear from the previous two sections that to develop a theological response to eating disorders, one must account for external factors, in particular one as pervasive as the thin ideal on social media; this section will address one mode of doing so.85 Approaching eating disorders through a lens of critical realism recognizes the attenuation of agency within social structures’ restrictions and incentives. A critical-realist approach understands social structures as systems of human relations among social positions, such as the relationship between a professor and a student within the university system.86 Engaging a critical-realist lens avoids overstating individuals’ power and freedom, which individualism tends toward, and denying peoples’ moral agency in favor of empiricism, towards which collectivism trends.87 In other words, critical realism provides a more accurate account of the relationship between moral agency and the structures within which they exist than either individualism or collectivism. Critical realism holds that persons, not structures, are conscious agents, and that social structures emerge from individual agents and have an independent, causal impact in those agents’ lives.88 Daniel Finn describes social structures’ impact as taking place through generational restrictions,

85 The social model also has theological resonances in Catholic Social Teaching, or 1 John 5:19’s recognition that while human persons are children of God, the world rests in the power of the evil one.


87 Finn, Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy, 68.

88 Finn, Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy, 68.
opportunities, and incentives in light of which (among other forces and causes) individual agents’ decisions change.\(^\text{89}\)

Translated to the diet and fitness industry, this means that while structures are not agents, they impact the lives of moral agents through the influence of restriction, opportunity, and incentive. Through these modes of influence, structures cause outcomes via the decisions of individual actors who are trying to accomplish particular goals within those structures.\(^\text{90}\) Structures and their limitations, opportunities, and rewards are causal forces. But, the influence of each is not deterministic; instead, Finn states, “this influence has an effect only insofar as it affects the choices that individual agents make in trying to accomplish their goals (whatever these may be) while facing [those] opportunities, restrictions, and incentives.”\(^\text{91}\) Structures, insofar as they generate restrictions and opportunities that alter the decisions of individuals, do prompt particular outcomes to occur, even as individual moral agents remain the cause of their own decisions.\(^\text{92}\)

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\(^{89}\) Finn, \textit{Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy}, 68.

\(^{90}\) Finn, \textit{Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy}, 69.

\(^{91}\) Finn, \textit{Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy}, 69.

\(^{92}\) Finn, \textit{Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy}, 69.

The question of who is responsible for the social structures that exist, especially in regards to eating disorders, is a substantive one when considering where and to what degree to attribute responsibility. This presentation of a critical realist approach to the question comes from Finn’s \textit{Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy}, 69-71. While individualism tends to view the social realm as a result of the contributions and decisions of the specific agents who comprise it, critical realism takes into account the legacy of the actions of those who came before and have shaped the structures we find in the present. Finn notes that regardless of a social structure’s beginnings, two aspects of the process of emergence are fundamental: (1) structures that emerge are not exactly what those involved intended (it is doubtful that the diet industry’s founders envisioned it becoming a central force in perpetuating women’s’ dissatisfaction with their bodies) and (2) that even if founders of a social structure are identifiable, their role in creating that structure took place within the aforementioned system of restrictions, opportunities, and incentives of other, pre-existing social structures.

Organizations’ leadership is a key factor in how they develop, and how change is affected within them. The history of the emergence of social structures, viewed through a critical realist lens, is that individual activity (frequently the legacy of the choices of those who came before) precedes social structure, and that social structures in the present precede the activity of living individuals. When analyzing agents’ actions
way, the diet and fitness industry can be said to incentivize particular outcomes—women’s
dissatisfaction with their bodies and themselves more broadly, both of which they seek to
resolve through weight-loss, body toning, etc.—while recognizing that these forces and the
structures in place in American culture are not themselves moral agents. While not moral
agents, Finn aptly characterizes the influence of social structures as “casually powerful
but not deterministic.”\(^{93}\) Structures like the diet and fitness industry, among others that
uphold unrealistic beauty standards, tend to perpetuate themselves because the agents
within them will be negatively affected if they violate restrictions, ignore opportunities,
or do not respond to incentives. But, agents retain the ability to do so, and can create
change “from below” by being willing to act in contradiction to any of the three aspects
of social structures.\(^{94}\) Through this critical-realist lens, social structures can be said to
cause things to take place and be critiqued by means of the limitations, opportunities, and
rewards they establish, while moral agency resides within the people who exist and
operate in those social systems.

Daniel Daly offers an example of how normative social institutions arise from
social structures and illustrates the way structures and cultural norms interact and create
compelling forces with which agency interacts which translates well to the norms that
surround women’s’ relationship to food. Daly observes that despite there being laws that
define what is legal on the roads, there are also normative social institutions that arise—

\(^{93}\) Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 74.

\(^{94}\) Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 74.
such as the norms of driving in a city like Boston. “In Boston, one is expected to drive somewhat aggressively, accelerating as soon as the light turns green and quickly merging onto the highway. The key norm in this circle is that one is not to slow down others and the flow of traffic.” These norms are not parts of the law, but are firmly established amongst those who are regulars on the roads around the city of Boston. If drivers do not do this, they will be punished by others via car horns, shouts, and/or gesticulations. Eventually, even if people did not learn to drive in the norms that dictate driving in Boston, if they drive in Boston long enough they are likely to conform to the norms of the social institution and subsequently learn new moral habits of relating to others on the road.

Daly’s example inspires helpful insights into the way women frequently are conditioned to relate to food in America. As young girls grow, they are shaped and formed by the conversations, images, and other forms of cultural conditioning that perpetuate cultural norms around food, eating, and body image. There are particular incentives, restrictions, and opportunities in place within social structures that encourage body dissatisfaction, which can be its own obstacle as well as a factor that can lead to disordered eating patterns. Even if young girls do not possess a genetic predisposition to eating disorders, have little to no childhood trauma, and have parents who model a healthy relationship with food and eating, they are formed by the structures and norms that surround them. By the time young girls turn six, they begin to express concern about

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The description that follows is paraphrased from Daly’s example in this chapter (found on pages 94-95), and inspires my own parallel with women’s relationship with food.
their weight or body shape: 40-60 percent of girls in elementary school (ages 6-12) are concerned about their weight or about becoming too fat.\textsuperscript{96} As structures and their norms begin to have their shaping effect, young girls begin to wonder if calories are bad, learn that it is normal to be on a diet, are formed to believe that losing weight is a good thing that garners compliments and praise, and that one of the worst things is to be a person who is perceived as “big.” Learning about these realities allows girls a quasi-rite-of-passage by which they come to talk about and critique their bodies like the women who surround them in real life, on social media platforms, and in movies. They begin to become “Boston drivers” on the roads that take them from childhood to the expectations that surround them as adolescent women, even before they reach adolescence.

Understanding how the structures and forces that shape them function, while recognizing that they retain agency as moral agents, is requisite for locating a road that leads toward virtue, even if it is populated with exits that lead toward unhealthy habits and relationships with food, eating, and one’s body.

Cultural norms that arose from the structures of the diet and fitness industry are not only sustained by the structures’ incentives, but by their disincentives. Just as Boston drivers use colorful language, gestures, and car honking patterns to communicate their displeasure to drivers that do not follow their regional driving norms, young girls quickly learn what will happen if their bodies and attitudes toward food do not conform to cultural beauty norms. Girls listen to conversations about good/bad food and dieting, comments that teach them that praise accompanies thinness, and people critiquing what they want to ‘fix’ about their bodies to improve their appearance. Entering into the

mature space that those conversations represent is part of growing up and imitating the adult women in their lives. If their bodies are larger than what is considered beautiful and they do not enter into negative body-talk or discuss their current diet, girls learn that they may be shamed or be the target of negative comments. These disincentives are one way girls learn the cultural norms that surround female bodies, food, and eating habits, and shape their expectations of what it is to be a woman. Even if girls do not relate to food in a disordered way early in their lives, at some point in their growing-up they learn either through observation or comments directed at their bodies that being a woman involves concern about weight, how one’s body appears, and how both inform their attractiveness. Subsequently, they learn new moral habits of relating to food, eating, and their bodies.

These norms are not merely interpersonal; corporations benefit from promoting and objectifying the feminine. In 2019 the United States’ weight loss and diet industry had its highest-grossing year, making 78 billion dollars.97 Losses were sustained during the Covid-19 pandemic, but the industry is again on the rise; the fitness and fashion industries also share an interest in continuing the cultural narrative that women need to be slimmer, fitter, and prettier to drive consumer interest. Changing the aforementioned narrative and promoting broader body norms for girls and women would mean that less incentives would exist to try new exercise programs, seek out “light” instantiations of their favorite food products, or ask their doctors about medical weight-loss products. A negative economic impact on this industry seems imminent if women and girls were to learn that their bodies need not ascribe to a cultural ideal to be beautiful.98

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98 Another insidious aspect of beauty ideals is their constant fluctuation; what is beautiful in one decade is modified in the next. So, even if a woman can mold her body to reflect whatever the current body norms
The hyper-sexualization of women’s bodies has led to sexiness or attractiveness being one of the primary ways women receive attention at large in society, which adds to the value women place on this aspect of their existence. This aspect of cultural beauty ideals is growing more difficult to attain. While most models wear a size 0 to 2, and over the past 20 years, they have become more slender, the average American woman’s size has expanded in the opposite direction, with an increase in waist circumference and an average dress size of 16 to 18. In order to attain the ideal before them and be “beautiful” or attractive, drastic measures often need to be undertaken—and the diet, fitness, and beauty industry promote the unrealistic ideal that drives the desire for thinness, and supply the solution—found in their products. The reality that women’s overly-sexualized bodies are also used as tools to market products to men—like sports cars, motorcycles, and other products which have nothing to do with women themselves—and that attaining the “ideal” of those “sexy” or “beautiful” bodies comes at a personal cost to women and often lines the pockets of the mostly-male leaders of the diet/fitness/beauty corporations presents a particularly stark dissonance, especially when reflected upon theologically.

Applying a critical realist lens to a theological assessment of structures’ and norms’ influence on women’s relationships with their bodies and food simultaneously recognizes the power of that influence while retaining women’s moral agency. Critical realism emphasizes “that human agents are always positioned within already existing

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social structures that possess real causal force.” However, it also recognizes that “structures and cultures have causal impact only through their influence on the decisions of agents. Agents are always positioned and constrained, but they really do exercise their own powers too.” Applying critical realism to Christian ethics, specifically the problem of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, not only recognizes the tension that exists between women’s moral agency and structures, “but also articulates the tension in ways that are deeply helpful for Christian ethics in its effort to answer the challenge of living a responsible moral life within the structured world around us.” Of course, the restrictions of the structures that one encounters would ideally make it harder to be sinful, while the world’s opportunities would enable morally good choices. “However, since both we and the world around us are subject to sin, finitude, and ignorance, the structures within which we live all too frequently threaten personal morality and the common good by placing restrictions on (thus penalizing) virtuous behavior and presenting opportunities for (thus promoting) vice.” Finn observes that creating change in structures will be easier if one understands how they work. I would add that understanding how the structures work, while recognizing the agency one retains therein, is also necessary to grow in virtue amidst structures like those maintained by the fitness and diet industry, where healthy relationships with food and virtuous formation in the realm of eating and one’s body are not always encouraged.

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100 Daly, “Critical Realism, Virtue Ethics, and Moral Agency,” 94.
101 Daly, “Critical Realism, Virtue Ethics, and Moral Agency,” 94.
103 Finn, “Social Structures,” 32.
104 Finn, “Social Structures,” 32.
Critical realism’s presentation of how social structures function morally and how to affect change within them is a useful tool for developing a theological response to eating disorders which both takes seriously the influences of structures and culture while allowing the individual to retain agency. Moral agents can create change in social structures, both for themselves and others. A future project might consider how a theological response to eating disorders could engage Catholic Social Teaching to consider how women and girls struggling with eating disorders or disordered eating can work against unjust structures, and perhaps aid their recovery and that of others through that work.

V. THEOLOGICAL MODEL OF EATING DISORDERS

Developing a theological approach to eating disorders requires adopting various aspects of the moral, psychological, and social model while improving upon their limitations or blindesses. To avoid determinism, a theological approach to eating disorders must retain the moral model’s recognition of the individual’s agency. Individuals, if they are free in the manner in which the Christian tradition understands freedom, have the ability to make choices that contribute positively or negatively to their flourishing.105 This reality includes the realm of attention in the context of social media use; the amount of time one spends on social media, the accounts and content one follows or consumes, and the impact of what one “clicks” on for future content and ad targeting are all, to some degree, moral decisions. This is particularly true in a theological response to eating disorders in light of the aforementioned data on how exposure to the thin ideal is

105 See Kate Ward’s excellent text, Wealth, Virtue, and Moral Luck: Christian Ethics in an Age of Inequality for an exploration of how economic circumstances impede and enable virtue formation.
correlated to changes in mental health, body satisfaction, and eating disorder symptomatology. However, the moral model’s emphasis on individual agency must be attenuated in a theological approach. This attenuation is exemplified in the *Catechism*’s approach to moral struggles in the context of habit; it recognizes that when actions are repeated, freedom and culpability does not disappear, but are diminished. A theological response to eating disorders must also account for external factors’ influence on eating disorder development—something that the disease model does successfully, but which the moral model fails to do.

The social model’s presentation of structures’ influence on individuals, the manner in which that influence impacts freedom, and the resulting conclusion about how to effect change are all considerations that a theological response to eating disorders should adopt. Thinking of the formative effect of the thin ideal on social media as a structure which operates via restriction, opportunity, and incentive yet is not itself a moral agent is helpful in formulating a theological response that aligns with the Christian tradition’s approach to how culture and structure impedes upon freedom while moral agents therein retain agency. Such an approach permits the critique of social structures (which is necessary, especially in light of justice) while recognizing them as “causally powerful but not deterministic.”\(^\text{106}\) The manner in which social institutional norms arise from social structures and themselves shape individual action provides a foundation for understanding why women and girls are so similarly and deeply impacted by the thin ideal; this foundation will be key for developing a virtue-ethic response to the thin ideal’s influence on social media in Chapter Four. In short, the social model provides a way to

\(^{106}\) Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 74.
account for and respond to social structures and institutional norms while allowing room for individual agency and action to both exist and mean something.

The search for worth and value must also be addressed within a theological approach to eating disorders. When women couple their goodness or value to their weight or appearance, they spend their lives pursuing a physical ideal that most will never reach while seeking a peace that no goal weight or dress size will impart. IFS addresses worthlessness psychologically within the context of relationship (the Self and its parts), likely a large part of this therapeutic approach’s success in helping those with eating disorders. A theological approach to eating disorders must harness its own tools of the Catholic intellectual tradition to respond to the deep chasm which resides in so many women between their belovedness in God’s eyes and their recognition that they are “not enough.” Doing so in a manner which avoids the pathologization of the human person or assuming full integration of the individual, while considering the person within the matrix of human community like IFS models reflects the dynamic, changing nature of the human person and the human as inherently relational, imago dei.

As previously noted, directing one’s attention well in a fallen world and amidst the influences of social media is difficult and invites the question of how to approach eating disorders theologically in this context. Are eating disorders instances of under- or over-developed temperance? Are they a question of idolatry, where the thin ideal takes precedence over cultivating a heart oriented toward God, and God’s will? Or, is it an

\[\text{107} \] Beth Haile’s dissertation (“A Good Appetite”) on developing a virtue-ethic approach to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction is the only robust Catholic resource to date on this topic, and is a rich resource. The defense of Haile’s dissertation prior to the wide-spread social media and smartphone use seen in today’s increasingly digital age leaves unconsidered the challenge of the pervasive influence of social media, which is a foundational part of this dissertation’s theological response to eating disorders.
incomplete view of human flourishing which accepts a cheapened, one-dimensional view of beauty that leads to a constriction of human flourishing? The theological response this dissertation develops will integrate the virtue of temperance and consider the role of the thin ideal as a cultural idol, but its primary orientation will be toward how theology offers an authentic and robust vision of the human person and its flourishing which is preferable to other available alternatives.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I presented the contributions and drawbacks of the moral, psychological, and social models and indicated which of these contributions must be integrated into a theological approach to eating disorders and which omissions or drawbacks must be considered or improved upon. Fundamental to a theological response is an attenuated sense of moral agency contextualized within a consideration of the external, internal, and structural influences on eating-disorder development and body dissatisfaction. Such an approach provides a vision of human flourishing that is responsive to women’s self-alienation and suffering, offers hope in light of grace, and expands the fields of theological aesthetics and virtue ethics in substantive ways. As I develop this approach, I do not offer a theological approach as a “silver bullet” which solves all the deep, interlaced complexities of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. Rather, I seek to offer a vision which engages the Catholic intellectual tradition’s richness, bringing its resources to bear on the experiences of contemporary women and permitting their experiences to speak back to theology. In doing so, I believe that lives and theology can be transformed.
A Catholic moral theological approach to eating disorders must address the cultural ideal of beauty promoted by the feminine thin ideal and offer a renewed, holistic moral approach that responds to the misguided moralism that O’Connor and Esterik describe. The theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar presents Christ’s kenosis on the cross as a vision of beauty informed by love. Christ on the cross as the embodiment of beauty presents a stark contrast to the feminine thin ideal that the Western world maintains as its standard of beauty—a standard that is a major factor in the development of body dissatisfaction, disordered eating habits, and eating disorders. Returning to an understanding of beauty that derives from Christ’s self-gift on the cross is fundamental to reshaping contemporary beauty ideals and the influence of the unrealistic and dangerous thin ideal. It is the work of this dissertation’s second chapter.
CHAPTER TWO:  
Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics as an Answer to the Thin Ideal

I. INTRODUCTION

The thin ideal, an idol of beauty for many women in a social media age, is based on a vision of beauty which does not reflect Being’s beauty, goodness, or truth. Hans Urs von Balthasar diagnoses a broad problem surrounding beauty in the first volume of *Glory of the Lord*, one traced back to Immanuel Kant and the British empiricists. Balthasar is an ontological realist, holding that the human capacity to taste, touch, and see gives them access to things as they are and ultimately to being itself, of which God is the Source.¹ Balthasar’s position contrasts with Kant, who views the human subject as existing “in immediate relation with the truth that lies outside itself,” inseparable from the love of the true, the good, and the beautiful.² Balthasar believes that humanity, even in its finite state, is open to and can encounter the infinite. This claim has consequences for claims about beauty in contemporary culture, in particular as it relates to the thin ideal. Evacuating the element of splendor ontologically, the thin ideal leaves those who perceive it with mere outward form—a level of attraction which is not substantiated by a connection to Being. Balthasar’s cruciform aesthetics uses the language of splendor and form to reveal that nothing can be beautiful without existing in relationship to God.³ Balthasarian theological aesthetics provides a transformative theological hermeneutic for reclaiming one’s personhood through an authentic understanding of beauty in the face of the feminine thin

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³ Aquinas and Goethe also use the language of splendor and form in their aesthetics.
ideal which encourages women to accept an impoverished vision of human flourishing. Balthasar’s theological aesthetics provides the tools both to identify the ways in which the thin ideal is an idol, severed from the truly beautiful, and to construct a new way of seeing which is built upon a theological anthropology that honors both the physical and spiritual nature of the human person.⁴

II. FORM, SPLENDOR, AND SEEING IN BALTHASAR’S CRUCIFORM AESTHETICS

A. The Relationship Between Goodness and Beauty

Balthasar’s theology is well-known for compelling readers to understand the intrinsic connection between beauty and the attractiveness of goodness and truth, a relationship which is pivotal to developing a theological response to the feminine thin ideal. Balthasar’s sense of the co-inheritance of the transcendals is rooted in a long philosophical tradition. Balthasar’s work elevates beauty to a level of theological focus and influence which is typically directed to the qualities of goodness and truth.⁵ Not only

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⁴ The structure of Jennifer Newsome Martin’s argument in “Beauty as a Paradigm for Resistance: Against the Pornographic Age” has been helpful in structuring the first part of my presentation of Balthasar’s role in critiquing and responding to the feminine thin ideal. This chapter can be found in the text Seeing with the Eyes of the Heart (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of American Press, 2020), 316-347.

⁵ Balthasar is drawing here on the long philosophical history of the co-inheritance of the transcendals. However, he observes that beauty has long held a contested status amongst them; to this end, Etienne Gilson observes that “Beauty does not occupy in the theology of Thomas Aquinas a place in any way comparable with that of unity and of goodness. Whole questions of the Summa Theologica are devoted to proving that God is goodness itself and unity itself, but there is none devoted to proving that God is beauty itself” (159). For more of his argument see Etienne Gilson, Elements of Christian Philosophy (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 159-163.

David C. Schindler in “Love and Beauty: The ‘Forgotten Transcendental’ in Thomas Aquinas,” posits that the apparent challenges of Aquinas’s presentation of beauty as less prominent than goodness or truth is resolved by recognizing the order of beauty as distinct from the order of the good or the true, which leads to the recovery of the ancient tradition rooting love in beauty (346). Instead of defining “love most basically as a passion in the strict sense, i.e., a movement of the sensitive appetite, which we then extend analogously, and somewhat awkwardly, to God…” he suggests defining it “most basically as the soul’s response to beauty, the reception of beautiful form—a reception that involves not only the intellect and will, but also, in human beings, the senses in their apprehensive as well as their appetitive capacities, a reception that transforms the appetite so as to be suited to the object, and in this way to provide the context
does Balthasar believe that he is reclaiming the gift of beauty that has been undervalued in recent decades of Catholicism, but he holds that there are ethical and ontological implications to an under-appreciation of beauty. Balthasar claims that an unbalanced focus on truth and goodness combined with an irreverence toward beauty has inhibited the flourishing of not only beauty itself, but also truth and goodness. Thus, Balthasar puts forth what Aidan Nichols, O.P. aptly describes as “a theology written by the light of beauty,” which draws one into a deeper appreciation of all three transcendentals.⁶ In his Glory of the Lord: Volume I, Balthasar writes that “beauty is the word which shall be our first…we no longer dare to believe in beauty, and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it. …We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name…can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love.”⁷ To flourish, truth, goodness, and beauty must retain their inherent connection, the identity they share as being perfectly realized in God’s Self. The good is “self-evident” because it is linked to what is beautiful; both truth and goodness are irresistibly beautiful, and as such draw the Christian toward God. Balthasar’s theology written in and by the light of beauty preserves the integrity of the three transcendentals and offers a hermeneutic for understanding true beauty which in turn rebukes the thin ideal as a facsimile. It is neither true, nor good, nor beautiful.

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Severing the relationship between goodness and beauty has both ontological and ethical implications, some of which are seen in the proliferation of the thin ideal. The effects of this severing are revealed in Western culture’s heightened valuation of the feminine thin ideal. Reducing female beauty to bodies and images that reflect the thin ideal presents an impoverished representation of beauty which is not grounded in Being, the God whose love sustains the existence of each human person. Too-thin bodies being extolled as examples of beauty ignores the suffering and unhealthy actions many models and everyday women make to achieve this ideal; it also presumes that beauty is rooted in thinness, and is primarily linked to external form (as opposed to being recognized in the unity of splendor—the depth dimension—and form). This facsimile of bodily beauty is a symptom of broader evacuations of beauty which Balthasar identifies. It removes the human features which make a person truly human, in particular the character development which fosters growth in virtue and leads toward fulfillment and sanctification. While the version of beauty that society proliferates is vacuous, it exerts untoward influence and commands a similarly disproportionate amount of attention. This cultural version of beauty—in its insufficiency as an end for female existence and the false nature of it as an idol—limits the flourishing and fulfillment of women and girls because it robs beauty of its relationship to goodness.

Goodness is understood traditionally as not mere moral goodness, but in terms of telos, which underscores the distortion which takes place as a result of uncoupling goodness and beauty. According to Aquinas, a thing is perfect and good to the degree that it is fully realized; “the perfection of a thing is its goodness,” and the perfection of a thing
exists to the extent that it is in actuality.\footnote{Thomas Aquinas, \emph{Summa contra Gentiles}, trans. the English Dominicans, I.38, I.39. https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~SCG1.} The perfection of a thing imparts goodness, and both are realized when a being or thing embodies or actualizes its \textit{telos}.\footnote{Telos, and the realization of a thing’s \textit{telos}, is connected to a form. Each substance has a substantial form which is “the configuration of the thing which gives it those characteristics that place the thing in its species” (322). These species also have a nature or essence which impart a power in respect to either being or acting. When either kind of power is perfected, it is called a virtue. See Eleonore Stump’s “Aquinas’s Theory of Goodness,” \emph{The Monist}, 105 no. 3 (July 2022): 321-336. Cited above.} In Aquinas’s view, the perfect human body could not be one which is too-thin because that does not reflect the \textit{telos} of the human person as it regards health, flourishing, or the pursuit of a relationship with God which results in attaining the third level of virtue. Moral goodness, to be discussed explicitly in Chapter Four, reflects the person’s ability to perfect the power of being or acting; this follows from Aquinas’s understanding of goodness as a transcendent and the implications of uncoupling goodness and beauty whereby prioritizing thinness over flourishing as a human person (with a healthy relationship to food, eating, and exercise) becomes many women’s goal.\footnote{However, Thomas argues for a partial identity between beauty and the good. He identifies a formal identity that exists between beauty and goodness insofar as they rely upon the same form or foundation, but indicates that there is a difference in their final cause. The good is related to the appetitive (that which everything desires) while beauty is related to the cognitive faculty. Many thanks to Jennifer Newsome Martin for this insight.} I posit that Balthasar’s theological aesthetics offers a robustly integrated vision of beauty and goodness which identifies and responds to the aforementioned poverty of Western beauty standards. In his use of aesthetics, Balthasar plays on its dual meaning as a theory of beauty and a theory of perception, working as a manner of perceiving “that is instructed by the beautiful
form; theological aesthetics is perception tutored by the appearing glory of God.”

Balthasar’s connection of beauty and goodness to Being itself can offer women a vision of beauty that is connected to human flourishing in an authentic presentation of human telos.

For Balthasar, what is beautiful is more than the appearance of a thing; to be beautiful, something must be connected to Being, and further, Beauty’s innate connection to Being makes it inherently worthy of love. A connection between love and beauty has long existed since the days of ancient philosophy, a history to which Balthasar alludes, and is a connection that is key to this argument for the rehabilitation of beauty. By placing beauty and love in relationship, love is not simply relegated to the realm of the appetitive, nor considered to be a mere passion or emotion. St. Thomas Aquinas, David Schindler argues, reflects the ancients’ view that love is connected to beauty, primarily because it can be ascribed to God who is immaterial; thus, love cannot be simply an appetite or passion but rather belongs to both the appetitive and apprehensive power. Love must therefore also be “an ordination to the good” as an object of both the sensible and intellectual appetite. Schindler argues that love’s existence as more than passion or appetite is best understood by conceiving of it in terms of beauty. This, he says, is

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12 See David Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 90-91 for an explanation of the implications of relegating love to the realm of appetite or passion. Pages 93-95 discuss additional implications of this relegation, which he also details in “Love and Beauty: The ‘Forgotten Transcendental’ in Thomas Aquinas,” Communio 44, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 334-356.

13 David Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 92-93, 100.

14 Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament, 93.

15 Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament, 96-97.
because Aquinas claims that love is a matter of both cognition and desire, such that the beautiful and the good are the same, differing only in aspect. Aquinas’s difference in aspect is located in the fact that the good is that which pleases the appetite, while the beautiful is that which is pleasant to apprehend. In other words, beauty is communicated through knowledge and enjoyment, involving intellect and will. Thus, “love is a relation most specific [...] to beauty; beauty is the proper cause of love.”

Beauty’s identity as love and as the sheer goodness of existence is reflected in the goodness of encountering and affirming the existence of a human being. To this end, Schindler notes that love has two objects; it wills something good (which desire also does), but differs from desire insofar as it wills that good for another. Thus, in love, “desire arises within the more basic context of an affirmation of the other and therefore always inside of an ethos of gratitude.” With its link to beauty as a transcendental, love is also revelatory, revealing some of the deepest truths of being. Similarly, it elevates the human person beyond one’s “previous condition” in order to be able to will or desire

16 Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament, 100.
17 Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament, 100.
18 Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament, 100.
19 Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament, 110.
20 Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament, 110.
21 Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament, 110.
22 Schindler, Love and the Postmodern Predicament, 111.

His “Love and Beauty: The ‘Forgotten Transcendental’ in Thomas Aquinas,” Communio 44, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 334-356 is also helpful on this topic, as is page 80-81 of “The Word as the Center of Man’s Onto-Dramatic Task,” Communio 46, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 73-85.

This insight will bear fruit in regards to the role of community, love, and virtue in the eating-disorder recovery process as explored in Chapter Four.
the “beloved object properly.” Love is communicated by beauty in the context of grace. Insofar as a person’s “engagement with the world begins and ends in love and thus under the sign of beauty, then the notion that grace elevates nature by in some respect giving it a new ends, that it satisfies only a desire that it has already transformed…” leads to the complete surprise of grace’s resonance. Love conceived as such becomes a privileged place of encountering divine grace. The possibility of understanding beauty as linked to love, and the manner in which love transforms desire, offers another means of critiquing the thin ideal and constructing a positive vision of beauty and flourishing within a theological response to eating disorders.

B. Splendor and Form

Balthasar’s theological aesthetics describes beauty in terms of proportion and movement. Balthasar describes beauty as seeming,

...from one point of view, to consist entirely in measure, in proportion, in delimited form, as if the image, understood as the appearance of the essence, were its true home. But in the twinkling of an eye, beauty can also appear to consist essentially in movement, in the rhythm of communication itself, or in the eternal movement of yearning for what lies beyond all delimited forms and images.

According to Balthasar, “both natural and artistic form has an exterior which appears and an interior depth, both of which, however, are not separable in the form itself. The content (Gehalt) does not lie behind the form (Gestalt), but within it.” In other words, form is the “external manifestation of a being’s ‘inwardness,’ or…its ‘intimacy.’” It is

what first draws our conscious attention when encountering the object. The object’s visible shape and harmony, the convergence of its component elements and dynamic ‘life’ as a whole, allow us to see it as form.”

Splendor is the “radiation of the inner depths of the object out of which the form appears.” Form and splendor are the philosophical and theological basis of Balthasar’s aesthetic system.

Balthasar’s presentation of beauty hinges on the classical relationship of splendor and form, and that relationship indicates that what is initially attractive is not necessarily worthy of love—that is, truly beautiful. Balthasar defines form as the wholesome uniqueness of the other. In *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, he describes form as “a totality of parts and elements, grasped as such, existing and defined as such, which for its existence requires not only a ‘surrounding world’ but ultimately being as a whole; in this need it is …a ‘contracted’ representation of the ‘absolute,’ in so far as it transcends its parts as members and controls them in its own confined territory.”

Form necessitates being and the context of a world to receive it. It reflects an analogy between the receiver and the thing-being-received which results in an experience of transcendence. A form is “seen” because it concerns an act of receptivity grounded in the existence of fundamental difference and distinction from the receiver and the other. To receive the form, it must provoke the receiver to shape its affections toward the form itself. Splendor is the “great

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32 Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 89.
radiance from within,” or that which is being perceived. When one encounters something “love-worthy,” one is “confronted simultaneously with both the figure and that which shines forth from the figure.” Together, splendor and form provide an image which helps humanity interpret their experiences in the world and in turn reveals how the world communicates itself to humanity. Beauty is the unity of splendor and form, the place where “we are brought face-to-face with both interiority and its communication, the soul and its body, free discourse governed by laws and clarity of language.” Its concrete instances “indicate the ‘mystery’ of a deeper ground, [and] present veiled glimpses not only of the deeper structures of reality but ultimately of absolute being itself.”

C. Christ, Form, and Beauty

Christ is the form of God’s revelation to the world–Beauty incarnate. The appearance of divine glory in earthly form is present in the Christ-form. The relationship of the incarnate Logos to the Father and Spirit “appears as a form within this world, yet one from which that world itself must receive its definite form.” Christ is the reality he signifies; “revelation itself radiates the light in which we see its form.” As the form of God in the world, Christ becomes the norm for measuring both the form of

35 Steck, *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 16.
37 Steck, *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 16.
40 Dupré, “Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology of Aesthetic Form,” 309.
revelation and the form of natural beauty.\footnote{Dupré, “Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology of Aesthetic Form,” 309.} God also gives the receiver the ability to receive, but in a manner that does not do “violence to nature.”\footnote{Dupré, “Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology of Aesthetic Form,” 311.} God’s revelation to the world not only adopts “the form of this world; it completes that form by extending it to its ultimate archetype, God's triune nature.”\footnote{Dupré, “Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology of Aesthetic Form,” 311.} Christ’s form communicates the Trinitarian mystery such that “[v]isible form not only points to an invisible, unfathomable mystery; form is the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while, naturally, at the same time protecting and veiling it… The content does not lie behind the form but within it.”\footnote{Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 151.}

Christ is, in other words, what he communicates. Christ’s incarnate form communicates the fullness of the Trinitarian mystery, and grace enables the recipient to perceive and respond to it. In particular, on the cross, the “‘form’ that appears out of this formlessness (i.e., out of the unfathomable inclusion of sin in the life of the Godhead) can be seen, but only \textit{as glorious}.”\footnote{Steck, \textit{The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar}, 19.} The “sight of this love and its attractiveness” of Christ’s beauty on the cross moves the person who encounters it to faith.\footnote{Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume VII: The New Covenant}, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990) 207. Hereafter abbreviated as \textit{GL VII}.} The form of Christ’s ugly formlessness on the cross “is bathed in a radiant mystery of triune love. We see now not ugliness but boundless love for the human creature.”\footnote{Steck, \textit{The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar}, 20.} The cross gives meaning to the brokenness of the human story in a manner other narratives cannot. The Christian story’s narrative horizon “does not interpret away
the relative meanings of one’s life, but rather illuminates in them Christlike patterns of living and, in these patterns, the glory of divine love.” 48 Christ’s death on the cross functions not just epistemologically as a lens for interpreting one’s life, but ontologically, such that the Holy Spirit stamps the form of Christ on his disciples. 49 The patterns of Christlike actions—surrender, acceptance, love, reconciliation—that a life marked by Christ’s form demonstrates is the embodiment of their identity, and living-out of their Christian mission. 50 Grace enables one to receive and live in light of Christ’s invitation to take up one’s cross and follow him (Mt 16:24).

Christ, Beauty incarnate, sets the standard for all other beautiful things. In other words, Balthasar recognizes that the Spirit incarnate is the paradigm of earthly beauty such that only the form which exists within the spiritual space of the ethical can be truly beautiful. 51 Nichols observes that for Balthasar, “[a] person with a life-form…is worthy of the beauty of Being; one who lacks such a figural existence ‘decays to expressionlessness and sterility’ like the dry wood of the Gospels.” 52 Because authentic beauty is rooted in the ultimate form of revelation (the person of Christ), true beauty is ordered to and is communicated by an encounter which brings one more deeply into relationship with the divine. While the following section engages Balthasar’s theological aesthetics to rebuff the thin ideal and its function as a tool which perpetuates women’s sense of inadequacy, it is clear from the work done in this section that contemporary

48 Steck, The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, 89.
49 Steck, The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, 89.
50 Steck, The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, 89.
51 Nichols, The Word Has Been Abroad, 3.
52 Nichols, The Word Has Been Abroad, 3.
culture distorts beauty—a distortion which works to the benefit of the diet, fitness, and fashion industries. The thin ideal becomes a weapon women use against themselves and each other, obscuring their manner of seeing themselves and others. It is clear that the thin ideal lacks a connection to Being, to the holistic goodness and fulfillment of the human person which God desires for all people.

D. Consequences of Balthasarian Beauty for Understanding the Human Person

Balthasar’s approach to beauty is not only ontological, but also considers the ethical, as evidenced by his recognition of the impact of culture and society on

53 As argued in the first chapter, it is imperative that the moral agent be understood to retain agency. However, I argue that this agency can be weakened due to the habituation which results from discrete acts of self-comparison which lead to hatred for one’s body in the form of body dissatisfaction becoming habitual, and often are involved in the development of disordered eating or eating disorders. See Chapter One’s section on critical realism for a presentation of how this process can be understood to take place, while moral agency is simultaneously understood to be retained with the individual.

Chapter One’s presentation of IFS, and the role of worthlessness in perpetuating feelings of shame that drive internal dissonance which leads to harmful behaviors, also captures one of the thin ideal’s many negative effects. The need for virtuous communities in to aid women in their pursuit of their telos is clear, and will be taken up in Chapter Four.

54 This statement is complicated by the engagement of splendor and form in the context of the human person, who is made in God’s image and therefore inherently valuable and worthy of love; it is even further complexified by the challenge of worthlessness (perpetuated by the thin ideal) which drives many women and girls to engage in eating-disorder behaviors in order to “improve” their bodies and gain worth in the eyes of themselves, others, and society more broadly.

There are a few key points that must be held in tension: 1. By being made in God’s image, all humans are inherently good (though not without the stain of original sin, which leads them to fall easily and often intentionally into the trap of elevating goods to the place of gods and engaging good desires in bad ways, or to egregious degrees). 2. Desiring to reflect and embody beauty is not a bad thing; God is Beauty, and desiring to reflect beauty is a good desire (which society often elevates to a bad–and unhealthy–level, which creates the tendency to engage in unhealthy behaviors). 3. Recognizing the human person as being made in God’s image and deeply beloved, yet in need of redemption beyond what one can attain by (spiritual or physical) willpower, is a key struggle of the spiritual life. Good theology leads to a theological anthropology in which this is true, and is necessary for establishing a true, good, and beautiful moral response to the challenge of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction.

However, Balthasar’s ideas about splendor and form can help capture the reality that humans can actively participate in or reject the process of deification—becoming more virtuous, and more like God (which makes them more beautiful in a manner that losing weight cannot attain as they participate in and communicate God’s grace through the element of “splendor” as their form remains the same). Thus, it is in this spirit and with these theological claims in place that I continue to engage Balthasar’s language of splendor and form to discuss the beauty of the human person.
recognizing beauty. When “light penetrates the light of the beholder,” Balthasar invokes Rilke’s ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’ to describe the phenomenon in which “‘There is no place in it which does not see you. You must change your life;’” beauty and ethics are linked.\(^55\) Balthasar goes on to explicitly acknowledge that historical development of culture shapes how humans experience reality and perceive beauty.\(^56\) While some ages reflect beauty at every turn, and produce an abundance of such forms, “the disfigurement and even denial of form turns the world nihilistically into a seeming void” in other ages.\(^57\)

Discovering the single Image which perfectly reflects form and splendor, created by the original Maker such that humanity now bears God’s likeness, is more or less difficult depending on how accessible (or not) the starting point of beauty in both splendor and form is.\(^58\) With this recognition, Balthasar serves as a helpful conversation partner in establishing a Catholic moral response to eating disorders. First, because he recognizes the formative effect of culture on humanity’s ability to recognize true beauty and the original Image of that beauty, capturing the challenges of the thin ideal’s formative effect that was articulated in Chapter One; second, because Balthasar maintains that some things are more adequate to the Beautiful than others; third, because Christ’s love magnified in the taking-on of human form in the Incarnation remains at the heart of true beauty; and fourth, because Balthasar maintains that reclaiming beauty will strengthen our knowledge of and commitment to truth and goodness.

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\(^56\) Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, 3.

\(^57\) Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, 3.

\(^58\) Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, 3.
In sum, being a form (in the image of Christ) is, according to Balthasar, “par excellence, what a Christian is. Justification and sanctification guarantee a spiritual form that ‘will thrive as the greatest of beauties’.”59 The form of the Christian is realized in sanctification, a fulfillment that extends beyond the weight one achieves or inches one shaves off one’s stomach.60 “In the redeemed, the archetype of Christ is set to work on the image of ordinary existence, for its transfiguration, by that almighty Creator Spirit who has no need to destroy the natural so as to attain his more-than-natural goal” of sanctification.61 Recognizing humans as being made in God’s image also safeguards the fundamental connection of mystery to humanity, a truth and gift which the disenchanted reality and the materialism of the diet and fitness industry actively obscure.

Balthasar’s understanding of ontology and beauty also reflects and protects the mystery which accompanies being human, something that a reductionistic vision of beauty ignores or rejects. Jennifer Newsome Martin observes that for Balthasar, “being is marked by mystery as a permanent, persistent phenomenon even in the most mundane manifestations of being in the world. The gratuity and grace of these ordinary expressions of being in the world is, Balthasar thinks, ‘a daily renewed, perennially inexhaustible


60 While Balthasar’s theology is thoroughly Christocentric, and the end and true joy of all persons is found in relationship with Christ that grows toward perfection, I also believe that God offers grace to all those who struggle and they may choose to cooperate with it. In the mysterious generosity of God, I think that it is possible that one who struggles with assenting to Christianity in contemporary times, especially if they have encountered a polarized or impoverished version of the faith, can still receive the self-communication of God’s love and Self that is grace, for it is God’s Being and self-communication that sustains life itself. It seems likely that the process of small assents to grace that form the person slowly over time can make them more like God, slowly sanctifying them in a manner that may at some point open the door to belief in Christianity.

61 Nichols, The Word Has Been Abroad, 4.
wonder.””  

To exist as a human is to be a mystery both to oneself, and to others. To exist, especially alongside other beings and amidst God’s glorious creation, is indeed “a daily renewed, perennally inexhaustible wonder.” Beauty standards that focus merely on one’s appearance eradicate the rich, inexhaustible complexity of the mystery which is implicit to human beings. Martin also reminds readers that within “Balthasar’s epistemology, incomprehensible mystery is a feature of knowledge, not a jeopardizing detriment to it…” or in other words, “mystery is a ‘permanent, immanent property’ of being.” For Balthasar, to exist is to recognize the complexity of oneself not as a puzzle to be solved, but a mystery which mirrors God’s own existence as mystery. Assenting to the societal message that when one is thinner, fitter, or otherwise made more attractive, one will be happy or whole ignores the reality of the human person as an inexorable mystery. This reality is part of the unity between truth and beauty: to be human is to be a mystery. Cultural recognition of the human person as mystery as well as the individual’s recognition of themselves as a fundamentally unknowable mystery resists the reduction of the human person to a number on a scale or silhouetted shape on a runway, though our contemporary disenchanted reality presents a vision of the human person which is unidimensional. Mystery and its relationship to B/being is one piece of the ontological and ethical response of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics to the feminine thin ideal.

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63 Balthasar, TL I, 142-143.


65 For more on the disenchantment and flattening of what once was seen as a mystery-filled, enchanted reality (due to the presence of the divine, and pre-Enlightenment approach to the world in which science
E. Beauty and Goodness: Critiquing the Thin Ideal

Balthasar’s implicit linking of beauty and goodness and splendor and form offers tools from theological aesthetics to critique the feminine thin ideal as a cultural beauty idol and to begin to gesture at what beauty informed by a theological aesthetic might look like. The feminine thin ideal presents beauty as necessarily linked to an unhealthy level of thinness, which is neither good nor true in a vision of human flourishing informed by God’s vision for humanity. What is good and true in the realm of relationship to one’s body and nutrition is an approach to food, eating, and exercise that focuses on holistic flourishing. One would eat foods that nourish the body with an abundance of nutrients, color, and texture, making eating a delightful experience—which is best enjoyed in community with others, although poverty and loneliness tragically often limit access to both of these goods. Foods that are rich and decadent would be appreciated for their deliciousness in reasonable amounts, which would vary depending on moderated desire and be uniquely personal. Fat, sugar, and other “bad” aspects of food would not be morally valenced, but rather consumed in moderation according to the body’s needs (after intense physical activity, for example) and the human’s desire (i.e. enjoying dessert without worrying about consuming excessive amounts of sugar on one’s birthday or even on an ordinary weekday). Exercise would enliven the body, mind, and spirit, bringing joy and a deeper connection with one’s community and environment. Within the triadic flourishing of beauty, goodness, and truth, recognizing an authentic beauty would involve the perception of the unity of both splendor and form. One would appreciate the external

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was not the primary hermeneutic), see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
beauty of another with—and perhaps because of—the interior state of one’s heart. One’s relationship with God and desire for virtue, coupled with the grace of the Spirit, perfects human nature as being made in the *imago dei*. This splendor perfects form, creating an image of beauty which mediates grace and can be an encounter with the love of God.

Balthasar’s claims do not encompass merely the content of theological aesthetics, but the manner of seeing that which is beheld. Balthasar claims that when one studies divine revelation through a lens of theological aesthetics, there are two kinds of “evidence:” the subjective and objective. When “the mind’s eye is struck by a new and hitherto unknown radiance (subjective evidence) which enables the person to contemplate (objective evidence) an object which is actually divine but is mediated by…an ordered constellation of signs, a sacramental economy,” this “vision—at once subjectively and objectively enabled—sparks off in the beholder a passionate movement of loving desire for the Infinite now made present through visible form.”66 The subjective evidence is located in knowledge and belief, and in Christian experience. Nichols states that “God’s self-revelation in Christ is found, firstly, in the act of faith and its conditions of possibility, both noetic and ontological—that is, what we need to *know* before we can believe (‘noetic’) and what we need to *be* before we can believe (‘ontological’). That same ‘subjective evidence’ is found, in the second place, in Christian experience, itself the normal fruit of the act of faith thus made possible.”67 This subjective evidence is


necessarily related to the objective evidence of God’s self-revelation in Christ; it cannot be abstracted from the objective evidence.\(^{68}\)

Balthasar’s focus on God’s passionate and abundant love at the heart of the manifestation of God’s Self is distinctly responsive to the suffering of women and girls with eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction. When the objective evidence of revelation is communicated through the radiance of subjective evidence, the sacramental economy enables the communication of grace and an encounter with God’s goodness, truth, and beauty. What one perceives through their eyes, or what is truly beautiful because it communicates the grace and love of God, creates the desire of love, a desire to be in relationship with God. Given the relationship between perception and desire, Balthasar understands faith as a kind of seeing, establishing “a communion of reciprocal knowledge between God and myself, in Jesus Christ and his Church, on God’s initiative” which will culminate in the eschatological self-knowledge which remains accessible only in part at present and will therefore contribute to the impulse to know and love God.\(^{69}\) Such a manner of seeing requires “the provision of fresh epistemic resources in supernatural believing” wherein the “mind is illuminated, just as will is rectified, so that in the revealed object the believer may find the Revealer…” through the light of faith.\(^{70}\) Knowledge re-orients the will and inspires the love necessary to find God. This belief is not uncommon to Western theology, but Balthasar nuances it such that the light of faith “breaks forth from within the revelatory form itself.”\(^{71}\)

\(^{68}\) Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, 28.

\(^{69}\) Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, 25.

\(^{70}\) Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, 25.

\(^{71}\) Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, 25.
taken on human form, communicates the radiance which God has communicated.\textsuperscript{72} In this way, God reaches down to humanity in a form and mode of communication which conforms to a human way of seeing and perceiving. God offers to us in a way that we “can see it, understand it, make it [our] own, and live from it in keeping with [our] human nature.”\textsuperscript{73} God communicates the objective evidence of revelation through the subjective evidence, all within the sacramental economy of revelation. This communication is mediated and motivated by love; God self-manifests in a manner that allows us to understand and receive God’s own mystery of Being.

The love that rises up in the human person in response to God’s self-communication is enabled by God’s willingness to temper God’s self-manifestation to something attenuated for human reception. God’s willingness to crouch down to the human level, to make God’s Self small so that humanity might not only encounter, but receive God’s love, is a marvelous and awe-inspiring demonstration of the depth and persistence of God’s love. The human movement toward God is a meeting of both humanity’s desire for love, and the longing of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{74} Balthasar uses the language of \textit{eros}, “a love which takes God out of himself into the world and stimulates in creatures a similar love for him” to describe the love which God demonstrates toward humanity.\textsuperscript{75} God’s own outpouring of passionate love “quenches and more than fulfills

\textsuperscript{72} Nichols, \textit{The Word Has Been Abroad}, 25.

\textsuperscript{73} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 121.

\textsuperscript{74} Nichols, \textit{The Word Has Been Abroad}, 26.

\textsuperscript{75} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 123.

Balthasar draws here on a long tradition. Pseudo-Dionysius writes in this vein, “And in truth, it must be said too that the very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good superabundance of his benign yearning for all is also carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to
the human longing for love and beauty, a longing which, previous to and outside the sphere of revelation, exhausted itself in impotent and distorted sketches of such a desperately needed and yet unimaginable fulfillment.”

Foregrounding God’s love by making it the center of God’s self-revelation makes Balthasar’s presentation of God’s nature well-suited for developing a theological response to the challenge of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. This claim is particularly true given the previously-articulated relationship of love and beauty; if “love is a relation most specific [...] to beauty” such that “beauty is the proper cause of love,” beauty compels the human person to love.

The encounter between the human person and God, in which *eros* exists as a love which draws God out of God’s Self to meet us, exists under the sign of beauty; therefore, preserving a right understanding of beauty in contemporary culture has stakes that exceed medical concerns about the rates of eating disorder developments and have a spiritual component.

Both Balthasar’s emphasis on vision and the manner in which one sees, coupled with the love that motivates God’s self-revelation and the need it fills in the human heart heals the unique wounds of the experiences of those who struggle with body satisfaction and eating disorders. First, when the objective and subjective evidence combine to compel the viewer to love that which they see, Balthasar provides a tool for understanding true beauty. The existence of both objective and subjective evidence is linked to splendor and form in Balthasar’s thought. If something appears beautiful, but

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76 Balthasar, *GL I*, 123.

77 Schindler, *Love and the Postmodern Predicament*, 100.
lacks the element of splendor, that object would fail to communicate the objective evidence of revelation as it lacked the essence of splendor which animates its being. Communicating some element of revelation through its beauty seems constitutive of things that mediate God’s Being and beauty, not beauty that is merely attractive to the eyes but lacks splendor. Second, the authentic and overflowing love of God for each human God seeks to encounter answers the human heart’s call to be loved. One of the deep pains from which eating disorders emanate is the desire to be worthy of love—this is frequently expressed through the desire to be thinner, fitter, more shapely, and more beautiful. A frequent refrain of those struggling with eating disorders is “I will be happy when I achieve X weight”—a goal number on the scale which, when achieved, almost-always becomes lower as the intoxication of control, compliments, and a new appearance takes hold.

Aquinas’s previously mentioned connection between the inherent connection between goodness and telos is central to the project of harnessing theological aesthetics to develop a theological response to eating disorders. Aquinas writes, “Man’s last end is the uncreated good, namely, God, Who alone by His infinite goodness can perfectly satisfy man’s will.” The human person is ordered to God as the uncreated good. It is similarly by goodness that God can meet the needs and desires of each human person. Further, Aquinas claims that the good is that which is desired by the human person—that is, “Since goodness is that which all things desire, and since this has the aspect of an end, it is clear that goodness implies the aspect of an end.” To summarize, the telos of the


human person is aligned to the good, in particular God who by goodness satisfies the desires of the human person. Traditionally, the telos of the human person is aligned with eudaimonia, the deep happiness of human flourishing. Aquinas builds on what has been established so far, relating the human telos to happiness:

It is impossible for any created good to constitute human happiness. For happiness is that perfect good which entirely satisfies one’s desire; otherwise it would not be the ultimate end, if something yet remained to be desired. Now the object of the will, i.e., of human desire, is what is universally good; just as the object of the intellect is what is universally true. Hence it is evident that nothing can satisfy man’s will, except what is universally good. This is to be found, not in any creature, but in God alone…God alone constitutes human happiness.80

Happiness is the perfect good which satisfies the desires of the human person–if one desired something else, one would not be happy. That which satisfies what the human person desires is necessarily good, and is located in the Trinity (one is reminded of Augustine’s cry that the heart is restless until it comes to rest in God). In sum, true happiness which imparts flourishing is necessarily good, and located in God who is the Good. The proof of God’s love and desire to know and be in relationship with humanity is nowhere more clear than the Incarnation and Christ’s kenosis on the cross.

III. RIGHTLY-ORDERED OUTPOURING: THE TRINITY’S RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST’S KENOSIS

At first glance, the doctrine of kenosis may seem to be about a shrinking or an outpouring of the self–Christ’s self, specifically–on the cross. The self-donation of Christ and the manner in which he pours himself out in love for the salvation of others is upheld as a vision of obedient love. Unfortunately, and falsely, Christ’s obedient love can become a model and justification for women struggling with eating disorders (especially

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80 Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I-II q.2, a.8.
anorexia) when they align their struggle to become smaller and imitate the thin ideal with Christ’s sacrifice of himself on the cross. Just as Jesus was obedient to the Father, overcoming his human desire to avoid the cross’s suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed that his Father’s will, not his, be done (Lk 22:42), some women understand their own resistance to their hunger and appetites as a renunciation of their wills in pursuit of something higher. Thus, it may seem counterintuitive to mine the doctrine of kenosis to help develop a theological response to eating disorders.

However, Balthasar’s presentation of kenosis—rightly understood—is the foundation for a critique of the thin ideal located in theological aesthetics, foregrounding relationship and offering an interpretation of the doctrine that avoids the aforementioned misunderstanding. All three of these contributions are fundamental to a theological response to eating disorders. Balthasar’s presentation of kenosis, and its relational roots, begins with the Trinity. There are three insights that Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology lends to this project: a continued development of the nature of splendor and form, which proffers a right understanding of beauty—one informed by God’s nature as Trinity and revealed by Christ’s kenosis; the role of relationship with God and others in the act of knowing who one is as a human person; and the nature of intra-Trinitarian life, specifically its distance, inclusion of humanity, and its continuity with Christ’s kenosis which foregrounds God’s love. In so doing, it calls the one who suffers out of themselves to encounter God’s affirmation of their goodness and worthiness of love.

Balthasar’s articulation of the relationship between Being and beauty points to the fundamental relationship that exists between his theological aesthetics and Trinitarian

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81 Recall the paradigm of misguided moralism discussed in the prior chapter.
theology. The nature of the Trinitarian God informs Balthasar’s conception of the transcendental, especially beauty. In addition, the nature of the God who expresses such abundant, unwavering love for humanity is also fundamental to claims that I make about God’s relationship to those who struggle with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. Trusting in the goodness, truth, and beauty of the Trinitarian God and understanding God’s ontological nature is a prerequisite for accepting the love God offers as a means of sharing in God’s glory, especially for those who suffer from and struggle with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. The foundation of Balthasar’s understanding of beauty—and how it is lived in the Christian life—is located in his understanding of the Trinity and Christ’s place therein, especially as expressed in Christ’s kenosis on the cross. It is Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology that provides a foundation for a further engagement of splendor and form, an understanding of human telos in light of relationship to the divine, and the nature of Trinitarian life, especially the role of distance, the divine-human relationship, and kenosis therein.

A. The Relationship Between Trinitarian Persons

First, for Balthasar, the Trinity is its relations; relationship lies at the heart of Trinitarian nature and identity. This classic theological claim is reflected in the work of many theologians, but Balthasar’s Christology concretizes the claim beyond the traditional description of mutual procession. Balthasar shares the classical theological starting point of procession and identity which is present in the work of Aquinas, explaining that “[i]n an account such as one finds, for instance, in Thomas Aquinas, not only are the relations of the persons of the Trinity described in terms of processions – the Son is generated by the Father, the Spirit spirated from Father and Son – but the persons
simply are these relations.” God’s immanence is essential to God’s economic actions. In Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology, divine immanence is “conceived as the underlying precondition for all that takes place in the economy of his actions.” Therefore, understanding the actions of God requires seeing them as “a reflection of the eternal reality to which they point.”

It follows from this point that understanding Balthasar’s claims about beauty and God’s glory necessitates grasping the relationships between Triune persons. As David Luy claims, “in order to understand the…‘splendour’ with which all ‘forms’ must correspond, one must grasp at least partially the interrelationships of the triune Godhead.” If there is not only continuity between the immanent and economic Trinity, but if God is God’s Trinitarian relationships, knowing God requires knowing God as relational, and eternally in relationship. There is a parallel to Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology in his theological aesthetics. To understand beauty as the unbroken unity—or perhaps better, relationship—of splendor and form requires encountering the splendor which can emanate from forms that appear to be beautiful. To recognize authentic beauty in the union between the exterior form which attracts and splendor which draws one into relationship with the beautiful via an encounter is to perceive, to some degree, the self-


86 These relationships are fundamentally self-revealing and kenotic, a point to which I will return later and which is exemplified in Balthasar’s presentation of the person of Christ.
revelation and out-pouring of God which draws the one who sees into a transcendent encounter.

Developing a Catholic moral theological response to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, especially in light of social media’s pervasiveness, requires an authentic beauty which flows from the nature of the Trinity. To this end, Luy offers two insights into Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology which are relevant to understanding the relationship between his Trinitarian theology and his theological aesthetics. First, while Balthasar establishes the immanent Trinity’s ontological primacy, he believes that it is through the economic Trinity’s manifestations that humans are able to access the divine.\(^{87}\) The tangible presence of God in the world, particularly through beauty, is not only important, but a primary mode of access and relationship for the human person. Thus, developing a Catholic moral theological response to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in light of social media necessitates establishing both an understanding of that which constitutes true beauty, and a flourishing vision of beauty which is grounded in an understanding of God’s nature. Second, Luy states that Balthasar does not permit the possibility of unmediated knowledge of God.\(^{88}\) This is clear through Balthasar’s understanding of revelation’s communication through objective and subjective evidence, presented in the previous section of this chapter. Because knowledge of God cannot be unmediated, the Logos’s taking on human nature in the person of Jesus is paramount—both to this project, and to Balthasar’s Trinitarian and aesthetic theology. Balthasar describes Christ as the “very apex and archetype of beauty in the world” because “the glory of Christ unites

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splendor and radiance with solid reality.”\textsuperscript{89} Christ’s existence as the archetypal form of beauty and the meeting-point of infinite and finite, the perfect embodiment of splendor and form, makes him the locus of God’s self-communication both broadly, and in particular as regards the revelation of God’s glory through beauty to humanity.\textsuperscript{90}

B. Three Insights from Balthasar

1. The Role of the Economic Trinity in Understanding Beauty

Having briefly reviewed Balthasar’s presentation of the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity and the primacy of the economic Trinity in his theological aesthetics, it is time for the first insight of Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology for this project: the economic Trinity’s role in rightly understanding beauty. Balthasar foregrounds splendor and form within his theological aesthetics. Form and splendor, the essence of beauty that dynamically communicates something of the divine by reaching out and drawing the one encountering the beauty in, are functions or self-communications of the Trinity that manifest in the world. Balthasar’s first volume of his theological trilogy begins with beauty, the discrete functions of splendor and form, and the roles they play in communicating God’s glory in other iterations of theologies in which beauty plays a prominent part. To quote Luy, “Balthasar begins with the assumption that, whatever takes place in the economy must express a reality that exists eternally within the immanent life of the Trinity.”\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{89} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 69, 124.

\textsuperscript{90} Balthasar understands Christ’s kenosis on the cross as both the embodiment of perfect love and beauty. This concept and its relevance to the project at hand will be taken up in-depth in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{91} Luy, “The Aesthetic Collision,” 159.
Balthasar chooses to establish his theological foundation with what is immediately manifest in the world, not the Trinity’s immanent nature; while the immanent Trinity and intra-Trinitarian life is a pivotal part of his theology and the theological aesthetics he establishes, Balthasar’s choice to begin with the economic Trinity indicates his commitment to the power of beauty in both communicating God’s nature, and drawing humans into relationship with God.92 Humans’ ability to know who God is—the splendor which is mediated through the form—comes through what is tangible. Rightly understanding what is truly beautiful, and that, “in the end, only something endowed with mystery is worthy of love,” is fundamental to both this project and Balthasar’s theological aesthetics.93 Form without splendor—something which is superficially ‘beautiful’ or attractive but lacks God’s self-communication and an invitation to enter into mystery—can neither be beautiful in Balthasar’s aesthetics nor included in the paradigm of beauty ideals. An encounter with true beauty communicates something of the Trinitarian, “luminously mysterious” “depth of Being itself.”94 For beauty to communicate the mystery of Trinitarian life, it must “snatch one up into a state of rapture” for it is “[o]nly through form [that] the lightning-bolt of eternal beauty [can] flash.”95

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93 Balthasar, TL I, 209.


95 Balthasar, GL I, 32.
Balthasar’s focus on the economic Trinity and the foundation it provides for his theological aesthetics establishes a standard for what is truly beautiful with implications for a theological approach to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. What is beautiful must be worthy of love, inclusive of not only an attractive form, but the essence of splendor which beckons the viewer in. This knowledge may be formative and helpful for those with eating disorders, disordered eating habits, or body dissatisfaction as they seek to replace societal beauty standards and the harm they cause and perpetuate with a standard that is both more true and good.\(^\text{96}\) In addition, being drawn into something beautiful is an experience of self-transcendence, encountering God and therefore being unfurled from the human experience of being *incurvatus in se* which individuals struggling with their body-image or eating habits may experience.\(^\text{97}\) Not only does an encounter with beauty draw the individual outward, a movement which combats the inwardness that being drawn into an obsession with calories, food, or weight can encourage, but it responds to the tendency of those experiencing eating disorders to isolate themselves. In addition to the obsessive power of an eating disorder, secrecy makes an eating disorder (often accompanied by feelings of shame) easier to maintain which often leads to isolation. Well-intended encouragements from friends to seek help

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\(^\text{96}\) There is a danger that the standard of perfection found in God can be even harder to attain than the thin ideal, if it is sought-after as a goal that one can reach through the application of spiritual willpower (i.e. Pelagianism). However, part of sanctification (perhaps even the first step) is realizing that one cannot attain goodness, beauty, or truth on one’s own, but rather must rely on God’s grace and love to make sanctification and salvation possible. Recognizing oneself as incapable of earning or attaining goodness, beauty, or truth on one’s own does not mean that one is bad or failing, but rather that one realizes the reality of being human in a fallen state and world, and relies on God’s loving goodness to journey toward union with God (by which one becomes more good, true, and beautiful).

\(^\text{97}\) This Latin phrase is found in Augustine’s *Confessions*, and is reflective of the human tendency to have disordered desires that turn the human person inside themselves in search of something that can satisfy the human *telos*—something, of course, that can only be realized and satisfied when it is ordered rightly, toward the divine.
or consider if one has an eating disorder are often rebuffed as unwelcome, because the eating disorder has become more powerful than the allure of a healthy life, a good relationship with food, and flourishing relationships with others. The act and grace of an encounter with beauty, which imitates and perhaps even incarnates the Trinity’s nature, can spur the beholder into a momentary relationship with something beyond themselves. Beauty, as that which is the proper cause of love, echoes the longing of eros. As previously discussed, when the creature meets God’s self-manifestation in creation—which is the source of and answer to creaturely longing—eros pulls the creature toward God. Balthasar believes that this divine encounter encourages the individual to take up their Christian mission (mirroring the coextensive nature of Christ’s nature and mission); action follows naturally from a divine ecstatic encounter. Such an encounter can be the beginning of a relationship with Being and represent a step toward or within an already-begun recovery process.

2. Theological Anthropological Implications of the Trinity

God’s existence as relationship within the Trinity establishes the correlative human need for relationship with God and with others, establishing a fundamental feature of Balthasar’s theological anthropology. God’s perichoretic self-giving creates a perfect community of love; the immanent Trinity is pure relationship, a mutual pouring-out and receiving. Genesis 1:26 proclaims the human person as imago dei, as reflections of the God who is our Creator. If God is loving relationship, a dynamic exchange between persons, then the claims of theological anthropology that follow are that humans, too, will

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98 Balthasar’s belief in the necessity of action following from a divine encounter is reflected in his Trilogy’s movement from a theological aesthetics to a theo-drama, moving from form to dramatic action.
find their human fullness and flourishing in loving relationship with God and others. Receiving God’s self-communication not only allows human persons to know God, which changes the manner in which they see the world around them (one’s perception of the world is transformed by encounters with beauty), but also offers them a deeper sense of their human purpose. Knowing the nature of the human person and the purpose of their existence that springs from being in relationship with God and is exemplified in Trinitarian nature, especially the Trinity’s second person.

Balthasar’s theology places Christ’s consciousness of his mission at the center of his existence, which informs the human purpose and mission. God reveals God’s innermost self to humanity in acts of self-communication, nowhere more clearly than in the person of Jesus. For Balthasar, Christ is his mission; he not only has or accepts a mission from God but is God’s mission to humanity, “the One in whom person and mission are identical.”99 As Joseph Ratzinger writes, drawing on Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology, Christ “as mediator he is God himself and ‘man himself’—both with equal reality and totality. But this means that God meets me here, not as Father, but as Son and as my brother, whereby—both incomprehensibly and quite comprehensibly—a duality appears in God: God as ‘I’ and ‘You’ in one.”100 Balthasar’s theological anthropological claim is the foundation for later insights regarding God’s desire to exist in relationship with people struggling with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. God desires to meet those who suffer and struggle, to return them to a knowledge of themselves in light of their telos. This self-return constitutes also a return to mission, to obedience in love.

The relationship between the person of Jesus and his mission is fundamental to understanding the significance of relationship both within the Trinity and for those struggling with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. Jesus’ mission is “linked with who Jesus is: indeed, Balthasar does not stop with the claim that he has a very strong sense of mission, or that this sense of mission is particularly central to him, but in fact identifies Jesus with his mission. Jesus does not just have a mission—he is the mission.”

While importantly distinct, there is continuity between Jesus’s identity and mission and returning to one’s self so as to embrace one’s telos, to flourish in the world and be able to respond to the call to Christian mission.

Balthasar’s claim about the unity of Christ’s identity and his mission is rooted in his ontology of personhood. The “what” of being a human person is a shared human experience, but “who” a human person is extends beyond distinctive qualities or the observations of others. Balthasar locates the identity of the human person in God’s communication with the individual, recognizing them as a subject with a purpose (or mission). He writes, “It is when God addresses a conscious subject, tells him who he is and what he means to the eternal God of truth and shows him the purpose of his existence—that is, imparts a distinctive and divinely authorized mission—that we can say of a conscious subject that he is a ‘person.’” When God speaks to the individual, communicating to them who they are and that they have meaning in the eyes of their Creator who is Being itself, God simultaneously gives a purpose, a mission. This mission

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is rooted in love; “[t]he love that God bestows on me makes me become what I truly am, and what I will eventually be. It makes the ‘I’ become the self, the real person that God wants to see and desires to possess.” 104 The human person’s call is to “assimilate our own ‘I’ more and more completely to our God-given mission and to discover in this mission our own identity, which is both personal and social. Because God is unique, by the act of choosing the individual by a love which is unique, God makes the person unique in light of God’s love. 105 According to the Gospel, “‘discipleship’ of this kind requires us to ‘forsake’ and ‘hate’ all things, above all our own ‘I’ (Lk 14:26), so that we may find everything again solely in doing the Father’s will.” 106 In Balthasar’s ontology, to be a human person is to receive God’s communication and mission. Christ serves as the archetypal model for Balthasar’s ontology of the human person as continuous with their mission, in which the human person discovers God by obedient service and in turn comes to discover themselves in doing God’s will.

Knowing who one is as a human person requires encountering and receiving God’s self-communication, in particular through the archetype of Christ. Melanie Susan Barrett frames Balthasar’s perspective on the transformation of the human person in the following way: “It is above all the beauty of God’s love in Christ—and of Christ’s love for us while we were still sinners (to quote St. Paul)—that makes possible our own faithful

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106 Balthasar, *TD III*, 271. This is the sense in which the person is conceived of as an actor on the dramatic stage of their mission in the world.
and loving response…God’s love…literally re-creates us.”

The Trinity’s beauty and its self-giving life makes human nature, its transformation, and the human response of faith and love to God—and others. This gift of re-creation from God works to ground all humans in their telos as God’s children, adopted through Christ’s kenotic self-gift on the cross, through which death—the death which literally and analogically comes through experiences of eating disorder and body dissatisfaction—is defeated. God’s gift of re-creation reminds those struggling with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction that their struggles do not define them, nor will the suffering and despair they inflict have the last word. As a child of God, with a telos oriented toward eternal life with God, their life is marked by being God’s beloved whom God longs to draw more deeply into a life-giving relationship. This relationship aids them in their struggle to orient their life toward what is true, good, and truly beautiful, and to step out of the isolation which eating disorders impart. Life-giving community plays a fundamental role in overcoming this isolation and the lies located at the heart of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction.

As beings whose relations are not consubstantial with the Father, humans are also called into relationship with other people. ‘Horizontal’ relationships sustain the human person, offering life and community which at their best are also images of the Trinity. In

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108 Ratzinger clarifies the distinction between human relations and Trinitarian ones. Because the Son proceeds from the Father, yet “confronts him with nothing belonging to him” he is completely equal to him and one with him: “When it thus becomes clear that the being of Jesus as Christ is a completely open being, a being "from" and "toward", which nowhere clings to itself and nowhere stands on its own, then it is also clear at the same time that this being is pure relation (not substantiality) and, as pure relation, pure unity.” (187-188) It follows, then, that Christian existence “is put with Christ into the category of relationship.” (187) So, being Christian is being like the Son, becoming a son, “living completely open in the ‘from’ and ‘toward’” in relationship with God and others. (188) All citations taken from Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004).
the realm of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, resisting the cultural messaging that one’s body is not good enough or requires constant modification calls for a strong community of love. Such a community affirms one’s goodness as a human “be”-ing, good by virtue of one’s identity as one made in the image of God and denies that modifying one’s body will bring happiness or help one achieve ‘beauty.’ Strong communities that image the Trinity encourage one another in virtue and in orienting one’s life around a telos ordered toward life with Christ—an end which will bring true happiness—instead of the facsimile of happiness that cultural messaging connects to the thin ideal. Being in relationship with family, friends, and communities in a manner which images the Trinity’s own self-giving love gives life, courage in the face of cultural messaging, and belief in one’s own process of striving for goodness even as one recognizes one’s fundamentally flawed state as a human person.

The mission God bestows is fundamentally communal; each person who encounters the light of Christ “receives a call and commission; to him is given the task of living for others and he becomes one of those who have begun to grasp the meaning of communion and sharing.”\textsuperscript{109} Community frees the individual “from merely private existence” and from “collective existence for the sake of a genuine communion and sharing.”\textsuperscript{110} Community helps one know and remember this mission and purpose and remain rooted in it, giving them strength to pursue it through trials and when immersed in an environment which makes it difficult to remember who they are, and that they are made in the loving image of their God.

\textsuperscript{109} Balthasar, \textit{Engagement with God}, 43.

\textsuperscript{110} Balthasar, \textit{Engagement with God}, 44.
3. Love Calling the Other Toward Encounter

The nature of intra-Trinitarian life and its continuity with Christ’s kenosis foregrounds the love of God, calling the one who suffers out of themselves to encounter God’s affirmation of their goodness and worthiness of love. At the center of Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology is a mutual openness whereby humans must be open to the Other and others in order to enter into relationship and establish community. Martin asserts in her discussion of the nature of the Trinity that Balthasar assumes a “Christian personalism” in which the person exists “as a category that is thoroughly open to the O/other.” The Other to whom the individual person is open is described by Martin as an eternal relationship of Trinitarian persons, the nature of which is “radically kenotic, marked by a self-emptying surrender which anticipates, is continuous with, and permits the kenotic acts in the economy of creation, and the incarnation, the passion of Christ, the descent into hell, and the silence of Holy Saturday.” The out-pouring of God’s very Self is both economic and immanent. Immanently, within this relationship, God the Father eternally generates the Son in an “eternal kenotic act which constitutes rather than jeopardizes the Father’s personhood.” That is, God’s kenosis is God’s nature, pouring God’s Self out in love. This does not jeopardize the nature of God, threatening God’s power or substance. Rather, it makes God who God is. For Balthasar, it is in the climax of the cross that there is a simultaneous veiling and unveiling of God’s Self which is

111 The critique of kenosis from feminist scholarship and the broader debate on the topic will be treated in the following chapter.
inherent to the divine act of self-revelation. The cross is the highpoint of God’s revelation and self-communication in the person of Christ, in particular in his kenosis.

The incarnation of the Trinitarian Logos in the human person of Christ incorporates humanity into the Trinity. Reciprocally, in Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology the Trinity is uniquely expressed in the person of Christ, in particular in the unity between Christ’s nature and mission. The incorporation of human nature into the Trinity is defined by its kenotic nature. Kenosis is the point on which Balthasar’s theology turns; Christ’s self-gift, poured out on the cross, defines Balthasar’s Christology, Trinitarian theology, understanding of glory, and the manner in which he deals with the problem of suffering theologically and in the Christian life. The unity between Christ’s nature and mission means that Christ’s kenosis is constitutive of who Christ is, which is encompassed by the Trinity. In Balthasar’s Christology, Balthasar presents Jesus as “the person who so completely accepts, lives out, and identifies himself with his mission that whereas others may have a mission, he simply is his mission.”

The unity between Jesus’ personhood and mission—who he is and his purpose—is rooted in Balthasar’s account of the immanent Trinity. Kilby offers the following description of the relationship between Christ’s mission and the Trinity: “the centrality of Jesus of mission, of being sent by the Father, reflects, or is the incarnate working-out of, the Son’s eternal

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“La croix porte ainsi à son paroxysme la dialectique du dévoilement et du voilement, dialectique inhérente à l’acte d’auto-révélaiion (Offenbarkeit Gottes) divine.”

Kilby, “Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity,” 210. Emphasis in original. This unity of identity and mission is expanded on in this chapter’s following section.
proceeding from the Father.”\textsuperscript{117} Christ’s nature reveals his personhood to be continuous with his (kenotic) mission, and subsequently the consubstantial Trinity is a relationship of dynamic exchange of kenotic self-gift. Not only humanity, but human nature perfected by kenotic self-gift, has been made a part of—and constitutive of—the Trinity. As embodied in Christ and his death on the cross, the Trinity is kenotic.\textsuperscript{118}

C. Implications of Trinitarian Nature for Eating Disorder Recovery

Having established the existence of humanity in the Trinity because of the incarnate Word and the kenotic nature of Christ’s humanity (which serves as the archetypal model for all people), it is time to reflect on the meaning of this theological reality for people who struggle with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. First, the basic theological claim about the inclusion of human experience in Trinitarian life as a result of the Incarnation fundamentally alters the nature of humankind. The inclusion of human nature and experience in God’s own nature and substance is radical; when one reflects on the pain and suffering which accompanies the experiences of those with eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction and God’s ontic willingness to enter into the human experience of such pain, the love behind God’s kenotic nature is clarified. This abundant love responds to the deep, human need to be loved which is often sought through attaining goodness. The recurrence of people with anorexia seeking goodness through weight-loss prompted O’Connor and Esterik to identify misguided moralism as a paradigm, highlighting the desire to be good which, in some cases, can fuel eating


\textsuperscript{118} The nature of Christ’s kenosis on the cross is particularly important when thinking about kenosis in relationship to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. This topic will be taken up in detail in the following chapter.
disorder tendencies.\textsuperscript{119} Frequently, humans believe that in order to be loved, they must be good; remembering God’s love for each human person made in God’s image does not erase the challenge that eating disorders or body dissatisfaction present. However, it does provide a balm for the woundedness of the human heart—a woundedness which is fundamental to the human struggle to believe that they are worthy of love.\textsuperscript{120}

Second, and following from the prior point, the depth of Trinitarian love is reflected not only in the mutually-generative, self-emptying nature of the Trinity, but Balthasar’s inclusion of distance and separation therein. Luy describes the distance incorporated into the Trinity through:

\begin{quote}
...the emerging picture of intra-trinitarian life (which comprises to a large extent Balthasar’s account of divine splendour) is one of radical self-giving - a self-giving that implies internal distance, albeit not a distance of separation, but a ‘kenotic positive distance' of infinite love. It is to this picture of divine glory that all events of the economy (including specific forms of divine revelation) must correspond, including, indeed paradigmatically, the supreme revelatory event of the crucifixion...Balthasar's account of intra-trinitarian 'distance' provides the hermeneutical key necessary to understand how modalities of human distance (largely negative) can become genuine 'forms' of divine revelation when filtered through Balthasar's aesthetic lens of intensifying correspondence.\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

The glory of God in radical self-gift, embodied by Christ’ kenosis on the cross, is what Luy describes as “the emerging picture of intra-trinitarian life” which also characterizes all “events of the economy” or God’s self-revelation in the world. The Trinitarian kenosis

\textsuperscript{119} This “good” is importantly distinct from the goodness linked to the human \textit{telos} as oriented toward relationship with God and the happiness possible therein.

\textsuperscript{120} See Chapter Four’s treatment of Dunnington’s perspective on the role of desiring the affirmation of others in love and worth in addiction for more on this topic, in particular the role that recognizing the unearned nature of God’s love plays in recovery.

\textsuperscript{121} Luy, “The Aesthetic Collision,” 160.

reflects infinite love’s positive distance, which is related to God’s self-revelation to humanity. God’s glory, particularly the climax of the cross, reflects the positive distance of infinite love within God’s self-revelation to creation. Balthasar describes Trinitarian distance, and its relationship to the perichoretic nature of the Trinity, this way in his *Theo-Drama, Volume V*:

> Again, we must not see the ‘distance’ in opposition to, or in conflict with, the ‘closeness’ (of *circumineessio* in the one divine nature); at the same time such distance is necessary, for two reasons: first, in order to hold fast to the personal distinctness of each Person both in being and acting; and second, in order to establish the basis within the Trinity for what, in the economic Trinity, will be the possibility of a distance that goes as far as the Son’s abandonment on the Cross.\(^\text{122}\)

Both Christ’s kenosis and the Father’s self-gift feature heavily in Balthasar’s work; Martin notes that the Father’s self-renunciation—“which the Father both is and does”—encompasses all possible distance and experiences of “Godforsakeness.”\(^\text{123}\) Balthasar bases this claim in the fact that the “Father’s act and substance of self-renunciation manifests what Balthasar calls provocatively ‘a (divine) Godlessness (of love, of course). The latter must not be confused with the godlessness that is found within the world, although it undergirds it, renders it possible and goes beyond it.”\(^\text{124}\) The existence of positive distance in the Trinity, realized in Christ’s own self-renunciation on the cross, encompasses all possible distances and experiences of being forsaken by God.

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\(^\text{123}\) Understanding the nature of God requires an exploration of Christ on the cross, and Christ’s kenosis; this exploration will begin in this chapter, but necessarily continue in the following chapter. While time does not permit a thorough exploration of Christ’s experience of Godforsakenness in hell, this experience of isolation from Christ’s self and divine Trinitarian community can be helpful in understanding the isolation from God and self that people who struggle with eating disorders and body satisfaction experience.

Balthasar’s focus on positive distance within the Trinitarian nature and the particular experience of forsakenness by the Father that Christ encompasses the experience of abandonment that many women who struggle with eating disorders or body dissatisfaction endure. Their own experience of isolation from others or being forsaken by God is something akin to the experience of the enfleshed Logos. Balthasar’s sense of positive distance within the Trinity permits Christ to have experienced separation from the Father and the Trinitarian community on the cross, a theologically divisive claim.

IV. BALTHASAR’S THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND ETHICS: LINKING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND MISSION

Balthasar was not primarily a moral theologian; his compact “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics” offers brief insights into how he envisions the ethics that arises from the claims of his Trilogy. However, his work lends itself to a moral framework because of his central claim that God’s glory is manifest in the world. “The perception of the glory of God does more, however, than transform one’s affect; it transfixes it: the Christian lives and acts in the horizontal but with the eyes turned upward.”125 Christopher Steck claims in his text on the ethical framework of Balthasar’s work that the manifestation of God’s glory is both attractive and commanding to the one who beholds it, such that its divine beauty “draws the beholder, ek-statically, out of his or her previous existence into a participation in the continuing mission of Christ.”126 Divine glory is not only the source of beauty, but an ethical framework.

125 Steck, The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, 66.
126 Steck, The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, 1.

The term ek-stasis draws on the Greek term stasis as it relates to the ontology of the human person, or God, and the movement of both beyond themselves (“ek-”). This term captures the nature of this movement both within and outside of the Trinity, and the human person’s movement outside of themselves toward God, linking this dynamism to ontology insofar as it is constitutive of being (stasis). It is frequently found in the
A. Learning to See Differently

Beauty functions ethically by de-centering the individual, awakening a moral response by the aforementioned ecstatic movement beyond the self toward obedience. Christ’s beauty, “as the glory of God appearing in the world, pierces and transforms the individual, drawing forth an obediential response that is not so much sensual…but affective, rational, and expressive of the new creation she has become.” When an encounter with the divine awakens one to their existence in love as a result of God’s presence, the only possible response is one of gratitude. In other words, “‘The gift’ of the other ‘implies a task’” such that “[e]thical behavior takes shape as grateful response.”

This vision of the human person, bathed in the light of beauty and responding in kind to it, forms the foundation of an theological response to eating disorders. Human obedience is offered not in response to God’s infinite power, but the powerlessness and kenosis of Christ’s love on the cross. In light of Balthasar’s Christocentric theological aesthetics, human persons see the world, and their task within it, in a different light as a result of Christ’s love, kenosis, and the ecstatic response it compels.

Barrett’s work on Balthasar also draws ethical implications from the connection that Balthasar makes between the simultaneous contemporary lack of goodness in the world as well as the inability of so many to recognize authentic beauty as connected to humanity’s telos. For if there is no recognition or appreciation of beauty, “the good is

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Greek Fathers’ work (Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus, etc.) and is the foundation of the manner in which contemporary theology speaks about “ecstatic” movements or experiences.

130 Barrett, Love’s Beauty, 11.
no longer attractive, so we are not motivated to pursue it.”\textsuperscript{131} If true beauty is not recognized as located in the unity of both splendor and form, societal beauty ideals will be impoverished. In other words, recognizing that true beauty is linked to Being itself and incarnated in the beauty of Christ’s perfect life and selfless love draws the Christian into Christ’s own mission; one who sees beauty is inspired by it, and drawn toward the splendor which emanates from it. Motivation and desire to live out the Christian life’s beauty is provided, at least in part, by the beauty of Christ’s example. Without the attraction of beauty, one approaches the good as an obligation; even the logic of goodness is not captivating without the thread of beauty.\textsuperscript{132}

Losing an awareness of the awe that beauty inspires motivates both individuals and communities to reduce that which they behold to mere materialism. Barrett characterizes the loss of beauty as “a loss of primal wonder.”\textsuperscript{133} “We moderns no longer respond either to humanity or to the created universe with a sense of awe, and this leads us to embrace matter as a universal metaphysical principle, which ruins our taste for love.”\textsuperscript{134} Barrett’s assessment resonates with Charles Taylor’s assertion of the disenchantment of the modern world which leads to the dissipation of awe.\textsuperscript{135} When the world and its beauty no longer inspires in the beholder a sense of awe, matter becomes all that matters. As individuals and society embrace consumerism, humans “inevitably begin

\textsuperscript{131} Barrett, \textit{Love’s Beauty}, 11.
\textsuperscript{132} Barrett, \textit{Love’s Beauty}, 11.
\textsuperscript{133} Barrett, \textit{Love’s Beauty}, 12.
\textsuperscript{134} Barrett, \textit{Love’s Beauty}, 12.
regarding one another as mere matter…”136 As a result, the ethical value of individual persons diminishes along with their inherent dignity.137 Reclaiming the wonder and awe that accompanies true beauty–beauty rooted in Being, mediated through graced encounter–is one component of re-learning what beauty is. Balthasar also calls Christians to learn to see differently as a result of their mission: “The Christian must, first of all, learn to see his fellow man and all created things through the eyes of God.”138 Rediscovering wonder and awe can help complicate materialism, leading us out of the cave which convinces us that materialism, among other cultural values, should be our ideal and idol.

Indeed, one of the primary problems of unrealistic beauty standards, especially the thin ideal, is the manner in which it reduces the individual to mere matter–oftentimes, literally one’s matter as measured by the number of pounds one weighs. The primary lens young girls learn to view one another through, as they scroll through Instagram and TikTok, is how perfect, beautiful, or attractive they are; they frequently find themselves coveting the bodies, beauty, and power of others. While the individual retains agency in the context of contemporary society–that is, one can resist harmful cultural messaging and yielding to the temptation to enter into such comparison or making one’s conformation to societal beauty standards the primary lens through which they view themselves–but as discussed in the previous chapter, the formative effect of these societal norms is profound. The evacuation of wonder in the face of beauty encourages the

tendency present in contemporary society to apply the materialist lens by which one’s body’s size and appearance becomes a primary defining characteristic which affects one’s self-confidence and conception of one’s goodness. This reductionistic, materialist lens is not only reserved for self-evaluation, but is applied to others as well—a behavior not only encouraged by the coveting and comparison that social media fuels but modeled by others in those spaces as well (both in the content on the sites, and on comments users leave on posted content). Reclaiming a theological aesthetic can help redeem how girls, women, and society at large evaluate beauty, with significant resonances for how they view not only goodness in the abstract, but how they understand themselves, their inherent dignity, and the manner in which they view and evaluate others in a way that extends beyond appearance and encompasses goodness in light of the truth that humans are made in the image of God.

B. The Ethical Implications of Balthasar’s Aesthetics and the Form of Christ

Barrett identifies two key insights from Balthasar’s identification of modernity’s ills, locating ethical insights in his systematic claims. She claims that in Balthasar, aesthetics and ethics are linked on the level of moral motivation (that one is motivated to pursue the good because of its beauty) and moral discernment (beauty’s presence indicates an inherent ethical value).139 Because Balthasar identifies an inherent connection between beauty and goodness, the fullness of beauty must necessarily encompass morality.140 The perfection and goodness of a thing is found in its realization; when a thing is perfected, it is made good, and its telos is actualized, according to

139 Barrett, Love’s Beauty, 12.
140 Barrett, Love’s Beauty, 12.
Aquinas.\textsuperscript{141} For Balthasar, the ethical task is something with which humans “concur and assist” as part of God’s creativity; in other words, part of the Christian task is participating in Christ’s mission, or “God’s work of creative form.”\textsuperscript{142} Linking ethics not to obligation or duty, but to glory or beauty, is an uncommon ethical turn. Some may raise concerns that such a turn risks subjectivism, particularism, or irrationalism.\textsuperscript{143} However, Balthasar offers a metaphysical basis for beauty’s rationality; establishing the Trinity as Being itself, and truth, goodness, and beauty as transcendentals, he claims that the transcendentals are convertible with being.\textsuperscript{144} In this way, truth, goodness, and beauty are both conceptually distinct, but also “interpenetrate” one another in a manner akin to circumincession–a Trinitarian concept defined by the Council of Florence as the Trinitarian persons’ mutual indwelling.\textsuperscript{145} Just as the Trinitarian persons are distinct, but interwoven in the others, so too are the transcendentals fully present in each other. Beauty, therefore, is not merely adjacent to reasoning and ethics (or truth and goodness), but rather is integral to both.\textsuperscript{146}

An ethics follows from Balthasar’s aesthetics which is rooted in the Christological arc of his Trilogy and orients the reader to the Being of the Trinity. For Balthasar, all ethical claims flow through the central person of Christ. Marc Ouellet characterizes

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\textsuperscript{142} Barrett, \textit{Love’s Beauty}, 12. Baarrett is referencing pages 34-35 of \textit{GL I}.
\textsuperscript{143} Barrett, \textit{Love’s Beauty}, 13.
\textsuperscript{144} Barrett, \textit{Love’s Beauty}, 17.
\textsuperscript{146} Barrett, \textit{Love’s Beauty}, 18.
\end{flushright}
Balthasar’s sense of Christian ethics as communicating the ecclesial essence, God’s communication to the world:

It is the radiance of this Christian ethics of absolute love which reflects most purely the essence of the Church as the self-communication of God to the world. Balthasar has never ceased to recall that the credibility of Christianity does not rest primarily on a teaching, a wisdom, or an organization guaranteed by a revelation from above. It rests above all on Someone who acts and who allows action at the heart of history by holiness, Someone who manifests his own transcendence by the transcendence of Christian love...147

The love which lends Christianity its “credibility,” both generally and ethically, both is and flows from the person of Christ. As the incarnation of Being, God’s love brought to human nature and to the world, Christ places “action at the heart of human history by holiness.”148 The Incarnation places action at the core of revelation and human history. Each time a person acts, grace and virtue enables them to both imitate and strive toward Christ whose existence and acts manifest “his own transcendence by the transcendence of Christian love.”149

For Balthasar, Christ is metaphysically and ontologically the locus of Christian ethics; as a Someone, Christ makes possible our own ethical responses and the possibility of attaining in some small measure the holiness he incarnated in human history, a holiness which is not merely an austere ideal, but can bring healing to the challenges and traumas of human existence, in particular eating disorders. While external standards (a particular weight, body shape, or other motivation) can become the focus of those with eating disorders, disordered eating habits, or body dissatisfaction, it is frequently the love

of a person which helps begin recovery—a family member, friend, teammate, doctor, or other community member who recognizes that an individual’s body or habits express that they are suffering.\footnote{This truth echoes what is found in the psychological approach of IFS; it is not psychological standards and goals that drive recovery, but focusing on the relationship of interior parts that flourish when brought into harmony. IFS’s relational lens echoes psychologically the theological truth expressed here.} These people mediate the love and grace of Christ, the supreme ethical standard whose embrace of love and recognition of the inherent goodness of the human person is a balm to the constant struggle of trying to meet an external standard or being trapped in the patterns of an eating disorder. Having Christ, not a rule or set of expectations to meet, as the Christian ethical standard embraces human experience and places relationship at the center of ethics in a manner that a manualist approach based on the morality of specific actions cannot. A personalist approach which relies on relationship with God as informing the exercise of one’s conscience can be transformative for those struggling with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. An approach to morality based on relationship and the development and exercise of one’s conscience prompts individuals beyond a rigid, legalistic mindset toward which many perfectionists, who are more likely to develop eating disorders, are inclined.

Christology orients the reader to Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology. This pattern is also imitated as one seeks to read Balthasar’s work in search of a Christian ethic. Ouellet articulates the relationship of lived ethics as being traced through the covenant Christ establishes: “In Christ, the covenant desired by God from all eternity becomes a living and fruitful reality. His response to the love of the Father pro nobis makes possible our response to the Trinitarian love ‘through him and in him.’”\footnote{Ouellet, “The Foundations of Christian Ethics,” 376.} Christ’s response to God...
makes possible each individual’s response of love—which for Balthasar involves, if not being grounded in, obedience—in particular through the mystery of substitution. In his substitution, Christ “gives the grace of justification and a mission of service to God and to man.” As a result of Christ’s substitution and the grace it imparts, Balthasar believes there to be “no general ethical norm over and above this divine election in Christ, which renders possible, through the Holy Spirit, an authentic personal response in the manner of a disciple of Christ himself.” Any ethical response, like the response of Christian discipleship through which ethical commitments flow, must for Balthasar be conceived of as being made through Christ’s own sacrifice on the cross which makes possible the “authentic personal response” of discipleship. The moral life is made possible by, and therefore must flow through, Christ’s kenosis and relationship to the Trinity.

There lies a great hope in Balthasar’s vision of the human person as being rooted in Christ for those struggling with eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction. A significant component of recovery is reclaiming a sense of self, a holistic vision of one’s existence (and goodness) which is distinct from one’s weight or appearance. This sense of the central person, a person who is so beloved by God that he or she is worthy of Christ’s kenotic self-gift, is reaffirmed and reestablished in the most rightly-oriented way in relationship with Christ:

More than in any other theologian, it appears, in the thought of Balthasar, that the most intimate identity of the human person lies hidden within the person of

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154 This idea is seen in psychological approaches like IFS, and in the work of other therapists (i.e. Costin and Grabb’s 8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder, referenced in Chapter Four). Women and girls in recovery strive to define themselves by measures not linked to weight, appearance, or the frequently with which they engage eating-disorder behaviors, but rather as robust persons often with a focus on who they are in the context of relationships with people who love them.
Christ. That which gives to every person a qualitative uniqueness is the Word which comes from God as a grace that heals a fallen human liberty and that creates a participation in the ‘filiation-mission’ of the Incarnate Word. The identity of mission and person, developed by Balthasar in light of the Christological archetype, seems to me to represent a major shift towards an ethic based on grace and liberty. In effect, the freeing of our liberty through the grace of Christ commits this very same liberty to the service of trinitarian love itself in human history. It is a commitment which completes the intersubjective nature of the human person as image of God, by the grace of a trinitarian resemblance which is signified within the reality of the ecclesial ‘we.’ The result of this resemblance is a rapport of reciprocal inclusion between person and community which reflects, within the ecclesial communion open to the world, the glory of trinitarian love.155

A Catholic moral theological response rooted in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics cannot be divorced from his Christology and is shaped by belief in the centrality of Christ’s kenosis in defining beauty. Such a response affirms the beauty and goodness of the human person’s most interior identity. This identity is rooted in Christ and discovered through encounter; the uniqueness of each human person, in other words, is imparted through the healing grace which enables human participation in Christ’s mission. Because of this, a Balthasarian ethic possesses grace and freedom as its cornerstones—two keys to developing a Catholic moral theological approach to eating disorders. Christ’s self-gift frees human liberty through grace to image more fully Trinitarian liberty, completing the “intersubjective nature of the human person as image of God.” Humans most fully image God when in relationship with God, by encountering through grace the love of Christ which abounds so plentifully that it was clarified on a cross. As a result, when this love is authentically encountered and trusted, the “rapport of reciprocal inclusion between person and community” is established.156 Such communities reflect the

156 For Balthasar, this is most fully realized and imaged in the Church; I contend that communities that bear similar marks can also exist both within and outside the Church and help women struggling with eating
glory of God’s own Trinitarian exchange of love to the world around them, incarnating Christ’s presence into the world as the Christian mission is lived out.

C. The Role of Human Freedom in Mission

This section closes with a final insight into how a moral theology grounded in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics offers a vision of the free human person whose uniqueness is realized in Christ and lived out in mission—a healing, holistic vision for those who struggle with eating disorders. Ouellet believes that in a Balthasarian anthropology, the human person’s liberty and God’s grace combine to help them realize who they were created to be: “Briefly, we become persons in Christ, by a gift of our freedom to the mission which likens us to, and associates us with, the gift of God. The ethical decision in response to the call of grace constitutes a theological person.”

Human freedom is created to be joined in unison with Christ’s own through divine grace; this is the process of “becoming” ethical persons in pursuit of their telos.

The role of human freedom is central to both Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and the dramatic aesthetics expressed in his Theo-Drama, the final movement of his Trilogy. The normative model for freedom in Balthasar’s moral framework is one of an aesthetic encounter between subject and object. Steck describes the relationship between beauty and freedom in Balthasar in the following manner:

Beautiful objects and finite goods, as they appear in the persons, events, even things in the world, offer us a ‘stage’ on which to act. We fashion our identity in the very recognition that we give them through decision and action... Through our

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acceptance of their beckoning, we are given the freedom to express identities formed by them. Beauty is thus not only free, but free-granting.\textsuperscript{159}

Freedom is not only encompassed by the decision of who the human person becomes, but the manner in which they perceive the world. To this end, the right manner of perceiving the world is one which allows the agent to respond freely to beauty, which is made possible by obedient love.\textsuperscript{160} The act of the person’s self-renunciation in response to the self-gift of the divine results in a union of freedoms which in turn reflects the glory of its source in the perichoretic unity of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{161} It is in the realization of this process that true joy, peace, and contentment can be found—not in the pursuit of societal beauty ideals. Entering into this process, begun by an encounter with Being in the context of grace, is itself an ethical decision, a response to the call of grace. Part of this response is obediently imitating Christ’s love for others lived out in mission.\textsuperscript{162}

Balthasar places living of the mission at the heart of humanity’s covenant with God. “At the heart of the historical-eschatological covenant, those who agree to live their existence as a mission, i.e., as a service to absolute love, as saints, find their beatitude and their profound identity precisely in that service. They find, in wonderment and gratitude, that they ‘can’ do something for God.”\textsuperscript{163} It is in the living of “existence as mission” in which those striving for sainthood find themselves. In offering love, those who agree to live their human existence as mission, or in service to absolute love,

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{159} Steck, \textit{The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar}, 27.
\bibitem{160} Steck, \textit{The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar}, 27.
\bibitem{161} Steck, \textit{The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar}, 30.
\bibitem{162} For more on the nature on Christian obedience and its connection to human fulfillment, see pages 64–92 of Steck’s \textit{The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar}.
\end{thebibliography}
are not just turned toward God in an aspiration toward love; they are also turned
toward the world, in God and with God, in a conspiracy with love. Even more,
they find that they can not only collaborate with the pouring forth of Trinitarian
love into the world, but by an unfathomable grace, they can also and thereby serve
the uncreated exchange between Father and Son in the Spirit.\textsuperscript{164}

It is in this space that human freedom is realized. When “through God’s becoming man in
Jesus Christ, which is an example to all of true fulfillment, there is a break-through and
entry into the sphere of precisely that kind of freedom which is so feverishly sought after
by modern man but which, without the revelation of God, he can never otherwise
find.”\textsuperscript{165} When human freedom is mis-directed, it “urges them onward into a barren void”
as opposed to the Christian who is a “messenger of freedom accomplished and a freedom
attainable by all.”\textsuperscript{166} This experience, of being urged toward a reality which is barren and
cannot satisfy, echoes the themes of discontentment and experiences of never being
satisfied of people who struggle with eating disorders.

Eating disorders can be so all-consuming, orienting those who struggle with them
toward food, eating, and weight in a manner which turns them inward onto themselves in
a manner most would never choose without the compulsive influence of a disorder. Being
so consumed with their eating disorders and the strict patterns and rituals that define them
often leave women with little time to engage with others or invest in relationships; many
recount losing friendships and experiencing the atrophy of family ties. When recovering
and being brought out of themselves into renewed relationships with others, many people
who struggled with eating disorders or disordered eating behaviors can begin to turn once


\textsuperscript{165} Balthasar, \textit{Engagement with God}, 21.

\textsuperscript{166} Balthasar, \textit{Engagement with God}, 21.
again toward the world and their communities. If part of their recovery includes a willingness to engage with God, their Creator and Lover, recovery can also be a time in which they become intentional participants in the communication of divine love to the world, serving in “the uncreated exchange between Father and Son in the Spirit.” The human person is called to offer “the free reciprocal love of the chosen, because free love can only be answered with love given freely. Therefore the love of God requires of those whom he chooses a free return of love” in which their telos will be realized.  

In summary, while avoiding the moral model’s implication that eating disorders are sinful moral failing and recognizing that moral agents have a degree of control over both their attention and other components of their flourishing as humans, “[i]t is only the proclamation of the true God that can decenter man from his unhealthy anthropocentrism and re-center him on Jesus, the one and only, who opens for him an infinite horizon of liberty, in love.” It is the response of love made possible by the gift of grace which can bring wholeness as one’s telos is realized.

V. CONCLUSION

Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, using the elements of splendor and form grounded in a kenotic Christology, provides a robust understanding of beauty which contradicts contemporary culture’s superficial sense of what is beautiful. First, Balthasar establishes the need for beauty in relationship to goodness and truth; neither is attractive to the human person who is called to pursue it without the dynamic pull of beauty which aids and directs the human desire to be good in pursuit of the truth. The existence of the

167 Balthasar, Engagement with God, 32.
thin ideal and other limiting cultural ideals of beauty and attractiveness constrain the human person’s flourishing. The room that Balthasar’s aesthetics leaves for mystery and wonder, both oriented toward God in addition to recognizing the complexity and goodness of the human person, can serve as an antidote for the flatness or disenchanted nature of contemporary society. There is mystery, too, in how grace operates; one can struggle to recover from an eating disorder yet be in relationship to God, pursuing one’s telos. Growth in virtue takes place in the everyday; for many girls and women, the “everyday” is fraught with struggles with body dissatisfaction, the temptation to purge, or trying to navigate how to eat well without falling into unhealthy dichotomies between “good” and “bad” foods. The question of how to think about grace and recovery, especially when one can desire recovery, praying for it and willing it, and yet continue to struggle is a complicated one—it is not one that will be resolved here, but is a question worthy of further study and thought.¹⁶⁹

Three Trinitarian insights from Balthasar’s work contribute to the formation of a moral theological response to eating disorders. First, he further develops the concepts of splendor and form in the Trinity, because the nature of divine being and life are foundational to understanding not only beauty, but goodness and truth. Second, the centrality of the relationship with God and others as a result of Balthasar’s presentation of the perichoretic nature of the Trinity foregrounds the role relationship and community can play both practically and theologically in the healing and recovery of those with

¹⁶⁹ See the end of both Chapter Three’s Section B, “Creation, Kenosis, and Divine Love” and Chapter Four’s Section A, “Why Virtue Ethics?” for further considerations of this question.

eating disorders. Third, the nature of the inter-Trinitarian life, in particular the distance which is maintained between Trinitarian persons, the humanity of the second person of the Trinity, and the continuity with the expression of the divine nature present in Christ’s kenosis foregrounds God’s love. This love calls the one who suffers out of themselves to encounter God’s affirmation of their being, goodness, and worthiness of love—a balm for the struggles of one who suffers with eating disorders or body dissatisfaction.¹⁷⁰

Finally, Balthasar’s work establishes the person of Christ at the heart of Christian ethics. The transformative potential located in a human person at the heart of ethics instead of a series of standards or rules responds to the challenges of those struggling with eating disorders or disordered eating habits, wherein rules about eating or meeting external goals become (to greater or lesser degrees) the center of one’s life. Eating disorders, disordered eating habits, and even body dissatisfaction turn the human person inward, away from relationship with others and the pursuit of other life-giving aspects of human life. The person of Christ, the embodiment of beauty, offers grace that can help those who struggle respond to his outstretched, wounded hand which promises understanding, healing, and the affirmation of their goodness as a human person created in God’s image.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ This conclusion parallels that of Kent Dunnington, although it was arrived at independently. His “Recovery and the Humble Reconstitution of the Self,” Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 70, no. 4 (December 2018), 242-251 argues that humility is central to recovery, as it responds to the recognition of a person struggling with an addiction that they cannot attain their ego ideal. Once one’s struggle with an eating disorder shatters the ego ideal, it can function as a perilous gift that prompts a turn away from the ego ideal toward the love of God which is an unearned gift.

¹⁷¹ This Balthasarian vision aligns with Servais Pinckaers’s vision of the relationship between the nature of morality and moral freedom. He understands moral freedom as a seed that contains knowledge of that which is true, and inclines the human person toward that which is good and will make them happy. This is not a mere morality of obligation, which one exercises in response to external commands, but rather a freedom for excellence which permits growth in virtue. This freedom allows the moral agent to order their life toward that which is objectively good, and which is therefore the source of authentic happiness.
CHAPTER THREE: 
Christ’s Kenosis, Love, and Worth: Taking on the Eyes of Christ

I. INTRODUCTION

Balthasar’s theological aesthetics makes clear the need for and role of beauty in faith and relationship with God. The Triune God’s glory is revealed in kenosis, and the prior chapter articulated the ways in which Balthasar’s theology reveals the link between kenosis and divine nature as Love itself. Building on this work, this chapter turns to the manner in which Christ’s cross exemplifies the outpouring of self which both sustains the Trinity and is the manner in which humanity is saved. Balthasar establishes the person of Christ at the heart of Christian ethics, highlighting both the role and need of relationality in a theological response to eating disorders.

Christ’s self-gift on the cross is one of Balthasar’s theological priorities which remains in view throughout his theological aesthetics, dramatic theology, and other areas of exploration. The kenotic nature of both the Trinity and Christ reveals the love which sustains the existence of both. However, this claim and priority is a contentious one, attracting reactions ranging from measured analysis to rage from feminist scholars of the past few decades. In this chapter, I offer a brief overview of a range of feminist reactions to Balthasar’s presentation of kenosis which will include an assessment of his theology of sexual difference and its relationship to the Trinity. This response is necessary in order to engage Balthasar’s presentation of kenosis as part of a theological response to eating disorders in light of the rates at which they affect girls and women. Next, I engage the insights of Sarah Coakley and Jennifer Newsome Martin to develop a path toward understanding Balthasar’s kenotic theology in the context of a theological response to eating disorders and the thin ideal. I argue that Balthasar’s theology of sexual difference
and kenosis provides a vision of the Trinity’s nature which exists in relationship to creation, the Incarnation, and the cross. This Trinitarian vision, rightly understood, protects against distorted understandings of both kenosis and sexual difference in his work. Balthasar provides a foundation for three distinctive theological claims regarding the Trinitarian role of community in human anthropology, the physical body’s goodness and communication of God’s Spirit, and kenotic insights into the thin ideal in response to the contemporary challenge of women’s experiences of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. Christ’s kenosis on the cross offers women struggling with eating disorders or body dissatisfaction resources for understanding themselves by the reorientation of the spiritual senses through an encounter with Christ which transforms both their physical senses and the manner in which they perceive the world.

II. TRINITARIAN AND CHRISTOLOGICAL KENOSIS

Christ’s kenosis functions as a hermeneutic in Balthasar’s theology, serving as the lens through which he explores the divine nature and upon which he bases his Trinitarian theology. God is “radically kenotic, marked by a self-emptying surrender which anticipates, is continuous with, and permits the kenotic acts in the economy of creation, and the incarnation, the passion of Christ, the descent into hell, and the silence of Holy Saturday.”¹ God’s nature is revealed on the cross in the person of Christ, in whom takes place a simultaneous veiling and unveiling of God’s Self which serves as the climax of

God’s self-revelation.² The cross, and Christ’s kenotic outpouring, is the highpoint of God’s revelation and self-communication in the person of Christ.

Balthasar locates the height of God’s glory in Christ’s death on the cross, a claim fundamental to his aesthetics, Christology, and Trinitarian theology. God’s glory is manifest in the act of Christ renouncing equality with God in self-emptying act of humiliation.³ Nichols describes the relationship between God’s glory and the beauty of Christ’s death on the cross as he writes, “[t]he glory of God’s triune love finds its supreme manifestation in the human form of the Son precisely as we see that humanity broken on the Cross, obedient unto death.”⁴ The glory of love is located in brokenness, reflected in Christ’s obedience to God’s will over his own desire that the cup he knew that he was to drink might pass from him (Mt 26: 39). The cross reveals God’s character, the simultaneous unity and distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity.⁵ Borrowing from Barth, Balthasar identifies Christ as the “‘concretion’ of the triune God.”⁶ The cross and Christ’s obedience for the good of humankind is a Trinitarian event for Balthasar. The kenosis of Christ reveals the nature of the Trinity; both mutually interpret each other, revealing how God’s glory is manifest in a bloody death on a cross.


⁵ Nichols, Divine Fruitfulness, 166.

⁶ Nichols, Divine Fruitfulness, 166.
The Balthasarian presentation of the relationship between the Trinity and Christ’s death on the cross also reminds his readers that the cross did not merely accomplish humanity’s salvation through God’s “self-abnegation” in “the Love that stoops down,” but also makes it possible for humankind to participate in divine glory through the cross. Christ’s suffering and death makes radical redemption and participation in God’s glory possible, a point which is pivotal to engaging with kenosis in the context of eating disorders. Rightly understanding kenosis does not encourage women to pour themselves out in pursuit of the thin ideal. Rather, a Christian kenosis that imitates Christ’s kenosis offers a self-transcending means of pursuing one’s telos. It prompts the person toward relationship with God, the source of true goodness and beauty, and offers grace as an aid in that pursuit.

Having established that Balthasar’s presentation of kenosis is essential to and reflected in the nature of the Trinity and is not merely a defining feature of the Father-Son Trinitarian relationship nor specifically Christological, it is worth exploring more broadly the theology of kenosis in order to better understand what is distinctive to Balthasar’s approach and why accurately understanding kenosis is fundamental to engaging eating disorders theologically. The theological term kenosis is rooted in the verb kenoo in Philippians 2:7, which translates, “he emptied himself.”

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7 Balthasar, Mysterium Paschale, 25.


points out that kenosis’ biblical root in Philippians raises the question of what this emptying refers to; is it God’s self-emptying in the Incarnation, or Christ’s outpouring of his life on the cross? Coakley points out the implications of this exegetical decision:

If Philippians 2 is not talking about Christ’s divine pre-existence, then the whole matter of kenosis is, from the start, not a matter of speculating about divine characteristics and the effect on them of the incarnation, but rather a moral matter of Jesus’ ‘self-sacrifice’ en route to the cross…If, on the other hand—as has been the more normal reading from early in the church’s exegesis—pre-existence and incarnation are assumed to be at stake in the passage, then sooner or later the metaphysical question necessarily presses: What, exactly, has been ‘emptied’ at the incarnation? Is this merely a figure of speech, or does it connote an actual loss of divine power—temporary or otherwise?9

Understanding what is emptied and the nature of that emptying is necessary to understanding kenosis, and in particular Balthasar’s understanding of kenosis.

Balthasarian kenosis encompasses the whole Trinity; it is not just Christological. Kenosis, “as the surrender of the ‘form of God’ [...] becomes the decisive act of the love of the Son…but the whole Trinity remains involved in this act.”10 The fullness of God and divine glory is present on the cross. Balthasar conceives of kenosis through a Trinitarian lens.

It is worth noting that even within a varied history of both translation and use throughout Christian history, the term “kenosis” has generally referred to God’s unconditional love for creation as exemplified in the descent of the Son for humanity’s salvation. In the words of Aristotle Papanikolaou, the suffering of Christ on the cross “became itself the paradigm for human salvation.”11 When understood as “obedience,

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10 Balthasar, GL VII, 214.
humility, and self-sacrifice,” kenosis became “the precondition for human participation in the saving event of Christ.” As a result, the sense of kenosis as self-sacrificial love “emerged as an ethical imperative within the Christian tradition.” For Balthasar, it is Christ’s act of self-sacrifice (one of haunting and terrible torture) which is his “glorification…brought about because of his obedience in the Spirit, [that] makes possible a mysterious participation in that glory, where the Spirit incorporates to Christ’s body, and makes [possible] every free act of Christian obedience to the command to love.” Christ’s glory, which is both the glory of the Trinity and the summit of beauty, is found in the kenotic act of the cross. It is this sacrifice which not only accomplishes human salvation, but enables participation in God’s glory which in turn frees the Christian to be free to love like Christ, to imitate the beauty of his obedience: “It is possible to carry this [mission] out, because obedience to God and waiting upon his will belong to the fundamental structure of the creature. Yet this is possible only through Jesus–‘without me, you can do nothing’ (Jn 15.5)–because Christian fruitfulness comes only from the kenotic readiness of the Son as he looks to the Father…”

In Balthasar’s presentation of the relationship between the cross, glory, salvation, and discipleship, his consistent theological interweaving of encounter and mission within discipleship is clear. Christ’s death and outpouring of self in obedient love on the cross is the climax of God’s glory. Beauty incarnate’s death is beautiful in part because it makes

Michelle A. Gonzalez, “Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology,” *Theological Studies* 65 (2004), pp. 566-595 is also a good resource for more on this point.

12 Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis and Abuse,” 41.
13 Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis and Abuse,” 41.
possible participation in divine glory. The striking nature of the juxtaposition of torture and beauty and death and glory in Balthasar lies at the center of his presentation of theological aesthetics and kenosis. However, his reliance on these themes have attracted criticism from feminist scholars, particularly in light of their readings of his theology of sexual difference and gender. These critiques must be addressed in order to harness Balthasar’s kenosis as part of a theological response to women’s experiences of eating disorders, particularly due to the thin ideal’s influence on beauty standards.

A. Balthasar’s Feminist Problem

To engage Balthasar as part of a discussion on eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, particularly given the previous chapter’s reliance on his theological aesthetics to critique the feminine thin ideal and this chapter's foray into his doctrine of kenosis, it is necessary to briefly acknowledge the criticisms that feminist scholars offer in response to his theology of sexual difference. The work of Delores Williams explores the question of what is acceptably female, and what this has to say about what society regards as good and beautiful. Her work points out what she identifies as the heart of culture’s oppressive aesthetic values, and the need to challenge both the patriarchy and how women treat one another in order to arrive at an authentic understanding of the “acceptably female identity.” Her womanist critique of the patriarchy takes issue with the assumptions Balthasar makes about sex, gender, and sexual difference. In her accurately-named *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, Karen Kilby writes that,

[a] notion of mutual dependence and mutual surrender would of course be reconcilable with equality, but Balthasar very specifically aligns womanliness (and not masculinity) with weakness, surrender, and dependence. Fundamentally,

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Balthasar’s logic is that women relate to men in something of the way all should relate to God, and whatever else we make of this, conducive to the notion of equality between men and women it is not.\(^\text{17}\)

A few pages later, Kilby reveals that she wonders if there could be a “psychological explanation” for Balthasar’s interest in gender and the nuptial.\(^\text{18}\) Tina Beattie, another staunch critic, claims that Balthasar’s sense of womanhood and the female body lacks almost any redeeming quality. Her view of Balthasar’s presentation of womanhood is such that she believes that according to him, women must give up not only their female bodies, but their identities to unite themselves to the Church. She states that “[I]ike Mary, ‘woman’ must surrender her identity, her personhood and her sexual body, in order to become one with the Church, and in order to let ‘him’ become ‘her’ in his suprasexual love affair with Christ.”\(^\text{19}\) Beattie also asserts that theologians or readers who appreciate Balthasar have “fallen under his spell,” for there is “poison at work” in his theology.\(^\text{20}\)

According to her psychologizing reading, Balthasar’s “psychological and spiritual health” should be questioned—something Martin rightly points out is more “ad hominem accusation than scholarly argument.”\(^\text{21}\) She politely observes that feminist scholars’ engagement with Balthasar’s theology of sexual difference ranges “from the apologetic to


the vitriolic.” Balthasar’s critics believe that his theology intentionally presents women negatively, consistently casting them as secondary to men in a manner which for many feminist scholars relegates his theology of gender, sexual difference, and the cross into the realm of the irredeemable.

Feminist scholars also take issue with the Christian doctrine of kenosis. Daphne Hampson observes that a kenotic sense of self-emptying may employ a cultural theme which is already damaging women’s sense of identity. Men, however, may need to model Christ’s kenosis on a moral level in order to overcome their patriarchal tendency to abuse the power that they possess. Hampson writes,

> [t]hat [kenosis] should have featured prominently in Christian thought is perhaps an indication of the fact that men have understood what the male problem, in thinking in terms of hierarchy and domination, has been. It may well be a model which men need to appropriate and which may helpfully be built into the male understanding of God. But… for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm.

She is a paradigmatic example of the feminist scholars that advocate for women’s abandonment of kenosis, relegating its usefulness to men who need to reform this relationship to power and their desire to dominate. Feminist scholars in this line of thinking argue that women are already being harmed by the ways that the world around

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Christopher Hadley, SJ, also picks up on feminist concerns in Balthasar in his A Symphony of Distances, especially those relating to kenosis. Hadley argues that Balthasar’s Trinitarian gender essentialism is a danger to Balthasar’s theological project, but that his theological work itself provides resources for “a critique of his internal consistency and of the adequacy of his theology of distance to the contemporary theological task of mediating religious symbols and language in context” (14). Time and space does not permit deeper engagement with Hadley’s response to gender’s role in the Trinity and its implications, but can be referenced in Chapters 3-4 (p. 90-182) of A Symphony of Distances: Patristic, Modern, and Gendered Dimensions of Balthasar’s Trinitarian Theology (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2022).

23 Daphne Hampson, Theology and Feminism (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 155.
them demands their self-abnegation, so they suggest leaving the moral implications of kenosis to men or altogether abandoning the doctrine.

B. Self-Sacrifice

Like Martin, Coakley acknowledges that kenosis has become a “contentious theme in feminist theology in recent decades: the call to ‘self-effacement’ or ‘self-sacrifice’—whether in God or in the human—has the inevitable ring of ‘feminine’ abasement, which feminist theology from its outset has been concerned to expose and criticize.”24 As noted above, the feminist critique of kenotic christology is that it “may make normative for women forms of ‘self-sacrifice’ and ‘self-abasement’ that keep them in subordinate roles, and can even lead to the condoning of abuse.”25 She goes so far as to wonder if “this current project of valorizing the ‘kenotic’ [can] be rescued…”26–an important question, given that kenosis lies at the heart of this development of a theological response to eating disorders.26 One of the primary things from which kenosis needs to be “rescued” is that which is leveraged in Hampson’s critique: gender associations around kenosis abound, especially because of the centrality of self-sacrifice to the doctrine. The harm which has been done to women as a consequence of gender assumptions necessitates both addressing them and acknowledging that they are not fundamentally what kenosis is about. To make kenosis a doctrine that is primarily about


Coakley is referencing here a sense of self-sacrifice not ordered to the achievement of one’s telos directed toward divine life with God. Her invocation of self-abasement similarly refers to a degradation of the self ordered not toward growth in holiness or a movement of penitence, but acting in such a way so as to not recognize one’s fundamental goodness, value, and dignity (often motivated by shame or a sense of inferiority) in relationship with others, especially men.

the male and the female is to ignore the fundamentally human nature of vulnerability and self-sacrifice.

However, a response to feminist scholar’s critique necessitates correctly understanding the nature of self-sacrifice both generally and for women. This is needed not only because of the assumptions and often-inequitable expectations regarding how and the degree to which women are called to sacrifice in Western culture—something feminist critics rightly assert should be considered—but also because of the relationship between sacrifice and eating disorders or disordered-eating behaviors. As women limit their food intake, over-exercise, or engage in other eating-disorder behaviors, they whittle their bodies away as they try to attain goodness through thinness in the eating-oriented moral system represented by O’Connor and Esterik’s misguided moralism paradigm. Their obedience and discipline are a hollow, distorted echo of the obedience and discipline of the Christian tradition, but if one does not understand the theological roots of obedience and the purpose of discipline and willpower (such as are cultivated by fasting or other ascetic practices), it could be easy to mistake the discipline associated with losing weight or “healthy” eating with acts of will and obedience that glorify God.

In some Christian traditions, women are taught that their bodies’ beauty and how they present themselves is part of how they glorify God.27 The saying, “how you present yourself to others [in terms of appearance, well-dressed and made-up] is a gift to God” captures this sentiment. This belief has negative moral implications for women who struggle with maintaining a socially desirable weight, because by not actively working

27 See especially the closing chapters of R. Marie Griffith’s Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity.
toward a “prettier” figure, they are withholding the gift of the beauty that it is presumed they could embody if they so choose. Misguided and insufficient catechesis and theology influenced by the cultural “water” of norms dictating how women are expected to perceive, characterize, and interact with their bodies creates a “perfect storm” in which women can easily be led by others, or within their own minds, to align their food restriction or other disordered eating behaviors with Christ’s self-gift and the obedience which he exemplified in pouring himself out on the cross to glorify His Father. Understanding the Christian call to self-sacrifice generally, and in relationship to women’s experiences in contemporary culture and surrounding food and their bodies, is fundamental to developing a theological response to eating disorders.

Even in light of the dangers of misunderstanding the nature of sacrifice and its role in kenosis, kenosis remains a powerful and legitimate spiritual goal for all human persons. Coakley’s assertion that “we should again beware of reinforcing the gender stereotypes that this illuminating form of critique seeks to question” rings true. Relegating kenosis to the male realm both perpetuates the gender stereotypes behind that relegation, and fails to acknowledge the “danger…in refusing even to face what the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ lays before us for consideration” or, in other words, dismissing kenosis altogether instead of recognizing the way in which it could be misunderstood or wrongly-engaged alongside its positive contributions. In response to both of the negative consequences of abandoning kenosis for women, Coakley instead identifies kenosis as “vital to a distinctively Christian manifestation of [feminism], a

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29 Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 208.
manifestation which does not eschew, but embraces, the spiritual paradoxes of “losing one’s life in order to save it.””

According to both Coakley and the Catholic tradition, kenosis as a doctrine cannot be left behind. To abandon kenosis would also be to abandon the vulnerability associated with it, whereby theology loses a characteristic which is fundamental to the Incarnation. Vulnerability is that which allows human persons to give and receive love more authentically and deeply, and to encounter one another in moments of their deepest suffering—like those associated with eating disorders—when modeled on Christ’s own vulnerability in love.

C. Power in Vulnerability and its Relevance for Eating Disorder Recovery

Rightly understanding kenosis redeems it from feminist critiques in a manner that allows it to contribute to the development of a theological response to eating disorders and the recovery process. This claim is grounded in Coakley’s argument that “true divine empowerment [could] occur most unimpededly in the context of a special form of human ‘vulnerability’” which, like Christ, “involves an ascetical commitment of some subtlety, a regular and willed practice of ceding and responding to the divine.”

In response to feminist critiques, Coakley offers a particularly helpful understanding of kenosis as “power in vulnerability”—a method of understanding kenosis which is also present in Balthasar’s scholarship. She describes contemplative vulnerability as a means to understand power in vulnerability, casting it not only as “vital to a distinctively Christian manifestation of [feminism], a manifestation which does eschew, but embraces, the

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spiritual paradoxes of ‘losing one’s life in order to save it,’” but as equally accessible and transformative for the spiritual lives of both women and men.\textsuperscript{32} Kenosis challenges men and women alike to explore the paradoxical tension that exists between power and vulnerability, something which is manifest in the Trinity, and to make a space of openness for God.\textsuperscript{33} The self-attunement and knowledge that vulnerability demands is undeniably useful for all human persons and necessary for those striving for holiness. I argue that self-attunement and self-knowledge, which making space for God in prayer or contemplation encourages and provides the tools to develop, is especially useful within the process of eating disorder recovery or the struggle to reconcile oneself to one’s body if one is struggling with body dissatisfaction.

The self-knowledge and openness to others or to God in an act of vulnerable encounter which it might engender are both fundamental to the process of healing and recovery from an eating disorder or body dissatisfaction. Eating disorders are usually accompanied by both a skewed perception of one’s body shape or size and a false narrative or self-deception surrounding what one is doing to one’s body or the extent to which certain behaviors have become habitual or outside of one’s control. Being honest about the degree to which one is struggling or recognizing that one has a problem which has spiraled beyond what one can handle on one’s own is often stated as being an initial step in women’s narratives of eating disorder recovery.\textsuperscript{34} These accounts mirror the self-knowledge present in Coakley’s theological identification of kenosis as power in

\textsuperscript{32} Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 4.

\textsuperscript{33} Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 208.

\textsuperscript{34} One thinks, for example, of AA’s first step: admitting one has a problem with alcohol. This is frequently paralleled in eating disorder recovery narratives. For an example, see the opening chapters of Costin and Grabb’s 8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012).
vulnerability, a theme which is present in other aspects of the recovery journey. Admitting to someone else that eating-disorder behaviors are occurring or inviting God into the reality of one’s struggle with an eating disorder opens one to grace and the healing possibilities it enables. These possibilities, contextualized within virtue ethics, will be discussed further in the following chapter.

D. The Unique Nature of Christ’s Kenosis

Attending to the uniqueness of Jesus’ kenosis preserves the fundamental difference between the rightly-ordered kenosis to which Christians are called and the dangerous and misguided employment of one’s will to be obedient to strict calorie restriction or an exercise routine in pursuit of control, a particular weight, or a certain body size. Anne Carpenter characterizes Jesus’s kenotic obedience as “not simply creaturely [...] obedience; it is also a unique kenosis available only to him as Son of the Father, available by virtue of the kenosis of the Father that the Son is forever the relation to…”35 Christ’s kenosis on the cross is particular, and only possible because of Christ’s relationship to the Trinity.

Christians are called to model their lives on Christ such that their self-sacrifice is rightly ordered toward growth in holiness and wholeness, not offered in a misguided exercise of will in which hunger cues are ignored or dominated and the body is whittled away. It must also be accompanied by the recognition that Christ’s obedience to the Father was unique, as he is the Word who assumed flesh and affected human salvation through his willing sacrifice.36 The distinct sacrifice of Christ can only be accomplished

36 See King’s chapter, “Body” in Addiction Nation (p. 111-122) for his insights on how establishing a confrontational duality between the spirit and the flesh, reason and passion, or conscious and automatic self is unhelpful to addiction recovery. In short, he posits that in addiction, the automatic self has been poorly
by the incarnate Word and is not that to which individual persons are called. God does not call people to undertake practices that are not ordered toward achieving their telos; thus, an effort to imitate Christ’s obedience that led one to adopt unhealthy habits, harm their body, or otherwise injure their relationship with themselves would not be an imitation of Christ’s kenosis nor align with the pursuit of the human telos. Christ is the only one who can pour himself out in obedience to the Father on the cross to obtain humanity’s salvation. Persons who attempt to pour themselves out in obedience to a commitment to gaining a certain weight or body shape are sacrificing in an unhealthy way, in pursuit of something which is neither a good, nor ordered to their good.

E. Of Creation, Christ, and the Trinity: Sexual Difference as the Key to Balthasarian Kenosis

While Coakley’s rehabilitation of a kenotic theology of the cross is valuable, understanding kenosis as a “contemplative ‘power in vulnerability’” is limited; both rehabilitating kenosis in light of feminist criticism and harnessing the full scope of its contribution to a theological response to eating disorders requires a balanced critique of Balthasar’s theological engagement of sex and gender. Martin observes that kenosis does not merely encompass what Christ did on the cross, and Coakley’s biblical exegesis does not attend sufficiently to either the Gospel’s narratives nor the Paschal mystery. In addition, “as Aristotle Papanikolaou has aptly pointed out, it is difficult to see exactly how [Coakley’s suggestion of] the kind of ‘gentle space-making’ required in silent prayer can be translated anthropologically, that is, into human-to-human relationships and the formed and lines of communication between the brain and body need to be repaired in order to establish a healthy, integrated bodily ecosystem (which overlaps with insights from ISF therapy). Thinking of them as a hierarchy and as essentially in conflict does little to prompt a healthy, integrated, recovered self in King’s approach.
development of human communities.”

Analyzing Balthasar’s presentation of kenosis necessitates a reasonable critique of his presentation of sex and gender. Martin offers a balanced view of the aspects of Balthasar’s theology that might merit a feminist critique:

For instance, despite Balthasar’s assertion that there is no question of inequality with respect to sexual difference, it is *de facto* true that in Balthasar’s theology woman is put into some hierarchical relation of inclusion and derivation with respect to man, and ontological priority is accorded to the masculine. His pervasive use of gendered or nuptial symbolism, in which the feminine (though not necessarily or in every case the female) is identified with being and receptivity, and the masculine (though not necessarily or in every case the male) with representation and activity, can problematically delineate roles that belong essentially to women or to men.

Martin’s assessment highlights the legitimate challenges that Balthasar’s theological engagement of sex and gender poses; his rendering of the doctrine of kenosis presents its own challenges for feminist and womanist scholarship. To develop a more robust understanding of kenosis which also responds to the critiques leveraged at Balthasar by feminist scholars, Martin suggests turning to the line of influence behind Balthasar’s gendered theology in order to understand its origins, role in his theology, and influence on his presentation of kenosis.

Martin claims that such a turn illuminates Balthasar’s gendered theology in two ways: first, that by attending to the influence of Russian Sophiology, in particular Sergei Bulgakov, one can understand the cultural and theological forces at work behind Balthasar’s engagement of gender and the feminine. Second, Martin argues that understanding the broader Trinitarian nature shifts the conversation from a myopic focus on Christ’s self-sacrifice, “preserving kenotic theology both for and from traditionally

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feminist concerns.”39 Retrieving the doctrine of kenosis not only responds to the challenges that feminist scholarship raises, but reveals theological insights into creation and embodiedness as well as difference’s role in enabling communion. Kenosis also offers insights into the cross’s context, which when rightly understood avoids the undue glamorization of suffering and serves to underscore the need to rightly-order one’s sacrifices in an authentic imitation of Christ.40 Each of these kenotic insights, but especially the last one, is useful in engaging Christ’s kenosis to form a moral theological response to women struggling with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. I conclude this chapter’s second section by analyzing Martin’s helpful response to feminist critiques to Balthasar’s presentation of kenosis in order to expand upon Coakley’s sense of kenosis as power-in-vulnerability.

Balthasar’s sense of kenosis as femininity and receptivity is rooted in his use of Sophia which he borrows from the Orthodox theological tradition, specifically Bulgakov’s work. Following this tradition, Balthasar understands Sophia as both “the nature or essence of God [as] a vivifying principle” and “the bond of the divine trihypostatic Person with divine nature.”41 In her existence as this bond, Sophia is an answer to God’s love; Sophia is not a hypostasis, but rather accepts divine love because as a vivifying principle (not a member of the Trinity) she has nothing to return.42 She is “the eternal self-donation which is God” or, in the words of Rowan Williams, “an eternal

quality of self-giving which allowed God’s life to be lived ‘in the other’ as well as for the other. God loves his own love, and so loves to see that love reborn—in the eternal Son, in creation, in the Church.”

The masculine and feminine is one of Balthasar’s dynamic “polarities” or tensions which constitute the human person. These polarities “serve…to draw attention to the fundamental ‘riddle’ of human existence” which is performed in the drama of their existence. The human person is a “reciprocal dynamism forged between the polarities of motion and being” which “orients the creature toward the infinite, transcendent horizon.” This polarity, among others (i.e. that of the spirit and the body, or man and woman, or the individual and communal) is a marker of humanity’s ecstatic nature which orient humans toward one another. Seeking a wholeness that will never be perfectly realized, “the human being is fundamentally oriented beyond the polarities toward transcendence which is their true home.” In this way, the image of the human person is both a “gift and a task” or “something given…and something imposed.” The tension between the poles of both individual human existence and the communal nature of humanity reflects both the dynamic nature of the finite human person, and the “quality of ‘being-on-the-way’” which will be taken up in Section III of this chapter, discussing how

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Balthasar’s sense of kenosis lays a groundwork for understanding the simultaneous existence of human freedom and attenuated agency in a theological approach to understanding eating disorders.

Balthasar’s reliance on Sophia and the polarity of the masculine and feminine provides the foundation for his theology of sexual difference. For Balthasar (as for Bulgakov), sexual difference is ontological and ensures that the person exists as a *dramatis persona*. Both resist a version of misogyny wherein salvation is understood as a return to androgyny, a theory which runs through the soteriology of many patristic fathers, and affirm that both men and women “share identically and perfectly in the same human nature.”

Bulgakov’s sophiology informs his theology of sexual difference, as Sophia reveals “the dyad of Spirit and Logos, who mirror the so-called ‘feminine principle’ and the ‘masculine principle’ respectively.” Balthasar picks up Bulgakov’s thread, while both affirming that Eve is cast as an equal partner who returns Adam’s gaze and critiquing the historical tradition of associating the female with matter. This tradition has led to assumptions that the female is “malleable, manipulable, or useable” or associating the image of God with the spiritual or male. Sexual polarity is a precondition for Balthasar’s expression of the ungraspable mystery of the human person.

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human person, regardless of sex, is feminine in respect to God due to the femininity of their spirit. This assertion complicates feminist scholars’ critiques of and assertions about the blanket misogyny present in Balthasar’s scholarship.

Martin’s excavation of the relationship between Balthasar’s kenosis and Sophia leads to an understanding of kenosis as a mode of self-divinization and movement toward human flourishing. She establishes that “Balthasar’s kenotic trinitarianism…revivifies the theological datum of kenosis for feminist theology.” By foregrounding Bulgakov’s influence on Balthasar’s theology and his engagement of sophiology, one arrives at an “opened-out, Trinitarian model, [in which] kenosis is not simply an evacuation or subtraction of the self, but fundamentally a kind of self-divinization, a move toward flourishing, whole human persons participating in the mysterious life of the divine Trinity.” Conceiving of kenosis in this manner presents it as something other than a behavioral model of self-sacrifice to imitate, instead allowing it to function “as ‘a model for every human being…trying to realize his [or her] own divine-humanity.’” A positive, flourishing-oriented consideration of kenosis both responds explicitly to the claims of some feminist theologians that kenosis should be doctrinally de-emphasized, and builds on Coakley’s framing to offer a more specific understanding of Balthasar’s presentation of kenosis. From a vision of kenosis that divinizes the self, moving it toward flourishing that aligns with the human telos, Martin draws three concrete implications for feminist-theological approaches to kenosis: that understanding the context of

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Balthasarian kenosis allows for an understanding of the doctrine which emphasizes the goodness of the created body, highlights the difference which makes relationality possible, and makes the cross a kenotic mode of divine love.\(^{57}\)

1. Trinitarian Difference and Distance

First, the difference between Trinitarian persons and the distance which exists between them is the precondition for the created order’s goodness and existence. Martin’s engagement with sophiology makes clear that the distance between Trinitarian persons creates the conditions for loving communion, both within the Trinity itself and between the created order and the divine. Distance within the Trinity allows for the recognition of “‘the ‘other’ as other.’”\(^{58}\) The Holy Spirit’s role in kenosis makes possible matter’s beauty and sanctification, by which “[t]he grace of the Holy Spirit shows the holy sensuality, creates holy flesh, ‘the very good’ of the world. Beauty is for the most part the revelation of the Holy Spirit.”\(^{59}\) The possibility for the transformation of human bodies and human nature—which Balthasar presents as indisputably good—is located in the kenosis of the Word incarnate and will be developed in this chapter’s subsequent section.


Having already completed initial drafts of this chapter, I was not able to restructure the chapter around Christopher Hadley, SJ’s *A Symphony of Distances: Patristic, Modern, and Gendered Dimensions of Balthasar’s Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2022). Had I to do it again, the structure of this chapter’s argument would have been different. Hadley argues that theological difference functions as a doxological category which offers insights into the loving act of God’s sharing divine glory (4). The distance between God (by which God withdraws into mystery) and creation leads creation more deeply into divine communion and participation in God’s self-revelation (4). He identifies four theological distances in Balthasar’s Trilogy: Two that exist between God and the world which consist of the act of creation and alienation from God as a result of sin (8). The other two distances exist within the Trinity, consisting of the earthly mission and the Son’s eternal generation from the Father (8). This paradigm of distances would provide a clearer process of discussing the role of inter-Trinitarian distance and its relationship to creation than presently exists in this dissertation, and I look forward to integrating Hadley’s insights should this work become a monograph.

2. Polarity and Identity

Second, Balthasar’s embrace of the primacy of sexual difference in Bulgakov’s theological anthropology is grounded in the dyadic sexual difference of the Son and the Spirit. Balthasar’s use of polarity in his approach to the Trinity and subsequently sexual difference is not intended to give rise to hierarchy, but “first to indicate the asymptotic reality of human existence, and then to describe the condition in which human beings are always in relation.”

Difference is necessary for and simultaneous with kenosis. In Balthasar’s sense of kenosis, there cannot be a sense of the self as being cast “as self over against the other in a relation of opposition, but rather affirms a relation of identity always inclusive of the other.” This vision of mutual affirmation of identity which is inclusive of the other and aligns with those proposed by feminist scholars.

3. The Cross in Context

Third, Balthasar’s sense of kenosis places the cross event into the context of the whole economy of kenotic modalities; this contextualization responds to the assertion that his presentation of kenosis causes an undue glamorization of suffering. Balthasar’s presentation of the crucifixion takes place within the context of the Trinity’s love, the beauty of the created order, the nature of the human person and community as fundamentally good, the resurrection and Pentecost’s glory, and the Eucharist. The context for the cross-event “helps to mitigate the potential for the glamorization of suffering and self-sacrifice that has often come with the territory of the rhetoric of

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kenosis understood as a narrowly Christological doctrine.” For Balthasar, the “cross...is a—if not the—central doctrine for his theological project of articulating the Trinity, beauty, Church, and a theology of divine glory: it is the decisive revelation of God's Self.” The meaning of the kenosis extends beyond sacrifice and death because of the goodness and love of God within which they take place. The cross itself “is not alien to divine nature, but expressive of the dynamic dispossessment within the Trinity and inextricable from the event of Incarnation.” The cross is intimately connected to divine glory given its simultaneous expression of kenosis and glory. “Ultimately, because the Cross is the fullest expression of divine, self-emptying Trinitarian love, even the sacrifice of death is contained within it: the Lamb that was slain before the foundations of the world was slain for—nay, is—love.” Martin’s presentation of Russian sophiology’s influence on Balthasar’s gendered theology serves to “soften” some of the feminist critiques that fail to account for both the Sophia tradition’s influence on his presentation of kenosis, and the positive feminine perspectives it offers to the doctrine which serves to “advance” feminist concerns. Balthasar’s kenosis expands a purely Christological vision of kenosis and self-sacrifice in order to orient his readers to the possibility of both human divinization and full participation with God. His expansion results in a much more holistic sense of fulfillment than feminist scholars credit to him, and results in distinctive contributions to the development of a theological response to eating disorders.

III. KENOSIS, LOVE, AND WORTH: RESPONSE TO EATING DISORDERS

Two kenotic, Balthasarian themes resonate in relationship to the experience of a person with eating disorders, specifically the Trinitarian role of community in human anthropology and the possibility for creation’s ability to be good and communicate God’s Spirit, and for physical bodies to do the same. Both yield kenotically-grounded insights into addressing the thin ideal. The foundation for the first two contributions lies in the Bulgakovian roots of Balthasar’s understanding of kenosis. Kenosis in Bulgakov proceeds from the eternal inter-Trinitarian relations to their expression in creation, the Incarnation, and the Paschal mystery’s events. Bulgakov emphasizes the “communal kenotic ek-stasis” of the Trinity as that which undergirds “all consequent kenotic modalities” in the earthly economy. As a result, creation functions as a “second kenosis.” The incarnational event and those of the Paschal mystery—which both follow and crown, respectively, creation’s “kenotic trajectory”—sprung from the Trinity’s mutual kenotic outpouring.

A. The Trinity’s Communal Nature and Human Anthropology

Balthasar’s conception of the Trinity’s nature is the precondition for the self-gift of love, community, and friendship which has particular implications for the process of recovering from eating disorders. Without the difference and separation that exists in the Trinity, love and relationship would not be possible for humans, made in God’s image.

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Martin identifies these three themes, and the following summary of Bulgakov’s understanding of kenosis comes from her presentation.


The exchange of love between Trinitarian persons, imaged in life-giving communities and meaningful relationships, is the essence of their Being. Similarly, love and self-gift in relationship is what defines and gives life and purpose to the human person through a theological conception of human anthropology. This truth sets the stage for a theological understanding of the power of community and friendship in the process of recovery for those struggling with an eating disorder, disordered eating, or body dissatisfaction. This theme will be more extensively developed in the following chapter on the power of virtue ethics in the recovery process in the context of community; however, I want to note its presence in Balthasar’s presentation of a Trinitarian kenosis and its importance for a theological treatment of eating disorders and the insights it can offer on the process of recovery.

As described in Section III of Chapter Two, it is Trinitarian alterity which makes possible the separation of persons therein. Within the Trinity, the self-destitution of the Trinity is captured in the mutual outpouring of the Father, Son, and Spirit into one another. The Trinitarian persons’ difference and separation is a necessary precondition for love, which allows each Trinitarian person to pour themselves out into the other in the manner that is fitting; in particular, it makes possible the Father’s reception of the self-donation of the Son. In the dispossession of power by the Father, He possesses divine nature; this paradox is the foundation of Balthasar’s sense of Trinitarian kenosis, evoking Coakley’s characterization of kenosis as “power-in-vulnerability.” A vision of God which permits such vulnerability is reliant on the existence of the Trinity’s inner life which Bulgakov describes as “a pre-eternal act of self-surrender, of self-exhaustion of the

Hypostases in Divine Love,” such that God’s love “finds itself in the other Hypostases, [and] realizes the one Divinity.” In this Trinitarian characterization, shared by Balthasar, self-gift is synonymous with self-realization, and God’s existence as Love means that love is not a mere attribute, but rather that “the very essence of God [is] eternal self-gift.” The nature of God as self-gift is the precondition for theology’s anthropological claim that community and relationships are necessary for human flourishing. The Trinity’s selfless outpouring of love is not only the source and realization of its existence as community, but also results in the existence and goodness of creation.

B. Creation, Kenosis, and Divine Love

Bulgakov’s influence on Balthasar’s understanding of the relationship between creation and kenosis foregrounds the love of God which in turn gives humanity knowledge of their worth—a central issue for many people struggling with eating disorders (as discussed in Section III of Chapter Two). The creation of the world is, for both Bulgakov and Balthasar, “a kenotic, non-necessary act which follows the eternal kenosis of the immanent Trinity.” In this outward, creative act, the “Absolute ‘becomes’ correlated with a reality outside God in an act of squandering, foolishly extravagant love.” The act of creation which unites God, who has need of nothing, to a reality outside God’s Self reveals God’s lavish love. It is this love which is the foundation

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for created matter (not only the world in which humans live, but the body itself) and provides a foundation for a theological response to the wound of worthlessness which seems to undergird the experiences of many women and girls with eating disorders, especially those who identify with the misguided moralist paradigm. God’s absolute freedom in the act of creation, especially insofar as it exists as an act of love that unites God to humanity, fills one who reflects on it with a sense not only of God’s love generally, but the specificity of that love for them. God was not compelled by force or necessity in the choice to create. It was done freely, out of a desire for relationship with humanity as a whole and each discrete member of the human race. The force of this truth and the magnitude of the realization that it could be otherwise—that one could, in fact, not exist at all—is a profound reminder of the gift and value of one’s existence. This reminder may serve to lessen the force of the thin ideal’s narrative that one’s value is primarily found in, or linked to, one’s adherence to contemporary beauty standards, as it re-orient them to the truth that it is good that they exist, and that their existence is undergirded by a powerful and personal love. The work of Kent Dunnington on the need to release one’s ego ideal in order to receive the unearned gift of God’s love echoes this truth.77

The goodness of creation is also manifest in the kenotic outpouring of the Trinity taking human form in the Incarnation such that, according to Bulgakov, “the Creator became a creature.”78 In this way, God’s Son “entered into a creaturely relationship to God” in order to make it possible for humans to become divine. The goodness of

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creation, and the body, is validated by God taking flesh, re-affirming the goodness of both of them—affirmed first in the Genesis creation account. This reaffirmation of goodness highlights the role of love in Balthasar’s theology, which serves as the “hermeneutical key to the cross-event.”

The Trinity’s substance as love, and God’s “self-destitution” as the “gulf [...] of absolute Love contains in advance, eternally, all modalities of love, of compassion, and even of a ‘separation’ motivated by love…” which can and does encompass all of the world’s suffering and brokenness. The distance of the Trinitarian persons makes the cross-event possible, which Balthasar and Bulgakov indicate does not indicate a change in the divine character, but rather “a continuation of the substantial dramatic modality of self-giving love which remains at the core of divine being.”

The cross reveals God’s love, which flows from the “first kenosis” of the generation of the Son from the Father. Creation’s goodness is first affirmed by God’s creation of it, and re-affirmed in a new way by the act of God taking flesh.

The incarnate Son’s death on a cross reveals the love behind that first kenosis, which enables all the kenotic events that follow it. Balthasar sustains this claim as he states that any abasement that God undergoes in the economy of salvation is “forever included and outstripped in the eternal event of Love.” Thus, what appears as the tortuous cross-event in the temporal economy is “only the manifestation of the

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80 Balthasar, Mysterium Paschale, vii-ix.
83 Balthasar, Mysterium Paschale, ix.
(Trinitarian) Eucharist of the Son…which must gather all creation into his body. What
the Father has given, he will never take back."84 Balthasar describes this kenotic
trajectory, and the connection between relationship, selflessness, and creation in

*Mysterium Paschale:*

The ultimate presupposition of the Kenosis is the "selflessness" of the Persons
(considered as pure relationships) in the inner-Trinitarian life of love. There is,
next, a fundamental Kenosis given with the creation as such, since God from all
eternity takes on responsibility for its flourishing (not least in regard to human
freedom), and in his providence, foreseeing sin, includes the Cross (as foundation
of the creation) in his 'account'. 'The Cross of Christ is inscribed in the creation of
the world since its basis was laid.' Finally, in the actual world, marked as it is by
sin, 'his redemptive Passion begins with his Incarnation itself...' [and]...the will to
undertake the redemptive Kenosis is itself indivisibly Trinitarian…85

God has given God’s own self–bodily–to humanity to make salvation possible. Human
flourishing in this life is ordered toward and perhaps even a foreshadowing of salvation;
in the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola in his First Principle and Foundation, “God
created human beings to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by doing this, to save their
souls… so that we ultimately desire and choose only what is most conducive for us to the
end for which God created us.”86 Salvation of the human person took place through self-
gift, and specifically that of the enfleshed Logos. This does not mean that sin no longer
affects the human person, or their bodies. It is part of the human condition to frequently
find oneself tempted by sin, choosing that which is not most conducive toward growing
in holiness toward the end for which God created humanity. Sin made necessary the
death of God’s sinless Son on the cross. Through grace, however, in light of Christ’s

84 Balthasar, Mysterium Paschale, ix.
85 Balthasar, Mysterium Paschale, 35.
86 Ignatius of Loyola, “First Principle and Foundation,” in The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola,
https://www.catholicspiritualdirection.org/spiritualexercises.pdf
Incarnation and the sanctification of the human soul and body, one can develop virtue by choosing the good—a decision which is ordered to sanctification, and whose role in developing a theological response to eating disorders will be detailed in Chapter Four.

The dissonant harmony of the nature of the Incarnation, Cross, and the salvation they actualize for women struggling with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction is disarming. That the telos of human life, suffering, and flourishing is made possible through Christ’s gift of self—which is coextensive with the nature of the God who created humankind—strips away contemporary culture’s pretenses about the need to be thin to be worthy, attractive, valued, or worth a second glance. The value of the human person comes from their existence, necessarily as imago dei. According to Joseph Ratzinger, joy in human existence comes from the certainty (that faith imparts) that one is wanted, has a task to undertake in the world’s history, is accepted, and is loved.87 Community is central to this realization; Josef Pieper observes that one needs the presence of another to say to them, in a way that surpasses that which can be expressed in words, that “it is good that you exist.”88 God offers this acceptance unconditionally, an acceptance which is (imperfectly) echoed in life-giving relationships with others. God’s constant refrain of love is both the reason for humanity’s beginning and its continued existence. “If ever man’s sense of being accepted and loved by God is lost, then there is no longer any answer to the question whether to be a human being is good at all. Doubt concerning


88 Benedict XVI, Address.
human existence becomes more and more insurmountable” and leads to a lack of conviction in the goodness of one’s existence.89

It is relationship with God and others which can help one to hear the echoes of the truth of the goodness of their existence, separate from the affirmation associated with embodying the thin ideal, amidst the din of contemporary consumer-culture and its multi-billion-dollar diet and fitness industry. The center of the human person is “in the responding gaze which the creature directs at the creating gaze of God, and ‘our entire religious life is our attention to the particular intention God had when he called us into existence’ with that new name which he bestowed on us in his Son.”90 Being re-centered by the gaze of God into one’s human purpose re-orient the human person, which can positively impact one’s recovery by orienting them away from the thin ideal toward a more authentic vision of human flourishing within divine relationship. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that recovery is not salvific; that is, while salvation involves some measure of recovery–eating disorders will not exist in the glorified body–a lack of recovery does not mean that one is not growing in holiness. One can struggle with unhealthy eating behaviors or an eating disorder and continue to be in relationship with God and grow in holiness and virtue. Grace can operate in ways unseen, which will only be realized in heaven.91 This theme will be discussed further in Chapter Four’s Section A.

89 Benedict XVI, Address.
90 Balthasar, GL I, 404. Balthasar is quoting poet Paul Claudel, emphasis in GL I.
91 One thinks here of the story of St. Mark Ji Tianxiang, a Christian doctor who became addicted to opium after treating himself for a painful stomach condition. He frequently went to Confession to confess his addiction, and the priest (not understanding the nature of addiction, in the 1800’s) observed his pattern of sin and instructed him not to receive the Eucharist; later, his confessor instructed him not to return to Confession until he developed the resolve to stop falling into the sin he confessed each time he entered the confessional. He was unable to receive the sacraments for 30 years, and died a Christian martyr who is now a saint–a patron for those struggling with addiction. He asked to be the last of the Christian martyrs to be killed so that no one else would have to die alone; his life, witness, and continued intercession are a
on the suitability of virtue ethics, especially in the recovery process, for a theological response to eating disorders.

C. The Trinity’s Personhood, Human Community, and Eating Disorder Recovery

The personhood of the Trinity enables the human-divine relationship and serves as a model for human community. Bulgakov’s prioritization of this personhood (preceding an “abstract impersonalism” foregrounding of substance) has informed Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology such that in Balthasar’s theology, the personal nature of God, “the ‘living I,’ of the I AM THAT I AM is always already tri-hypostatic.”92 This prioritization of divine personhood not only carries forward the aforementioned affirmation of the goodness of creation and the divine embodiment of created human nature, but places personhood as “the primary locus of community between human beings and God; it is because humans are hypostatic that they can enter into relation with the divine hypostases.”93 The body-spirit unity of the human person makes it possible to enter into relationship with God, and to mirror the imago dei in a manner which makes connection with others possible.

The understanding of the human person which results from Bulgakov’s priorities, re-echoed in Balthasar’s foregrounding of divine personhood, is helpful in developing a theological understanding of the attenuated agency people with eating disorders experience, and the manner in which a human person can return to themselves through testament to the mysteriously powerful ways that grace can work, in manners that far exceed human understanding or theologizing.


eating disorder recovery. Bulgakov’s claim, which Martin traces in Balthasar, is that “Human beings are hypostatic in such a way that their personhood is both a given and an agenda; that is, human personhood is always in a state of flux, becoming more adequate to his or her nature…” 94 The human person can participate in the realization of their telos, or choose to reject the grace extended to them to aid their pursuit of holiness. Doing so takes place within a matrix of relationships which can participate in the mediation of grace and aid both individuals, and the community as a whole, in their pursuit of virtue. Balthasar realizes the hypostatic nature of the human person, and the lack of perfection within Christian communities, and echoes the Church’s warning to “bear with one another in patience.” 95 Persons suffering with eating disorders become known to themselves anew in recovery through community and patient relationships, in particular a faith community in which persons encounter one another “with the eyes of faith” instead of using the “categories of everyday psychology as the measure of [their] worth.” 96

When the potential for human flourishing is diminished by the attenuation of agency which increases one’s proclivity to pursue an eating disorder or eating disorder behaviors, the freedom and subsequent realization of human flourishing becomes less adequate to human nature—both in itself, and in its ability to exist in community with others. God’s Trinitarian existence as love (the self-outpouring from one Trinitarian person into another) enables the divine-human relationship. It also offers an understanding of how the lack of flourishing present in someone struggling with an

95 Balthasar, Engagement with God, 53.
96 Balthasar, Engagement with God, 51.
eating disorder might be understood in relationship to the Trinity. Trinitarian doctrine serves as a helpful hermeneutic for understanding the nature of love in God’s divine nature. God’s relationship to the world, existing in a kenotic key, allows divine love to echo into the hypostatic existence of the human person. This love, within the context of relationship, enables both relationship with God and an understanding of the human person in relationship Love itself. This affirmation of the connection of human nature to love is helpful pastorally and theologically, as it simultaneously offers a paradigm for a theological understanding of the attenuation of agency and positive potential for human flourishing in relationship to humans’ existence as imago dei, especially for those who struggle with eating disorders or body dissatisfaction.

In sum, the Trinity’s kenotic extension into creation follows from God’s eternal existence as self-gift. Because of what Balthasar identifies in Mysterium Paschale as the responsibility that God takes on for human flourishing, and the foresight which made Him aware of both sin and the cross, he reminds his readers that Christ’s cross has been inscribed in the world’s creation since its foundation was laid. The Trinity is expressed in creation, the Incarnation, and the Paschal Mystery; therefore, creation can communicate God’s goodness. This goodness can be communicated more explicitly through the human body as a result of the Incarnation’s sanctification of human existence. And it is the blessing and radical, humility-laden sacrifice of the Incarnation which makes possible the kenosis of the cross. The need to rightly understand the body’s goodness and its relationship to self-gift, stamped upon it by the Trinity’s own nature and humanity’s existence as imago dei, cannot be overstated. It is in light of this goodness

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97 Balthasar, Mysterium Paschale, 35.
that this chapter’s final section turns to Balthasar’s understanding of the human person in light of Christ’s kenosis and its formidable contributions to a theological response to the challenge and suffering of eating disorders.

D. Taking on the Eyes of Christ: The Spiritual Senses and the Thin Ideal

Attending to the incarnational and kenotic key of Balthasar’s aesthetics, specifically his treatment of how people perceive non-corporeal realities by engaging the spiritual senses, offers a final insight into how Balthasar’s kenosis responds to the role of the thin ideal in eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. The possibility of participation in Christ’s experience on the cross through the spiritual senses can transform persons as body-soul unities.

In Balthasar’s theology, the spiritual senses are fundamental to human nature. Balthasar’s distinction between the physical and spiritual senses come from Origen, who “conceives of a kind of theia aesthèsis (‘divine perception’) which enables human beings to perceive the mysteries of God.”98 God’s appearance within the reality of the world, and humans’ ability to encounter God therein, relies on the “profane human senses” becoming spiritual as they enable an assent of faith.99 Perception necessarily both includes and emphasizes the senses, and are the means by which the “man perceives and acquires a sensibility for the reality of the world and of Being.”100 When the Christian enters into the Paschal Mystery and rises with Christ, “then, with body and spirit, he has become a ‘spiritual man’...[with] not only a spiritual intellect and will, but also a spiritual

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heart, a spiritual imagination, and spiritual senses.”\textsuperscript{101} The senses are at once wholly immersed and responsive to the physical world and the soul’s mystical ground.\textsuperscript{102} What is “spiritual” and therefore picked up by the spiritual senses is that which evades physical sense perception; “[t]he fallen senses are transformed in the death and resurrection, [and] their relation to God [is] renewed.”\textsuperscript{103} These five spiritual senses reflect the biblical conception of the body’s integrated physical and spiritual state wherein the heart is the center.\textsuperscript{104} In the psalms and the words of the prophets, God’s people yearn and hunger for God; the bones of a person can “‘tremble’” or “‘exult’” and the entrails of Job “‘seethe without rest’.”\textsuperscript{105} For Balthasar, this sense-laden language points to a need to safeguard the tension that exists between body and spirit in the spiritual senses which is also present in the person of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{106}

Through the spiritual senses, Christians become able to do more than imitate Christ—they can engage in a process of participation. Balthasar applies the exitus-reditus structure of patristic and Thomistic theology to the senses which serves to emphasize divine participation in human existence within the event of the Incarnation.\textsuperscript{107} This takes place through the restoration, facilitation, and perfection of the triple-infused habitus of

\textsuperscript{101} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 366.
\textsuperscript{102} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 366.
\textsuperscript{103} Maeseneer, “Retrieving the Spiritual Senses,” 279.
\textsuperscript{104} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 389.
\textsuperscript{105} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 389.
\textsuperscript{106} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 385.
\textsuperscript{107} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 371-373.

Balthasar traces the development of the spiritual senses from Origin through the Middle Ages into the beginning of modern times on pages 367-380.
the virtues, Holy Spirit’s gifts, and beatitudes. Faith, in turn, enables those who believe to participate in divine perception of the world because doing so constitutes a theological act of perception and gives the human perspective a new orientation. Seeing anew is enabled by faith. Faith which engages the spiritual senses and aligns one to Christ’s experience so that one begins to see as Christ does, through his bodily experience in which his spirit “lives fully, with all its freedom, in his senses and emotions; it is convulsed, made indignant, angry, sad, afflicted unto death and the life of his body until the very end, and still more in the Resurrection, fully participates in all the mysteries of his soul.”

In the realm of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, this claim creates the possibility for another theological avenue through which to explore the possibilities of a theological transformation of human perception by engaging the spiritual senses through faith, enabling one to participate in the physical and spiritual suffering of Christ. Balthasar contextualizes the act of faith and its potential to transform physical and spiritual sight within theological aesthetics. The spiritual senses are born from aesthèsis’s Greek roots, and Balthasar’s translation of the term as “perception.” If faith is the beginning of vision (inchoatio visionis) as Balthasar identifies it in Herrlichkeit, faith’s

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109 In Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises, this process is begun by preparing the senses to enter into prayer and then engaging them in contemplative prayer of Scripture and entering into the fires of hell, for two examples (Balthasar, GL I, 374-376).
110 Balthasar, GL I, 385.
111 Maeseneer, “Retrieving the Spiritual Senses,” 276.
function is that of “a theological act of perception” whereby faith opens the eyes and other senses to draw the person toward an encounter with Christ.\textsuperscript{112}

Balthasar cites a liturgical rite to describe the manner which, through the divine “mystery of the incarnate Word the new light of [divine] brightness has shone onto the eyes of our mind; that knowing God visibly, we might be snatched up by this into the love of invisible things.”\textsuperscript{113} Seeing God (in the person of Christ) with eyes of faith enables a transformation of what a person loves, a transformation that helps conform what they love to the invisible things that endure.\textsuperscript{114} Balthasar’s selection from the Christmas Mass reveals his belief, and more broadly the ecclesial belief, that theology necessitates a doctrine of perception which evokes an experience of the senses. For the suffering of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction which is—for lack of a better word—so bodily, and rooted in perception, the inherent link Balthasar identifies between experience, perception, and theology means that both of these things can be healed and spoken to directly by theology—because they are the essence of the Incarnation which gives rise to that theology. Balthasar’s sense of faith as a theological act of perception permits the Christian to engage in God’s participation in the world, and in the person of Christ by means of the spiritual senses which raises the person “above himself” making them “free for God and through God.”\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{112} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 155.

\textsuperscript{113} Preface of Christmas I, quoted in Latin in \textit{GL I}, 119-120.

\textsuperscript{114} For more on this through the lens of Thomistic virtue ethics and the role of connatural knowledge, see Beth Haile’s “A Good Appetite: A Thomistic Approach to the Study of Eating Disorders and Body Dissatisfaction in American Women.”

\textsuperscript{115} Balthasar, \textit{GL I}, 389.
This act of participation changes the manner in which one sees, allowing them to take on the eyes of Christ through the theological virtue of faith. Contextualized in grace, this transformation can be part of the process of recovering from eating disorders wherein the human person reorients themselves outward to encounter the Other (and others). They become aware of themselves as more than just a body, but a body and a soul with a *telos* ordered toward Love who poured Himself out for them. Balthasar believes that one’s physical senses must die, be resurrected, and rise with Christ to the Father and so offer hope in a new way of seeing.\(^{116}\)

Encountering Christ is the methodology by which this transformation of sight takes place, and is both the purpose and source of the spiritual senses’ transformation. The spiritual senses help the human person understand what it is to be fully human, and this transformation is brought about by “a kenotic training of the senses.”\(^{117}\) Because an encounter with Christ reaches into and touches the human heart, it also transforms the spiritual senses. The eye’s roots are located in the heart such that the eye sees from the heart. Thus, it is only love which can truly see—a claim Balthasar traces back to Augustine.\(^{118}\) Christ’s gentle caress of the human heart also rewrites the fleshly senses—the effects of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection bear both corporal and spiritual


It is important to note that implicit grace can be operative in the recovery process of those without faith; God does not withhold grace relative to one’s belief, but rather offers it freely. It is up to the human person to determine the degree to which the participate with grace—something that I believe can be done without the recognition that one is accepting divine grace. This may, in the larger scheme of one’s journey toward holiness, be an action of growth in faith unrealized until heaven.

\(^{117}\) Maeseneer, “Retrieving the Spiritual Senses,” 284.

\(^{118}\) Balthasar, *GL I*, 392. Balthasar traces this connection through the work of Romano Guardini.
(purgative) fruit. \textsuperscript{119} Humans learn to see differently, enabling them to love their neighbor differently. \textsuperscript{120} This is important both for one who is struggling with an eating disorder, and those who might wish to help them. Encountering Christ and perceiving others in a new way, which enables one to love them better, is part of how one can enter into relationship with another more freely and fully. This enables the individual to better serve others within love’s daily praxis.

Both the rewriting of the fleshly sense in light of the Paschal Mystery and the service of the spiritual senses within the daily praxis of love are counter-culturally resonant in a society that is oriented around images. In the present “image culture,” Maeseneer notes, “the unstoppable stream of images is at once stimulating and dulling the senses.” \textsuperscript{121} Not only are the thin ideal’s negative effects mediated by the unhealthy images that pervade social media, apps, advertising, film, etc., but the constant bombardment of visual stimuli dulls both the physical and spiritual senses. People are less attuned to images when they are present everywhere—driving down the highway, standing in line at the grocery store, and in smartphone camera reels or social media apps. Imagine a world (now gone-by) in which images were primarily depicted in art, which was itself a rare indicator of wealth, with its beauty and presence acknowledged by an air of awe by those lucky enough to encounter it. Today, the thin ideal’s effects seem to be both symptomatic of and caused by a dulling of the spiritual senses. These senses’

\textsuperscript{119} Maeseneer, “Retrieving the Spiritual Senses,” 285.

\textsuperscript{120} In \textit{GL I}, Balthasar also writes about the transformative effect of the Eucharist, which adapts the human person’s being to God in a manner which transforms on a level that is below even the senses. “Not only does Spirit speak to spirit, but Flesh speaks to flesh” (401). The potential of the Eucharist to affect the sensory perceptive faculty is made possible because of the Incarnation, and should live “inside-out” according to Claudel (403).

\textsuperscript{121} Maeseneer, “Retrieving the Spiritual Senses,” 286.
dampening helps collapse a robust sense of human worth, value, and telos into a genetic ability to match a white European beauty standard. Humans become less attuned to God’s presence and beauty, and more oriented toward the images that demand attention on Instagram, TikTok, and other platforms. Slowly, wonder and awe at the world’s beauty, and the beauty of the human person, is worn away to leave an individual scrolling past an endless stream of edited, Photoshopped images that do little to reveal the deep beauty of the person who they depict, or the complex richness of the life of a person striving to embody their telos in a life of holiness.122

In addition to grinding away at a sense of wonder and awe, “television and multimedia-devices only transmit information for the two highest senses—even a touchscreen is based on visual perception.”123 “Highest senses” refers to the most commonly-engaged senses of sight and touch, and Maeseneer warns that ignoring the other three corporeal senses is done at the peril of the moral self. Dismissing the other senses creates a reality in which “we can see people dying from hunger or hear the computer game-like sounds of war, but it all happens at a distance. It remains abstract. In front of our screens, we do not feel the trembling after the bomb explosion. Nor are we confronted with the fact that poverty stinks like hell.”124 The virtues of charity and justice would be better served by the engagement of all five senses. As Maeseneer observes, assenting to “Balthasar’s kenotic inversion of the tree of the senses would disturb our ‘society of

122 Paul writes in Colossians 3:1-4 of the Christian call to set one’s heart on the things that are above with Christ, in contrast to the things of Earth. With Baptism, one has died to earthly things and their life now lies hidden with Christ in God so that when Christ appears, one will also appear with him in glory. This reflects the human telos rightly ordered toward divine life, something that a superficial sense of beauty neglects and which may exceed what can be captured by social media snippets.

123 Maeseneer, “Retrieving the Spiritual Senses,” 286.

124 Maeseneer, “Retrieving the Spiritual Senses,” 286.
spectacle’ (Debord).” The purgation of the spiritual senses—which comes in the context of and as a result of encountering Christ—causes a change in and transformation of the physical senses. The link between the reawakening of the spiritual senses and transformation of the physical senses, especially in an image-inundated culture, presents another means of understanding and helping women and girls in recovery strive toward a vision of flourishing directed toward relationship with God in light of a vision of the human person as a body-soul unity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Balthasar’s theology, while not primarily considered as a moral framework, provides a deep theological grounding for anthropological insights about the human person’s flourishing which are necessary to establish a moral theological response to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. Balthasarian kenosis presents a vision of kenosis which is not self-negating, but self-transcending—rightly ordered toward the divine in light of the human telos. Placing oneself rightly within the matrix of identity between God, self, and others is both a reflection of kenosis, rightly understood, and helps one imitate Christ’s kenosis without self-abasement. Balthasar’s framing of kenosis properly orients the person toward God and others, and so helps her know her worth in light of divine love, not the thin ideal.

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125 Maeseneer suggests that the development of the spiritual senses can be furthered by developments in biblical studies as well as the formative, sanctifying space of liturgy insofar as “the liturgy embodies narratives, which (trans)form our worldview. It is about ‘restoring a rightly ordered perception - training us to take the right things for granted’.” (288) He notes that Claudel’s insight that “reorienting our senses is about awakening ‘our attention for the particular intention God had when he called us into existence’.” (288) Liturgy places us into a space where we can receive and better grow into the person who God created us to be. Pickstock notes that liturgy has a way of speaking to ‘the lower senses’ such that it permits the “rehearsal of a radically kenotic attitude.” (288) The possibilities of the liturgy and the liturgical imagination to sanctify perception are topics that will be necessary to explore in future papers as part of the development of a robust theological response to eating disorders, body dissatisfaction, and the recovery process.
In addition, the identity of the human person as a body and soul, imaging the community of the Trinity, both affirms the goodness of the body in the context of a creation which also mirrors its Creator and makes relationality possible. The role of relationship with God and the affirmation of the individual human person’s worth and goodness that it provides is theologically and pastorally instrumental in a theological consideration of the process of recovery. The tri-person existence of the Trinity makes clear the human need for community—a need undergirded by research on addiction and eating disorders from various fields.

Similarly, the spiritual senses provide a manner of participating in Christ’s experience which transforms the way one sees and aids their growth toward their telos. Because Christ is “the image of all images, it is impossible that he should not affect all the world’s images by his presence, arranging them around himself” he serves as a personal, relational corrective to the ill-effects of the thin ideal. The form of Christ establishes the correct distance between the things of the world, himself, and the Christian, which the believer can come to see through faith and by which “creation as a whole [becomes] a monstrance of God’s real presence.” Love becomes the lens through which one sees when the senses are transformed, as “love is what creates image and bestows shape absolutely. Love is the creative power of God himself which has been infused into man by virtue of God’s Incarnation.” Divine love affirms the human person’s worth, and works to correct the lies of the thin ideal so as to free the human

126 Balthasar, *GL I*, 419.
127 Balthasar, *GL I*, 420. The aforementioned role of implicit grace in faith is necessary to recall here, as is the reality that recovery is not inherently salvific.
person to see themselves, and the world around them, as a monstrance of God’s real presence through relationship with Love itself.

It is divine love that calls the person toward virtue as they seek the goodness that is the realization of their *telos*. Balthasar claims that an encounter with this divine love compels the human person to be obedient to the Christian mission, imaging the continuity which exists between the person of Christ and his mission. Thus, it is natural to consider what the role of living virtuously in pursuit of one’s *telos* might look like in the context of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. To explore this question, Chapter Four employs Thomistic virtue ethics as part of this dissertation’s development of a theological response to the thin ideal. Virtue ethics provides a vision of human flourishing which responds to the challenges faced by “misguided moralists” and those who fall prey to the temptation to consider one’s self as having less worth if one is not thin, fit, or actively ‘improving’ one’s body. Thus, reflecting on the role of grace, Thomas’s unity thesis, and virtue ethics’s insights into the role of community in virtue development insofar as it might aid eating disorder recovery constitutes this dissertation’s next chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: 
Flourishing, Fulfillment, and Food: The Pursuit of Virtue

I. INTRODUCTION

In Chapter One, I posited that a theological response to eating disorders needed to address women and girls’ search for worth and value in light of social structures and cultural norms which conflate value with thinness and attractiveness. In the two chapters that followed, I engaged Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and kenotic theology. The former provided a theologically-grounded vision of beauty ordered to the flourishing of the human person; the latter offered a theological response to girls and women’s struggle with worthlessness which lies at the core of many battles with body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, a battle which exists as a result of humanity’s fallen nature as well as the aforementioned social structures and cultural norms.

Chapter One also argued for a theological response to eating disorders which takes seriously the moral agency of the individual while accounting for the influence of external factors on the development of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. The Christian tradition conceives of the human person as a moral agent who, while constrained by circumstances, has the ability to make choices that result in the development of virtue or vice. Agency can be attenuated by circumstance, but agency remains nonetheless. Balthasar’s presentation of the manner in which Christians can respond to divine, beautiful encounters with Christ also highlights the role of agency. Chapter Two engaged the theological role of beauty, and the choice that people have in response to encountering beauty. They can choose to be moved by it, and enter into relationship with Beauty itself, or to reject the grace that the experience offers. Christ’s kenosis on the cross offers a similar opportunity; Chapter Three describes the function of
divine love poured out on the cross, an act which is an invitation to relationship with the Trinity. This invitation is communicated by and transforms the spiritual senses, which in turn transforms one’s physical senses. The transformative potential that theological aesthetics and kenosis offer are accepted or rejected by exercising one’s agency, and the effects of this transformation extend beyond the realm of the spiritual to affect how one lives. Virtue ethics provides a means of exploring the role of agency in a theological response to eating disorders, and a way to help women grow in virtue both in pursuit of their telos and in aid of their eating-disorder recovery.

Virtue ethics, specifically Thomistic virtue theory, provides a moral theological approach which retains moral agency within difficult circumstances while leaving room for the possibility of that agency being attenuated. As a result, it is well-suited to addressing the challenges of the interior lives of women and girls who struggle with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in a social media age. In this chapter, I detail why virtue ethics is a fitting theological response to the challenge of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in light of the thin ideal’s influence and prevalence on social media.

Theologically, eating disorders may be thought of as conditions produced by a debased vision of beauty, a self-negating rather than self-transcending conception of kenosis, and a distorted pursuit of goodness or “misguided moralism” that results. The purpose of the current chapter is to lay out a vision of virtue informed by the restored forms of beauty and kenosis described in the previous two chapters. Such a vision will, of course, offer a compelling theological alternative to the misguided moralism that so often drives eating disorders. The claim, put simply, is that goodness is better understood as relational gift rather than individual achievement. To make this clear, I elucidate a
version of virtue ethics informed by Aquinas, focusing particularly on the contributions of the Thomistic unity thesis and development of personal virtue within the context of divine grace and human community.

II. VIRTUE ETHICS AS A RESPONSE TO EATING DISORDERS IN A SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

A. Why Virtue Ethics?

Virtue ethics is oriented toward holistic human flourishing via its focus on growing in virtue; unlike other ethical approaches, it does not begin with the question of whether a discrete action is right or wrong. Rather, virtue ethics views actions as rooted in character and reflective of the values one holds, and in the Aristotelian tradition, places moral exemplars at the heart of the re-formation of desire and the actions that follow from it. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle maintains that when humans act intentionally, they do so with a goal motivating their action. If one traces the various “why’s” behind actions, they arrive at one goal of human life: *eudaimonia*, or human fulfillment and flourishing.¹ He identifies the human telos as the perfection of one’s natural capacities or abilities, or virtues, such that living a virtuous life is not about the complete denial of one’s natural inclinations, but rather striving to live the best life in accord with one’s human nature.²

Virtue is the firm and stable disposition to do the good, a good ordered to human flourishing. As the virtues are habituated, they are conducive to human flourishing on an individual and communal level. Habituated virtues are lasting in a manner that

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² *ST*, Ia IIae q.1, a.1.
dispositions are not, and good habits prompt an individual toward morally good acts which contribute toward their overall virtue.\textsuperscript{3} Growth in virtue results in virtuous actions becoming easier and more desirable to the moral agent as they pursue their \textit{telos}, such that they find virtue increasingly enjoyable.

Aquinas’s virtue ethics draws heavily on Aristotle’s understanding of human virtue and flourishing, adopting and adapting his virtue paradigm to recognize a two-part human \textit{telos}. While Aristotle’s understanding of the human person’s perfection involves the fulfillment of human nature, Aquinas believes that the human person possesses a \textit{telos} both natural and supernatural. The cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude perfect the human person on a natural level while the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity as well as the infused versions of the cardinal virtues perfect the human person in the supernatural realm. Rebirth in baptism infuses grace into the soul’s essence along with the theological virtues and infused versions of the cardinal virtues, all of which are ordered to the ultimate end of the beatific vision. While natural virtue can be acquired through human effort and will, the theological virtues are the result of grace, an unearned divine gift.\textsuperscript{4} Simultaneously, Aquinas upholds the human person’s dignity, freedom, and self-determination as they practice and acquire the moral virtues. Aquinas believes that because the human person knows their work’s end and moves themselves toward that goal, they participate in the accomplishment of it such that a proper natural

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{ST}, Ia Iae q.49, a. 2.

\textsuperscript{4} The unearned nature of the three theological virtues and the necessity of grace for their development are important to the argument of Thomistic virtue ethics’s fittingness for developing a theological response to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in light of misguided moralism, and are discussed in Part III of this chapter.
perfection of a person is possible. Grace perfects nature such that no contradiction exists between the person’s natural and supernatural telos. While the person’s natural inclinations may need to be perfected, they do not separate the human person from God, but rather represent natural dispositions to virtue that are themselves imperfect. Aquinas’s view of the possibility of perfecting natural inclinations and the role of grace in virtue development preserves a sense of agency amidst the challenges of one’s lived reality in his virtue ethics.

The fittingness of Thomistic virtue ethics for developing a theological response to eating disorders will be established throughout this section. First, as noted above, virtue ethics takes into account the influence of external factors in the formation of virtue while maintaining the individual’s moral agency. Virtue, in pursuit of natural and supernatural perfection, takes place through and amidst everyday life. For girls and women, everyday life encompasses experiences that emphasize the thin ideal, making it difficult for them to find peace with their relationships with food, eating, and their bodies, especially if they struggle with body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, or disordered eating. Second, Thomas’s approach to virtue ethics permits the realization of natural virtue in those who do not believe in God, which makes a theological approach to eating disorders accessible to those who might not profess belief in the Trinity. Third, virtue ethics is well-suited to

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5 ST, Ia Iae q.6, a.1.

This represents the first level of virtue, consisting of natural dispositions toward virtue.

7 Space does not permit further elaboration on this point, but it is worth noting that a theological response is likely to be most resonant with and applicable to girls and women of faith. However, God does not withhold love and grace from anyone, regardless of how far they distance themselves from God; yet, God also respects human free will and does not force grace or its fruits upon human persons. Jean Porter notes that while Thomas identifies the end of human life as the beatific vision, the content of morality is not
respond to the paradigm of misguided moralism. As women try to earn goodness through thinness, they remain unsatisfied. Shifting the desire for goodness to the realm of virtue ethics not only rightly orders them to their natural and supernatural telos, but reflects a reality in which the perfection of virtue comes through the gift of grace and cannot be earned. Fourth, while virtue ethics is often critiqued for being individual-oriented to the expense of community virtue development, Thomas’s presentation of virtue ethics in the context of Balthasar’s work on kenosis and the Trinity orients the human person to growth in virtue in the context of community. His communally-oriented approach responds to the needs of those who struggle with eating disorders and offers a way for their struggles to enrich the community of the Body of Christ.

B. The Role of Desire

In order to argue that Thomistic virtue ethics is useful to developing a theological response to eating disorders, one must attend to the role of desire in Thomas’s theology. Chapter Two detailed the correlation between the human telos, love, goodness, and beauty in Aquinas, and the resulting desire of human persons for flourishing in relationship to God when that desire is well-ordered. To briefly recapitulate that correlation, Aquinas begins his teleological treatment of morality with a treatise on
drawn from theological grounds. Rather, “Thomas’ moral theology presupposes that the content of morality can be derived from independent, nontheological grounds” (Jean Porter, “Desire for God: Ground of the Moral Life in Aquinas,” Theological Studies 47 no. 1 (1986), 65). Porter goes on to say that the Summa is a distinctly theological interpretation of the moral life, something which is intelligible on its own. It follows, then, that for Aquinas, “to be moral is precisely to direct oneself to one’s natural fulfillment as a human being in accordance with a rational conception of what is truly good for humans” (Porter, “Desire for God: Ground of the Moral Life in Aquinas,” 58). In this way, it seems, Thomas permits non-Christians to pursue goodness in the moral life. In other words, while he believes that Christian doctrine offers distinctive insights into the significance that the moral life can hold for Christian persons, Aquinas does not believe that the content of the moral life can only be established theologically (Porter, “Desire for God: Ground of the Moral Life in Aquinas,” 65). Thus, much of virtue ethics can be applied in the realm of the natural good and the pursuit of virtue on lower levels, and does not exclude non-Christians.
happiness, not with a list of moral rules. Happiness serves as the primary lens for Aquinas’s treatment of morality. It is that which humans pursue as the goal of their moral actions.

Only the vision of God, the “Divine Good,” will satisfy the human longing for the intelligible as they seek happiness. However, Thomas acknowledges that it is not uncommon for humans to confuse the true object of their happiness with a created good. The mistaken desire to conform one’s body to the thin ideal resonates with this Thomistic insight about mistaking an object of happiness for The Divine Object of human happiness. Aquinas believes that while “in a formal sense everyone else does indeed desire happiness since everyone desires whatever he or she believes will perfectly satisfy his or her will,” not everyone recognizes this true happiness as being found in the divine vision. This is more than confusion, but rather reflects an authentic desire for

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It is worth noting that in contrast, Peter Lombard’s Sentences addresses happiness last.

On page 91, Haile offers a brief overview of the relationship between happiness and flourishing. Happiness, eudaimonia in Greek, is translated as beatitudo in Latin; in English, this is commonly translated as “flourishing.” Both eudaimonia and beatitudo refer to a happiness ordered toward the final end, and the good, of the human person, making “flourishing” an appropriate translation of the term(s)

Haile also observes that “Terence Irwin, a translator and scholar of Aristotle, writes that the translation ‘flourishing’ fails because that would allow eudaimonia to be predicated of plants and animals, which cannot be said to ‘be happy’ in English, but can be said to ‘flourish.’” (Haile, p. 91) For more on the relationship between these terms, see John Cooper, Reason and Human Good in Aristotle, p. 89, n.1.

9 See ST, Ia IIae.

10 ST, Ia IIae q.3, a.5; q.8; q.1, a.8.

Thomas’s insights are rooted in Augustine’s theology, captured in one of his most famous lines: “Because you have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.” (Augustine, Confessions, 1.1.1).

11 ST, Ia IIae q.1, a.7; q.5, a.8.

something that, as an end or ultimate desire, is unsatisfying. In Aquinas’s thought, individuals really “do want riches or power or whatever more than anything else; even though their desires are based on a mistake, those really are their desires.” In the case of women and girls struggling with eating disorders who desire to be thin, according to Aquinas’s framework, they truly do want to be unhealthily-thin—though this is based on a mistaken desire which, by all accounts, sets them out in search of a “good” that they will never achieve (being “thin enough”) and which is not ordered toward their telos. Their search for perfect happiness has brought them to thinness as beauty, providing disordered eating behaviors as a means for attaining that happiness.

1. Moral and Theological Virtues

The moral (cardinal) and theological virtues fulfill discrete functions in regards to humans’ ultimate desire. The moral virtues are directed to natural human happiness. Theological virtues are ordered toward achieving the deep happiness of directly communicating with God. While the moral virtues are capable of directing both reason and will toward God to the degree that God is the beginning and end of nature, they do so in proportion to nature. In other words, natural love for God is possible. The theological virtues are distinct from the cardinal virtues in this way; they “relate the human person


14 Determining what it means to be “unhealthily-thin” is a difficult question, and begs the question of how to determine what constitutes a healthy weight. As discussed in Chapter One, BMI is an incomplete diagnostic criterion for establishing a healthy weight for individual persons. However, considering a healthy weight as a range is an initial step, as could be considering body composition together with BMI and other medical measures, like blood and hormone tests. Considering the degree to which one’s weight and one’s focus on it, exercise, and food choice/eating enhances or impedes one’s daily life could be part of the criteria for determining what it is to be at a healthy or unhealthy weight. This question could be its own bioethical project.

15 ST, Ia IIae q.62, a.1-3.

16 ST, Ia IIae q.62, a.1 ad.3.
directly to God Himself, as He is in Himself and not as the obscure cause of the finite creation. Hence they cannot be attained by the development of our own innate powers (unlike the moral and intellectual virtues) but have to be given to us directly by God, ‘entirely from without’.”

The theological virtues, imparted through grace, are gifts, and their nature as gifts is pivotal to a theological response to eating disorders. The misguided moralism which fuels some women’s eating disorders aligns their goodness to their thinness. In contrast to this, the theological virtues cannot be obtained by rigorous exertions of will or even zealous spiritual practices. They are unearned gifts bestowed by God. Jean Porter concludes, on the basis of Aquinas’s claims about the differences between the cardinal and theological virtues, that “there is a qualitative difference between the object of natural happiness, as it would exist without an economy of grace, and the true supernatural happiness to which God has in fact called us.”

This qualitative difference is reflected in the distinction between the cardinal and theological virtues. While the cardinal virtues can be cultivated through the exercise of the will and reason; the theological virtues are imparted as a grace, and cannot be earned. Both are ordered to the development of virtue, and the nature of the theological virtues as gifts responds to the paradigm of misguided moralism that is frequently observed in women struggling with eating disorders.

In Porter’s reading of Thomas, it is freedom that plays the central role in the pursuit of natural and supernatural happiness. Aquinas believes that all rational people

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want to be happy, and all rational desires and actions are in some way ordered toward what a person believes happiness is. Thomas recognizes that using reason to identify the good which one then pursues can be done badly or well; a moral person is one who proceeds in light of reason, as they correctly understand what the good is, or that which is appropriate to the nature of the person, and that which is not. They act on the good that causes flourishing and is linked to their telos. While this is the ideal version of how the human person acts and grows in virtue, one’s self-direction can be impeded by sin. When a person mis-identifies happiness as located in obtaining an object of desire, instead of being oriented toward God as the object of their desire, their freedom is constrained.

Porter captures well the manner in which sin “undermines, in an especially invidious way, the rational indeterminacy that is constitutive of human freedom. The actions of the individual who sins in this way are so constrained by his or her overriding attachment to some particular good that he or she inevitably loses out even on other finite goods appropriate to human life.” In the life of someone struggling with sin that undermines their human freedom in this manner and to this degree, the pattern of their life will be ordered toward attaining or holding on to the (misconceived) good, and they will not be free to act in a manner which would alter their attachment to, or result in losing, what they have identified as good.

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19 ST, Ia Iiae q.1, a.5-6.
20 ST, Ia Iiae q.91, a.2.
21 ST, Ia Iiae q.94, a.2.
22 ST, Ia Iiae q.2, a.4, q.78, a.1, a.4.
The morally good person, in contrast, is free. While all human persons live within constrained realities (that is, no one is totally free to act well), the person who identifies and desires a happiness which is based on a true conception of the good acts with an awareness of the things they are not free to do—steal or lie. They are free to “seek happiness in and through the pursuit of any combination of particular objects that seem likely to suit: to choose to marry this or that person, to pursue this or that career, and so on” whereas the individual who aligns happiness with something finite “has a much narrower set of options” if they are to achieve their “one supreme desideratum.” Their life will be totally ordered toward the achievement and preservation of that one, finite good.

This Thomistic sense of freedom aligns with Balthasar’s presentation of human liberty. Balthasar’s vision of the free human person is one whose uniqueness is realized in Christ—and because of this realization, one is compelled to enact the Christian mission that is discipleship. Encounter with Christ is what helps humans be persons; Ouellet describes Balthasar’s sense of the person’s turn to mission as that which “likens us to, and associates us with, the gift of God” so that an ethical decision takes place. This ethical response occurs “in response to the call of grace” so that it “constitutes a theological person” who seeks that which will make them truly happy. Human freedom is created to be joined in unison with Christ’s own through divine grace; this is the

process of “becoming” ethical persons in pursuit of their *telos*, and is that which will bring about the happiness that is found in realizing true goodness.

The pursuit of a true good that will bring happiness, Thomas says, is patterned on a moral life that both preserves and enhances freedom, while sin undermines human freedom.28 A person who lives a moral life cultivates the qualities (cardinal virtues) that are necessary for true happiness. Yet, God’s grace is necessary for the bestowal of the theological virtues—a reality which must be always held at the fore of any conversation in moral theology to avoid Pelagianism’s trap. As Porter provocatively and movingly writes, “Without God's altogether unconstrained offer of Himself in grace, the virtuous unbeliever is actually as far from true happiness as the worst of sinners.”29 Simply put, regardless of the virtue one cultivates in the moral life, happiness is not attainable without the gift of God’s very Self—something of which all humans find themselves equally in need, regardless of the status of their moral lives or their naturally good-natured existence.

These Thomistic truths are borne out in the case of eating disorders and disordered eating; the more un-free one becomes, the more constrained one’s choices around food, eating, and exercise become as one pursues the thin ideal or via habituated, unhealthy behaviors. Narratives from women struggling with eating disorders indicate that when they began making dietary changes, restricting calories, binging and purging to control weight, or exercising more, they initially had control of the choices they were making. However, the ability to act or be in control of their choices often evaporates

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rapidly as their human freedom is constrained. Aquinas’s virtue-based characterization of the limited choices available to those who are not ordered toward a vision of human flourishing aligned with God’s goodness captures the experiences of women who struggle with eating disorders and disordered eating in a manner which is helpful for characterizing their experiences in a moral, theological key.

However, lacking in Aquinas’s understanding is a well-developed distinction between constrained will resulting from moral failing versus psychological impairment. Given his 13th century context, it is understandable that Aquinas might not recognize the need to elucidate the role of psychological factors in morality, save in an incipient and very general sense. While this project does not limit itself to a Thomistic version of the moral model, Aquinas’s concept of connatural knowledge is helpful in understanding the role of the feminine thin ideal in eating disorders.

C. Connatural Knowledge and Habit

Aquinas’s understanding of connatural knowledge provides a means for understanding the paradoxical reality in which women can be attracted to something (like the thin ideal) that they intellectually know is not good for them, yet continue to desire it. Aquinas understands connaturality (“with nature”) in two manners. One pertains to two things that share the same nature; the second regards a draw from one thing toward another.30 The human’s connatural end is the happiness for which the human person was created. It is grace that makes the human person connatural with supernatural happiness, and makes connaturalilty with God’s divine nature possible.31 Connatural knowledge is a

30 ST, Ia q.93, a.6, ad.3.
31 ST, Ia IIae q.62, a.1.
knowledge that results from the exercise of emotion and experience. In other words, “it is knowledge of the world that comes from a certain emotional affinity with certain objects.” When one feels a pull toward a particular thing, the intellect and will combine to make a judgment about that object and how one should engage with it.

Connatural knowledge is also related to aesthetic knowledge and apprehension. Aquinas’s alignment of beauty and goodness, rooted in the same form, results in goodness being praised as beauty. The appreciation of beautiful things, however, is not solely intellectual or a result of exterior attributes. It involves all of the powers of the soul. Thomas cites Dionysius who writes that “Beauty and goodness are beloved by all things,” because each thing has a connaturality to that which is suited to it naturally.

Balthasar, though elevating the role and primacy of beauty beyond what is seen in Aquinas, also traces an intrinsic connection between beauty and the attractiveness of goodness and truth. For him, beauty is primary—that which draws the soul toward the Good and True, and which carries negative ontological and ethical implications if it is undervalued. It is connected to God’s own Being, which is what makes something beautiful worthy of love. Aquinas, who like Balthasar draws on the ancient view that love is connected to beauty, draws a connection between appetite and apprehension. Love, then, is linked to beauty and represents an orientation to the good as an object of both the sensible and the intellectual appetite.

33 ST, Ia q.5, a.4 ad.1.
34 ST, Ia IIae q.26, a.1 ad.3.
35 For a further discussion of the distinction between Aquinas and Balthasar on beauty and its relationship to love, see David Schindler’s Love and the Postmodern Predicament, especially p. 92-100.
The connections between habituation, connatural knowledge, and beauty in Aquinas are rife with implications for developing a theological response to eating disorders in light of the thin ideal’s effect on girls and women. Margaret Miles’s *Image as Insight* reminds its readers that in line with Aquinas’s theory of connaturality, “whether we acknowledge it or not, images retain their role of formation by attraction.”

Haile argues in a similar vein that Aquinas’s presentation of connatural knowledge permits an understanding of the connection between the choice to look at thin-ideal images and the moral implications of that choice. Haile asserts, following Aquinas’s claims about the relationship between knowledge and love, that merely knowing images are edited and computerized is not sufficient to alter women’s desire to look like them. Instead, Aquinas’s theory of connatural knowledge reveals that when women choose to look at thin-ideal images, they are being formed by them. The formative effect of the images increases a woman or girl’s desire to see more of them and encourages her to see the values that they represent as desirable. Like a snowball picking up speed and growing in size as it rolls down a hill, the more a woman chooses to look at thin-ideal images, the more she becomes connatural to them, whether she rationally judges the images and their values as desirable or not. In time, “this affective inclination toward the thin ideal becomes part of her character.”

The thin-ideal images that women and girls view shape them to unconsciously compare themselves to others and often to act in a way

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that they believe will bring them closer to the beauty ideals those images embody. In the words of Nichols, “Such looking shifts our whole way of reading the significance of the world. In its wake we find our own existence reshaped from the experience of what we have seen.”

Thus, Haile establishes, viewing the images is indeed a moral act. Therefore, addressing eating disorders should include attending to images’ embodied, affective, and emotional attractiveness, extending beyond education on the unrealistic nature of the images.

One must have an emotional response to intellectually appreciate the beauty present in a thing. In other words, “whereas concepts are the medium of science (or of scientific insight), emotion is the medium of poetic insight” which “gives form to a work of art as well as being the intentional vehicle of reality known through inclination or connaturality.”

Haile points out that the relationship between emotion and aesthetic knowledge is paralleled in Aquinas’s theory of habituation. Habituation is part of the process by which one is conditioned to perceive things as beautiful (community is also part of that process, with explicit connections to the effects of social structures and norms in regards to the thin ideal’s formative effect on beauty standards); as “we continually choose to regard these objects as beautiful (and hence desirable), we become connatural with them, thus influencing subsequent judgments of beauty.”

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person (and their community) upholds as beautiful both influences future judgements of beauty, and the connatural draw toward those objects which are perceived as beautiful.

Images do not simply portray discrete instances of beauty; they also communicate values. The work of Lelwica captures the reality of images, the values that they represent, and the role of habituation therein: “The pictures in women’s magazines are not simply images of women. They are also bodily symbols. More specifically, they are icons of womanhood, pointing to a seemingly transcendent truth—a feminine ideal—that many girls and women recognize as Ultimate. This recognition is neither fully conscious nor unconscious: it is habitual.”

Lelwica, Starving for Salvation, 41.

45 Lelwica, Starving for Salvation, 41.
toward an action like cheating when one knows one has not prepared sufficiently for an exam and a passing grade is needed, but the will can insist on acting virtuously and giving one’s best effort instead of copying off one’s neighbor. But, when love and knowledge both present an object to the will, it is love which is more powerful in its effect on the will. Despite this difference in power, knowledge and love act together; connatural knowledge represents the synthesis of love and knowledge which reflects a union between the activity of both the cognitive and affect. In Aquinas’s approach to virtue ethics, therefore, moral knowledge is not the result of reason or affect alone, but functions as the result of the intellect and the affections together. Moral decision-making is also linked to habit, a dispositional quality of the soul that aids or hinders it in accomplishing the tasks that lead to its fulfillment.

Good habits are virtues by which a person is connatural with something that is objectively good; bad habits are vices and are the result of and result in a person’s connaturality with things that are not good or only appear to be good. True goods, as Porter pointed out in the previous section, are in accord with rightly-used reason that is ordered toward the person’s ultimate good. However, Aquinas observes, a person can choose an objective good even in light of a desire that resists that good. To explain this example Haile offers the example of a coffee-drinker who is compelled to give up coffee:

Say her doctor tells her that the morning caffeine jolt is causing high blood pressure. Our coffee drinker may subsequently decide not to have her morning cup of coffee for the sake of her health, though she in fact still desires it. Such an act is chosen because it is conducive to some end, namely health, which is cognitively recognized by the intellect as a good, though the actions conducive to

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47 ST, Ia IIae q.28, a.1, 3.
this end are not affectively desired. Ideally, her appetite will gradually change to no longer regard the morning cup of coffee as desirable. 49

While the coffee-drinker likely quite deeply desires her morning coffee the day she wakes up after being advised by her doctor to stop consuming caffeine, her intellect reminds her that avoiding high blood pressure and the need for drugs to manage it, or the potential for it to harm her health and longevity. Thus, she exercises her will, avoids using or disposes of the coffee in her cupboard, and eventually no longer longs for the smell of fresh coffee in the pot when her alarm goes off each morning. When a person is virtuous, their correctly-directed affections permit them to see reality as it is, like the coffee drinker who acts on her doctor’s advice and changes her behavior.

Humility is also a central consideration within the formative effect of thin-ideal images. Dunnington’s article on humility’s role in recovery purports that persons with addiction know that they cannot attain their ego ideal. Humility shifts them from that forlorn pursuits to a sense of one’s self-worth as grounded in the free gift of God’s love. Dunnington contextualizes humility in addiction recovery within one’s personal connection to their future self, (a self who does not abuse alcohol, for example) in order to stop a behavior (drinking) in the present. 50 Dunnington holds that a person struggling with addiction fails to a degree that shame impedes the process by which most people arrive at a unified experience of the self. 51 He traces the manner in which pride leads to a

50 Dunnington, “Recovery and the Humble Reconstitution of the Self,” 244.

Norman Wirzba, taking a Christian look at the role of the self in relationship to community in Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating, discusses eating disorders through the lens of the (negative) transformation of food into a commodity and the body into a machine; restoring relationship with food, the Earth, and others is key to his vision of returning the person to a sense of home in their bodies. For more, see page 102-109 of Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

51 Dunnington, “Recovery and the Humble Reconstitution of the Self,” 244.
failure to recover, and turns instead to humility—a virtue that, it can be argued, must be fostered and developed in community and helps a person struggling with eating-disorder tendencies resist connaturality to thin-ideal images. The following section will discuss the role of humility, temperance, and prudence in a context of grace, and the specific way that these virtues respond to the challenge of misguided moralism in the larger context of developing a theological response to eating disorders.

III. GRACE AS A RESPONSE TO MISGUIDED MORALISM

As discussed in Chapter One, the work of anthropologists O’Connor and Esterik terms the process through which people with eating disorders often strive for goodness through thinness “misguided moralism.” Current research indicates that the suffering of those with eating disorders, driven by misguided moralism, is influenced by the beauty-ideals that are perpetuated by thin-ideal images. The “virtue” that women with eating disorders exemplify is embodied in actions like avoiding eating fat, losing weight, decreasing their calorie intake, etc. These choices are made in pursuit of what Lelwica describes as icons of womanhood that point to a feminine ideal. This ideal serves as a transcendent truth “that many girls and women recognize as Ultimate.”52 As mentioned in Chapter One, this social reality is also captured in contemporary societal narratives; in addition to the morally valenced language that is commonly used around food (i.e. “confessing” a late-night snack binge or “being good” by ordering something healthy off a menu while eating out), O’Connor and Esterik write that their study participants “echo how contemporary culture moralizes eating. Witness the popular prejudice whereby fat people, seen as ‘letting themselves go’, are stigmatized as weak or even bad, while slim

52 Lelwica, Starving for Salvation, 41.
people, perceived as strict with themselves, exemplify strength and goodness.”

Moral associations around food and eating abound, creating an unhealthy context of moral judgements surrounding types of food, eating habits, and body size which is fueled and perpetuated in no small part by the proliferation of thin-ideal images on social media and the values they promote—values which frequently align with those of “misguided moralists” as they pursue the “Ultimate” feminine ideal of thinness.

The graced context of Thomistic virtue ethics can be responsive to the challenges that “misguided moralists” face. People with eating disorders struggle within social structures and contexts in which food is frequently villainized and eating habits are easily disordered. Engaging virtue ethics to develop a theological response to the struggles of individuals within the social structures that encourage a distorted vision of one’s self and one’s value is practical insofar as it targets something within the individual’s control (virtue). Virtue ethics also responds to the misguided moralist paradigm via the Thomistic role of grace. Aquinas claims that while the moral virtues develop over time and are habituated, theological virtues (and the habits that make natural and supernatural happiness attainable) are infused into the human person via grace; “[b]y both habituation and grace, God directs the rational creature toward happiness.” In other words, while natural virtue can be acquired through human effort and will, the theological virtues are

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See Daniel Daly’s The Structures of Virtue and Vice (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2021) for a framework for understanding and responding to structures of vice.

the result of grace, an unearned gift from God. Personal agency does not disappear; Aquinas simultaneously upholds the human person’s dignity, freedom, and self-determination as they practice and acquire the moral virtues. However, the human person cannot earn virtue or the supernatural goodness that virtue aims toward and imparts. Grace is that which saves while the natural perfection of the human person takes place as they grow in virtue. The perfection of human nature occurs such that no contradiction exists between the person’s natural and supernatural telos. While the person’s natural inclinations may need to be perfected, these inclinations do not separate the human person from God. The rehabilitation of the natural inclinations and the appetite is possible for someone struggling with an eating disorder, but it is not a process entirely under their own power and direction due to the influence of grace.

Dunnington identifies humility as central to helping a person struggling with addiction locate their self-worth in God’s love. His claim is also helpful for women and girls struggling with eating disorders. Dunnington defines humility as necessarily referential to others; unlike pride, “it is a general lack of concern about one’s own personal significance over against others.” He claims that instead of pride (proving oneself as better than others), a Christian approach to virtue places self-worth at the fore and allows it to condition the self—a place that self-worth deserves because of the loving and undeserved gift of God’s grace. Dunnington argues that depending upon God and

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56 The unearned nature of the three theological virtues and context of grace are important to the argument of Thomistic virtue ethics’s fittingness for developing a theological response to eating disorders and body dissatisfaction.
58 This insight is especially meaningful in connection to the challenge of worthlessness that many women and girls experience in connection to their eating disorders as explored in Chapter One.
embodying humility by sharing stories of one’s failures with others repeatedly permits one to create a self-narrative where one’s noteworthy role disappears.\textsuperscript{59} One comes to know the self as he or she is, not as a self “buttressed by [his or her] ego ideal.”\textsuperscript{60} Instead, one comes to know the self’s value as located in God’s love, constantly extended by means of grace, and also in relationship with others that helps one identify and remain oriented to one’s \textit{telos}.

Growth in virtue contextualized in grace imparts knowledge that is distinct from the accumulation of information and contributes to eating-disorder recovery by directing the human toward their \textit{telos}. Connatural knowledge leads to action as it functions as an “\textit{inclination}al knowledge” which “cannot remain idle but seeks to be in union with its object, which in this case, is God.”\textsuperscript{61} This union is enabled by grace; the gifts of the Holy Spirit (grace-infused habits) shape the human person to become connatural with the things of heaven, which imparts knowledge of “the means and ends necessary for ultimate happiness, the pursuit of which begins in this life.”\textsuperscript{62} Grace also re-habituates the appetite.

Through the connection that exists between natural and supernatural virtues, connatural knowledge also imparts wisdom, joy, and peace as gifts of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{60} Dunnington, “Recovery and the Humble Reconstitution of the Self,” 248.
\textsuperscript{61} Haile, “A Good Appetite,” 221. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{62} Haile, “A Good Appetite,” 221.
\textsuperscript{63} Haile, “A Good Appetite,” 222.

\textsuperscript{61} Haile, “A Good Appetite,” 221. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{62} Haile, “A Good Appetite,” 221.
\textsuperscript{63} Haile, “A Good Appetite,” 222.

All three aid discernment and contribute to the development of fortitude that recovery requires. By directing one’s appetites to God through grace, the will grants God permission to work in the pain and (potentially) aspects of sin that are contributing to an eating disorder so as to redirect the appetitive nature to God, the good life, and human flourishing.\(^6^4\) While a woman might desire “extreme thinness because she has been rendered connatural to thin-ideal images, her desires are not consistent with true happiness. The gifts inspire her to resist this futile pursuit, and to seek beauty and happiness in objects which truly satisfy.”\(^6^5\) The fruits of the Holy Spirit, a taste of the fruit of eternal life, are markers of the re-habituation of desire.\(^6^6\) This re-habituation imparts a peace that results from the restoration of the Self to itself, and results from the will being directed to one end instead of being pulled in multiple directions by conflicting desires. The gift of peace is a spiritual grace imparted as part of the appetite’s re-habituation which works for the good of the human person on both a spiritual level and in the process of eating-disorder recovery.

Grace is not only a central characteristic of a theological response to eating disorders but is uniquely responsive to the struggle with misguided moralism faced by many women with eating disorders. The lack of control and complete self-determination associated with growth in a context of grace is often difficult to accept for all human persons; due to the focus on control which often results for women grappling with eating disorders, this can be especially hard for them to recognize. Connatural knowledge in the


\(^{6^5}\) Haile, “A Good Appetite,” 224.

\(^{6^6}\) ST, Ia IIae q.70, a.2.
context of grace imparts a knowledge that goes beyond the formation of reason, involving a conversion of the appetite that leads to action. When one cooperates with grace, the gifts of the Holy Spirit that are foretastes of eternal life are also cultivated—these include joy, peace, wisdom, and self-control, all of which are spiritually and practically helpful to a person struggling with an eating disorder.

A. Haile’s Response of Restraint

Haile’s response to living a graced human life in light of the influence of the feminine thin ideal is for women to restrain their eyes from thin-ideal images, an approach which is not feasible in a social-media age. In light of the fact that “every action, even the most seemingly mundane and ordinary like looking at a fashion magazine, are moral actions and contribute to the overall happiness of the moral agent,” Haile suggests that Thomistic virtue ethics reveals the role of restraint in the moral life for reorienting the appetite toward the true good of the human telos.\(^67\) She also realizes that any time women go online, images of extreme thinness surround them. And, as long as society continues to ascribe to extreme thinness as a marker of beauty, “even the most confident woman is likely to feel a twinge of dissatisfaction when she compares herself with this standard.”\(^68\) Yet, Thomistic virtue ethics admits two things which allow for virtue to develop in such a space: one, grace permits the renewal of women’s vision, enabling “her to see herself in relationship with God, and to direct all of her actions toward ultimate union with God as her ultimate satisfaction.”\(^69\)

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the lens of God’s love and in pursuit of virtue which will bring one into union with God at the end of time is an orientation that is radically distinct from misguided moralism, reorienting the individual to their ultimate telos and true value as a human person. Second, Aquinas’s approach to virtue ethics allows for growth in virtue while simultaneously recognizing that both true virtue and happiness are impossible to achieve in a fallen human world. The ability for women with eating disorders to strive for virtue within structures that encourage vice in relationship to food, and amidst their own struggles with food and eating is necessary to consider within a theological approach to ethics, and is the subject of the following section.

IV. THE POSSESSION OF VIRTUE AND THE THOMISTIC UNITY THESIS

The manner in which one possesses virtue is pivotal to the claim that virtue ethics can aid women and girls struggling with eating disorders. If one assumes a Stoic approach to virtue, it would be impossible for a woman struggling with an eating disorder to possess any degree of temperance. In the Stoic view, virtue is either fully possessed or totally lacking. Thus, if one sometimes struggles to be temperate, but in other situations successfully exercises temperance, one still lacks temperance because it is not possessed in full and thereby exercised in every situation. Cicero, a Stoic, explained the possession of virtue in the following way: a man is drowning whether he is lying with his face in a puddle, or is in the middle of an ocean. To put it differently, “[a]nyone who has room left to morally progress lacks virtue completely.... [F]or the early Stoics, to be virtuous is to be beyond improvement, to be morally perfect.”

is possessed perfectly and wholly such that no further progress in virtue can be made, or the individual lacks it altogether.

An Augustinian sense of virtue is responsive to the logical dissonance that accompanies the Stoic view—that is, if one either wholly lacks or fully possesses virtue, how does one progress from not having virtue to attaining it? And, how is a human person wholly and perfectly virtuous? Augustine argues that such a standard is impossible to attain, thereby making virtue impossible to attain in lived reality. Andrew Kim, critiquing this view, observes that adopting the Stoic view “leads to the discounting of virtue as it manifests in the lives of actual people and entails either implausible descriptions of moral progress or eliminates the possibility of it altogether.” He points readers to Aquinas, whose approach to virtue avoids these flaws by presenting virtue as existent in degrees and developing over the course of three stages. In *De virtutibus in communi*, Aquinas argues that virtue’s character exists in reference to its object, not in being the best of its kind. Because virtue orders the human being to the upper limit of his or her capacity for goodness, Aquinas believes that the individual can be more or less disposed towards what is best and thereby have virtue to a greater or lesser degree. The ability to possess virtues in degrees leads Kim to see three levels or stages of virtue-possession present in *De virtutibus in communi*, which proves helpful in articulating how women and girls struggling with eating disorders might grow in virtue throughout their recovery.

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71 Kim, “Progress in the Good,” 151.
72 Kim, “Progress in the Good,” 155.
73 Kim, “Progress in the Good,” 154.
74 Kim, “Progress in the Good,” 154.
A. Levels of Virtue

Kim describes virtue as being accomplished “when the whole soul is brought into harmonious alignment with truthful vision of the way things are; this occurs by degrees in stages of time.” The first stage, or level of virtue, consists in “natural dispositions to virtue which are wholly imperfect (\textit{virtutes omnino imperfectae}), because they exist without prudence and so do not achieve right reason.” Aquinas holds that one can develop virtue on a natural level but holds that these virtues are imperfect and incomplete as they lack prudence (which guides the development of all other virtues) and do not lead the individual to right reason. Stage two “achieves right reason but does not reach God” because the virtues are not combined with charity. Therefore, the “virtues are complete in relation to the human good (\textit{perfectae per comparationem ad bonum humanum}) but not perfect simply. They are true but imperfect virtues.” In the first stage, virtues represent fragmented and unstable dispositions that can only actualize the rational soul in a manner that is imperfect. They are the beginning of the human journey to virtue that is simply perfect (the third stage). The second stage of virtue improves upon the first; the right use of reason is accomplished in the individual, but the development of the virtues falls short in leading the individual to God. They are not united to charity, and are thereby complete in relation to human goodness, but not divine goodness. Finally, the third stage of virtue consists in virtue that is combined with charity (\textit{simul cum caritate}), which is simply perfect (\textit{virtutum simpliciter perfectarum}). While the process of attaining virtue in Aquinas is more realistic than other approaches to virtue, he holds (alongside Augustine)
that absolutely perfect virtue (the third stage) is unattainable in the confines of one’s earthly existence.

The possibility of developing virtue in degrees means that anyone can grow in virtue, regardless of their life circumstances, even if the degree of goodness that they are able to accomplish differs. Thomas characterizes virtue as unfolding in what he describes as stages in time and says that an individual’s virtue can be complete relative to the stage that they are in. This belief makes it possible for every human person to have the potential to grow in virtue and develop morally, regardless of the reality in which they find themselves. It follows, then, that the virtues are united in the end toward which they direct the human person. Kim argues that this claim is supported by the relationship between the second and third stage of virtue development. In the second level of virtue, the virtues are considered perfect insofar as they are connected by prudence within their varied stages of development. However, when compared to the third stage of virtue, they are incomplete insofar as they are not yet perfectly united with and ordered to charity. This does not mean that the good that the two levels of virtue will accomplish is the same; according to Porter, “perfected virtues will always give rise to morally good actions; in contrast, the imperfect virtues, which also qualify the desiderative faculties, typically result in actions which are good only in some limited respect.” The extent to which one possesses virtue, and makes progress in the good, can be seen by the relative goodness of the actions one produces. While no one can be perfectly good or virtuous at

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76 Kim, “Progress in the Good,” 170.
all times, progress in choosing the good and growing in virtue is possible in Thomas’s view (in contrast to the Stoic sense of virtue) and is necessary for progressing in the Christian life.

B. The Unity Thesis, Prudence, and Temperance

1. Thomas’s Unity Thesis

Regarding the process of developing virtue, Aquinas holds that virtue develops proportionately, giving rise to a unity thesis. Kim describes the unity thesis as the virtues growing together in the “manner in which a hand grows. As the whole hand grows, the fingers grow ‘at a proportional rate.’ Thus, with respect to acquired virtue, as prudence (the hand) grows so too the fingers (the moral virtues) at a proportional rate.”78 Aquinas is able to understand the virtues as growing together because of the interconnected nature of the cardinal virtues. Though she rejects the unity thesis, Porter characterizes their existence as “interlocked, in such a way that no one of them can function properly without the others.”79 As a result of this interlocking relationship, Aquinas holds that “a single virtue cannot be possessed in isolation from the other virtues.”80 Because Thomas holds that the virtues can be possessed in degrees, and growth in virtue made incrementally, his unity thesis is plausible.

The unity thesis is responsive to the challenges of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in contemporary times, because it provides a response to the challenge of a reality in which it is at best impractical and at worst impossible to avoid thin-ideal

78 Kim, “Progress in the Good,” 168.
80 Kim, “Progress in the Good,” 147.
images. Haile concludes that to grow in virtue and work against the connotatinality imparted by thin-ideal images, women should avoid fashion magazines and other sources of thin-ideal images.\textsuperscript{81} Her work was published before smartphones and social media was near-ubiquitous, making avoiding the internet, social media posts, and advertisements featuring the feminine thin ideal unrealistic. Women do have agency in choosing the social media accounts they follow, posts they click on, and the amount of time they spend online, but avoiding it altogether is not feasible for most girls and women. Algorithms on social media and linked to search engines are able to pinpoint the age, gender, and other characteristics of their users, and cultivate advertisements based on this information. For girls and women, this means being exposed to advertisements for weight-loss programs, fitness routines, clothes, beauty products, and other services advertised using edited photos that promote the thin ideal. The abstinence model in the case of thin-ideal images is not a realistic solution to the challenge of connotatinality and the thin ideal.

Prudence is central to the unified growth of the virtues. Porter defines prudence as “the capacity to discern and choose in accordance with one’s overall desires for what is good, noble, and just,” observing that it “could not develop in someone who did not have these desires at all, or experienced them only fitfully or intermittently.”\textsuperscript{82} Prudence gives the individual the ability to discern what actions are in accord with the desire for the good, and to act on those desires. Therefore, Aquinas considers it to be “the principal virtue of the intellect considered as practical reason” whose role is to guide the cardinal virtues.

\textsuperscript{81} Haile, “A Good Appetite,” 188.

\textsuperscript{82} Porter, “Virtue and Sin,” 524-525.
It is for this reason that Aquinas understands prudence as the unifying virtue in the other virtues’ growth; if a particular decision or action is to help a person grow in virtue, it must be in accord with right reason. Therefore, Thomas concludes, all virtues must come to be attained with and through prudence.84

2. Prudence as Guide

Prudence helps one begin to act virtuously, which can take place before one has begun to habitually possess virtue. Aquinas locates the beginning of the acquisition of virtue and the unified growth of the virtues in a discrete choice to act well; to obtain virtue, one begins by enacting it. Prudence is necessary to attain this, for “a good life consists in good deeds. Now in order to do good deeds, it matters not only what a man does, but also how he does it; to wit, that he do it from right choice and not merely from impulse or passion.”85 A person chooses in light of something, which Aquinas holds should be the human telos. The virtue that directs the human person to that end “perfects the soul in the appetitive part, the object of which is the good and the end.”86 The intellectual virtue which perfects the reason and orders the appetitive desire is prudence.87 Developing prudence requires repeatedly choosing it. Repeated good actions in the context of grace deepens the habit of virtue, which leads one to become virtuous.

However, Aquinas’s moral theory is distinct from others insofar as he believes that the

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83 Porter, “Virtue and Sin,” 525. This is Porter’s translation of Aquinas, ST Ia IIae q.58, a.4.
84 Kim, “Progress in the Good,” 168.
85 ST, Ia IIae q. 57 a.4.
86 ST, Ia IIae q. 57 a.4.
87 ST, Ia IIae q. 57 a.4.
ability to “reason well” relies on the degree to which the complex relationship between a person’s behavioral, emotional, and mental features are ordered rightly.  

It is also important to recall the context of grace in the pursuit of virtue in the context of the unity thesis—one cannot attain it under the direction of the will alone. Porter puts it this way: “It is not enough to act out of the dynamisms of one’s created nature in order to attain God. The human person must receive a new and qualitatively different set of capacities, in order to attain an end which altogether transcends the natural telos of any created nature, namely, direct personal union with God.”  

Because the end at which virtue aims is not creaturely, the creature needs a distinct set of capacities to attain it (which divine grace provides). Grace enables the human person to attain a telos beyond their creaturely capacity, which is not only a gift but avoids the tendency toward a Pelagian effort by which one can attain goodness or virtue as a result of sheer human effort. The context of grace is that which makes the growth in virtue communicated by the unity thesis possible, and frees women trapped by misguided moralism to consider another moral paradigm in which goodness cannot be earned, but is given freely and from-without (instead of within) through grace, such as the one Dunnington describes as essential to recovery from addiction.

3. Temperance and the Appetite

Aquinas’s belief that the virtues grow together with prudence at the helm offers an alternative to Haile’s abstinence model as well as a means of growing in temperance

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in order to aid those struggling with eating disorders.\(^90\) Growth in prudence results in the other cardinal virtues’ development under the unity thesis. Instead of attempting to avoid thin-ideal images, one might instead cultivate the virtue of prudence, which then motivates the growth of the other virtues. This solution is also responsive to the challenge that temperance presents to many women and girls who struggle with eating disorders and body dissatisfaction. Temperance provides “a bridge between the natural appetite—the first nature—and the acquired appetite or ‘second nature’ that follows from habit.”\(^91\)

Rehabilitating the appetite to desire the right amount of food, for the right reason, at the right time is often one of the primarily goals of eating disorder recovery; in therapeutic circles, dietitians and psychologists often introduce intuitive eating as both a goal and means for rediscovering the body’s hunger cues and desire for particular food at appropriate times. Yet, this process of rediscovery is often one of the greatest obstacles for women and girls struggling with eating disorders, disordered eating, body dissatisfaction, or merely struggling under diet culture’s influence. They are not temperate, either due to excess or defect; women who binge and purge eat too much food too quickly, and then expel it from their bodies to leave their stomach empty again. Women with anorexia are intemperate by defect, not taking in enough calories to sustain their bodies. A temperate woman has an appetite that desires the right amount of food, and understands both what is too much and what is too little—going the right length with desire.


Rightly-ordered temperance is not limiting, but rather liberative and thereby essential for developing the ability to eat intuitively. Josef Pieper notes that temperance is much more than moderation. He points to the fact that “the primary and essential meaning of temperare [...] is to dispose various parts into one unified and ordered whole.” 92 Nicholas Austin, SJ, also argues that temperance has a liberative function, seen in the two manners in which it operates. One is “restraint and [the other is] what might be called ‘enjoyment’ or ‘proper use’: One can be too restrained, but one cannot be too temperate; temperance therefore, is not restraint alone....The appropriate response to human hungers and appetites can often be joyful fulfillment, in grateful recognition of the gifts of God.” 93 In other words, temperance is going the right length. One who is temperate has a desire for food, or other things, that is rightly-ordered, but Haile’s work demonstrates that this virtue is not only restrictive, but liberating—a perspective that also works to challenge misguided moralism’s assumptions. Haile also points out that temperance functions in an intuitive manner, allowing the person to make judgements about the goods of the senses without engaging the higher intellectual powers. The intuitive nature of temperance makes it particularly well-suited for developing the intuitive eating toward which therapists direct their clients. The role of temperance as “an appetitive knowledge of which sensible pleasures are good to pursue, and the knowledge of how these sensible pleasures are to be pursued” establishes it as necessary for engaging in intuitive eating. 94

93 Nicholas Owen Austin, “Thomas Aquinas on the Four Causes of Temperance” (PhD diss., Boston College, 2010), 46-47.
cardinal virtues, requires habituation in order to achieve the liberation it offers. Once developed, it “frees us from the pursuit of false desires and allows us to identify and satisfy those desires which are authentically ours.”\textsuperscript{95} In the context of eating disorders, growing in temperance re-orders the desires and rehabituates the appetite in order to orient both toward a person’s \textit{telos} which will bring about the joyful fulfillment inherent to rightly enjoying God’s gifts instead of the short-term satisfaction of restricting food intake, binging, or losing weight. An effect of such re-ordering is the ability to eat intuitively, freed from the unhealthy behaviors and eating patterns that body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and eating disorders often involve.

C. Applying The Unity Thesis, Prudence, and Temperance in Recovery

The united growth of the virtues (including temperance) under prudence’s direction provides a robustly pragmatic theological response to eating-disorder or disordered-eating recovery. Many women and girls struggle to rehabilitate their appetites and desires in recovery, which is traditionally considered to be the role of temperance. Especially in early stages of recovery, increasing or decreasing food intake (depending on one’s particular eating-disorder struggle) may seem beyond the realm of possibility, making intuitive eating a therapeutic goal that is beyond one’s reach. However, under the unity thesis, temperance can be developed in tandem with the other virtues. So, it is likely that the courage and fortitude exercised in regular check-ins with an accountability partner when one feels the urge to binge will, according to the unity thesis, encourage temperance to grow, too.\textsuperscript{96} Temperance can also be developed in realms outside of

\textsuperscript{95} Haile, “A Good Appetite,” 196.

\textsuperscript{96} Jessica Coblentz on pages 564–568 of “The Possibilities of Grace amid Persistent Depression,” \textit{Theological Studies} 80, no. 3 (September 2019): 554–71, explores the idea of “small agency” and details the flourishing it can bring about in the context of persistent depression. She terms small agency as a means
eating; frequently, women with eating disorders engage in other control-oriented behavioral patterns. They strictly regulate the amount of time that they spend studying, for example, and may struggle to allow themselves to take breaks or engage in enjoyable activities when their work is not done. Exercising the liberative nature of temperance wherein the parts are directed into one unified and ordered whole in order to enjoy things—even things as small as a study break for a coffee or a chat with a friend—to the right degree can also develop the virtue of temperance, making it easier over time to be temperate in one’s eating, exercise, and perhaps social media consumption.

The intellectual virtue of prudence helps guide the appetitive virtue of temperance’s development. Prudence can help the woman who struggles to be temperate in her studying. She might be willing to consider the studies that say taking brief, intermittent breaks aid focus and retention. This could lead her to decide to try taking small breaks which interrupt her long, disciplined study days in a healthy way. In this case of prudence guiding the development of temperance in a realm outside of eating itself, the woman would also develop courage and the fortitude to repeat this behavior. Temperance’s role in helping the human person to align their goal of fulfilling their telos with the freedom that God desires for them makes the act of this alignment a liberative act. As Austin and Pieper point out, temperance is a freedom which permits the human person to properly enjoy the good things of life. In the case of eating disorders, the human person is invited through the virtue of temperance to order their desire not toward the false pleasures afforded by the thin ideal or weight loss, but toward the joy of virtue of recovering possibility which can take place over months or years, exercised in seemingly-small actions like doing laundry or the dishes.

Though our insights share similarities, they were arrived at separately.
in this life. These joys, as they are perfected, prepare God’s created beings for the even
greater joys that are to come in the next life. Grace’s gift of a knowledge that moves from
the intellect to the heart, imparting “a deeper kind of knowing, inexpressible in words and
concepts, of what is good and true and how to act in order to achieve happiness,” directs
the human person toward their telos.  

Christ is present in the grace offered to persons striving for virtue. In his article on
the role of grace in recovery from addiction, Kim reminds readers that Christ’s grace
“can go where others cannot. He can enter into the cemetery of the...soul in a way no one
else can and encounter the inward man afflicted, crying out...and there not only comfort
him but also heal his mind and return him to his family to tell of all the Lord has done for
him.” Grace is given by Christ, the very person who accompanies each individual in
their particular struggles with eating disorders, disordered eating, body dissatisfaction,
and the thin ideal. And, that grace heals in a manner which compels the individual to
return to their community to share the hope and joy of their healing. Healing and grace
comes from relationship with Christ to restore individuals to relationship with
themselves, others, and their communities. It is to the role of relationship and community
in a theological response to eating disorders that this dissertation will now turn.

V. THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN VIRTUE DEVELOPMENT AND
RECOVERY

Recovery from an eating disorder frequently requires a supportive community to
help the individual develop new habits and behaviors around eating, how they see their

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98 Andrew Kim, “Newness of Life and Grace Enabled Recovery from the Sin of Addiction,” Journal of
Moral Theology 10, Special Issue no. 1 (2021): 136.
body and their value as a human person, and to ultimately help restore them to a vision of themselves that is in line with their telos. In other words, community helps to rehabituate a sense of self, and a vision of one’s self as a robust (not unidimensional) human person. As part of this process, community can encourage growth in virtue and inspiration in the form of moral exemplars on earth and in the heavenly communion of saints.

A. The Separation and Re-integration of the Self

The context in which both the individual struggling with an eating disorder and their community exists is a challenging one. As described in Chapter One, a critical-realist approach to social structures reveals the way in which one becomes connatural to language around food, eating, and body critique in a manner that is not in line with human flourishing, but rather aligns to the facsimile of beauty put forth by the thin ideal. That chapter’s section on IFS therapy also detailed how an integrated vision of the Self functions therapeutically and aligns with a theological anthropological assessment of the human person as internally integrated, and as existing within a community of persons. In this view, the challenge of restoring a vision of the self which is aligned with one’s ultimate telos and flourishing is experienced not only by the individual, but by the women and girls with whom they are in relationship, and the larger communities of which they are a part. However, hope is found not only as a theological virtue imparted by grace, but in community. Communities play a central role in encouraging growth in virtue, and in the specificity of eating-disorder struggles, can

99 For more on structures’ ability to encourage virtue and vice, see Daniel Daly, The Structures of Virtue and Vice (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2021).
provide a vision of one’s true self which is central to the restoration and reunification of the self in recovery from an eating disorder and substantive cases of body dissatisfaction.

Literature on eating disorders as well as IFS points to the ways that an eating disorder separates the person from their true self. IFS conceives of the human person as a Self with parts that possess a range of emotions, abilities, desires, and views of the world. In this interior ecosystem, internal parts can take on roles that are undesirable during difficult experiences like trauma, which are habituated and activated when future times of difficulty or anxiety occur. The goal of IFS is for the Self, the core of the human person, to harmoniously lead its parts instead of having those parts react powerfully to perceived threats in an attempt to protect the Self. IFS’s therapeutic approach, considering the Self within a relational ecosystem, is noted for its promise for treating people struggling with eating disorders. IFS’s vision of an integrated human person mirrors the therapeutic work of Carolyn Costin and Gwen Schubert Grabb, who posit that as eating-disorder behaviors become habituated and the desire to engage in them strengthens, there “becomes a separate, adaptive, disordered self, the ‘eating disorder self,’ which is different from the core ‘healthy’” part of a person. While a person’s eating disorder self will encourage them to purge after consuming cookies, Costin and Grabb point out that if encouraged to consider speaking to a child tempted to engage in this behavior, the healthy self comes forward to dissuade the child. It is the eating

disorder self that encourages them to take laxatives, binge, or fast all day.\textsuperscript{103} The goal of eating disorder recovery is to learn from the eating disorder self (not to get rid of it) so as to discover the function it is playing in one’s life and develop the healthy self so that it can take over these responsibilities (mirroring the sense of internal ecosystems and harmonious leadership featured in IFS).\textsuperscript{104} Reconciling these two parts of the self will result in integration. Eventually, when strong enough, the healthy self will exist while the eating disorder self simply becomes the part of one’s coherent self which lets them know that something is wrong so that the healthy self can attend to it.\textsuperscript{105}

Psychology and theological anthropology recognize that the human person does not arrive at an integrated self alone. Not only are strong familial and social relationships protective factors in the development of eating disorders, research also indicates that supportive relationships aid recovery from eating disorders.\textsuperscript{106} Eventually, Costin and Grabb claim when writing about the recovery process, relationships with people will replace one’s relationship with their eating disorder.\textsuperscript{107} As part of recovery they suggest that an individual with an eating disorder learn how to rely on others to deal with the difficult emotions and problems that they encounter, and invest in meaningful and authentic relationships. Their therapeutic approach recognizes the inherently relational nature of the human person that reflects the Trinity’s communal nature, and the practical suggestions that they offer capture the role of relationship and community in recovery.

\textsuperscript{103} Costin and Grabb, \textit{8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder}, 38.

\textsuperscript{104} Costin and Grabb, \textit{8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder}, 38.

\textsuperscript{105} Costin and Grabb, \textit{8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder}, 44.

\textsuperscript{106} Costin and Grabb, \textit{8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder}, 191.

\textsuperscript{107} Costin and Grabb, \textit{8 Keys to Recovery from an Eating Disorder}, 191.
Costin and Grabb suggest having accountability partners, someone to call when one is tempted to engage in an eating disorder behavior or after one has engaged in a behavior that they are trying to stop. This person serves as a support and can help them reflect on how they are feeling, what prompted their behavior, and how to move forward. Planning meals with friends who know that a person has difficulty eating out or trying new foods can also help with accountability in moving toward recovery goals, and provide support for new behaviors that are challenging to implement in one’s life. It is clear from these practical examples, and from the theological anthropological premise that humans need community, that relationships and community inspire virtue in the context of eating disorders. Relationships can mediate grace and inspire collective striving toward beauty. While the process of integrating the self to fully pursue a telos directed at one’s flourishing is difficult, friends and communities can also help remind the individual who they are. Grace-filled relationships with others can remind one who struggles that they are more than the behaviors with which they struggle, and that they have value that extends beyond their satisfaction with their body. In the act of reminding them of this truth, communities and friends help them move toward incarnating their authentic (and integrated) beautiful self.

B. Moral Exemplars on Earth and in Heaven

It is clear that relationships and community are therapeutically integral to the reintegration of the self and in helping women and girls struggling with eating disorders recall their telos. Practical examples of how development in virtue in the context of eating disorders can occur are detailed above, described in tandem with therapeutic recommendations. Aristotle traditionally turns to moral exemplars as a mode of learning
how to be virtuous, and habituating that virtue. Moral exemplars are fundamental to the Catholic tradition, residing in both the earthly and heavenly Church. The mystical Church’s saints not only provide exemplary examples of virtue in lived realities, but their presence in heaven provides women and girls who struggle with intercessors whose prayers are sources of grace that aid growth in virtue.

Moral exemplars and sources of support in the realm of food and eating facilitate the recovery process, and the Thomistic tradition points to the role of exemplars in one’s present reality as a way to learn how to act virtuously and a means to habituate that virtue. Aquinas, with the addition of grace and the possibility of one day joining in God’s divine life, transforms Aristotle’s reliance on moral exemplars in virtue with the implications of the Incarnation and the communion of saints. The earthly role that supportive friends play in recovery, specifically in the development of virtue, encourages the reintegration of the self, provides a vision of the recovered self that the individual may struggle to imagine themselves, and aids the person in recovery in enacting the good behaviors or avoiding the harmful behaviors that they are working to overcome.

While it is difficult to conceive of a woman who has not struggled with their relationship with their body, food, or eating, someone who has struggled (or is to a degree still struggling) can support other women struggling with eating disorders as an exemplar of sorts. First, women can support young girls and women by virtue of their shared experiences; they understand the pressures and complications of existing in the milieu of diet culture which encourages body dissatisfaction, and the ways this can insidiously
begin to express itself in one’s relationship with food and eating. While relationships and support from all persons are important, it seems that women in particular can be a source of understanding for one another regarding the difficulties of navigating beauty standards, food choice, and other challenges. Second, women can share from the wealth of their own experiences. Most women have stories of periods in their lives in which they made decisions to exercise, eat, or compare their bodies to others in a manner which did not cultivate virtue in them, or in others. They are able to share the outcome of those decisions, the manner in which it contributed toward or inhibited their flourishing, and might encourage others to make different choices as a result of their experiences. Third, while women’s relationship with their bodies, food, and eating is always liable to change, when one has arrived at a good place in that relationship it can serve as a model for others. While it is perhaps unrealistic to seek a model who has never struggled with pressures to conform their body to the thin ideal, monitor food consumption, engage in exercise as a means to control one’s body, or engage in other unhealthy behaviors, a woman who has reached a place of peace with food, eating, and her body provides a particular incarnation of what a good relationship with food and eating might look like in a broken world.

108 Complicated relationships with the body, food, and eating are instantiated and enacted in many ways; this represents one such way, not the only way such complications might arise or be experienced.

109 The realities of women’s changing bodies (from pre-puberty, to puberty, to young womanhood, to mature womanhood, to potential pregnancy, to the pre- and post-menopause body) and the role that hormones play in hunger cues and weight loss/gain means that women’s bodies are frequently in flux. The frequent changes in one’s body can be confusing and change one’s emotional relationship with the body (often resulting in attempts to change the body by altering food intake or exercise routines). The fact that most women do not arrive at a peaceable relationship with one’s body and maintain it for the rest of their lives should not be understated, with the many changes the female body undergoes over one’s lifespan.

110 Community can also impede virtue development. In the case of eating disorders, online pro-anorexia (pro-ana), pro-bulimia (pro-mia), and thinspiration encourage members to continue their eating disorders or offer tips for hiding them from parents and friends. These communities date back to 2001, and are present
The possibility of transformation in virtue in relationship with another is made possible by the incarnation and example of Christ. Patrick Clark points out that in John’s Gospel, the call to “love one another as I have loved you” is linked to the description of love in John’s first letter whereby love is laying down one’s life for another like Christ did.  

In John’s writings, “the full manifestation of moral goodness in the world is the manifestation of the love that motivates Christ’s actions in the world.” Therefore, to act well or virtuously is to act like Christ, whose actions serve as a reference to the divine love he revealed to humankind. These actions transform human vision in a manner akin to how a community or person can offer someone struggling with an eating disorder a vision of who they can be. This transformative possibility is rooted in encounter and self-gift. Clark observes to this end that “[e]ncountering the love of Christ establishes a new horizon of meaning and purpose, not on account of Christ’s incomparable moral superiority, but because of what his self-gift reveals about all reality and every human life.” As two women encounter each other and offer the gift of self in imitation of Christ’s own love, these encounters with virtue motivated by Christ’s love allow the

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mutual seeing of things “more truly through the eyes of those who truly love.” 115 The mutual-seeing described here evokes Balthasar’s development of the spiritual senses, contextualizing their development in a community ordered to the good of both persons which encourages them to resist the thin ideal’s corrosive effects on their very selves, and the manner in which they see.

In a Christian community that understands the human telos as ordered toward God, a new possibility for growth in virtue is present. In the realm of eating disorders, the manner in which one woman admires another’s lack of attachment to maintaining a particular number on a scale can provide a vision of freedom and hope, actualized in a manner which makes it appear achievable for her. Or, a young woman might speak with another about her desire to be less influenced by the images she sees on Instagram accounts or TikToks that share advice for targeting “trouble areas” of the body or successfully fasting for twelve hours a day. In the context of grace and a unified vision of their telos, a conversation about curating one’s feed, changing one’s social media habits, and providing accountability or space to check-in on how that endeavor is going can bear fruit which is not possible in a space without grace. The revelation of divine love to others in imitation of Christ creates new possibilities for accompaniment, growth, and transformation in the eating-disorder recovery process. Seeing the world through the saints’ eyes enables not only new ways of loving, but other transformative possibilities.

The saints serve as moral exemplars in virtue, and provide a space for connection with God’s grace and love in the context of relationship. Relationality is central to eating disorder recovery as well as growth in virtue. The human person’s telos is to join the

saints in heaven so as to share in their communion with God, and *Lumen Gentium* encouraged all Catholics to ask the saints for their intercession in order to achieve this end.\(^\text{116}\) Entering into relationship with the saints so to ask their intercession can develop a familiarity and love that is a hallmark of being in relationship. In addition, the intercession that the saints provide is a source of grace for the person who petitions them for prayers, and the lives of the saints themselves are also “illuminating inasmuch as the basis of a saint’s moral decision making flows out of this mystery of ‘being in Christ’.”\(^\text{117}\)

The saints have fully realized their human *telos*, for it is communion with Christ that one discovers who they are; in the words of James Keating and David M. McCarthy, the mystery of the saints is that “they have not grasped the fullness of our good end and the possibilities of human life, as much as they have been ‘gripped’ by Christ.”\(^\text{118}\) Their goal was following God and entering fully into relationship with Christ, not merely adhering to a moral code. They have conformed themselves to Christ so that being and mission have been integrated–Balthasar’s vision of a whole-hearted response to the call of Christian discipleship. This example is life-giving not only in the most literal way (such that the person attains eternal life with God), but orients the person away from a rule-based way of life (one that is more akin to the tendencies of the misguided moralist) toward relational flourishing. While the saints “do not settle our moral quandaries or


\(^{117}\) James Keating and David M. McCarthy, “Moral Theology with the Saints,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 2 (April 2003), 205.

\(^{118}\) Keating and McCarthy, “Moral Theology with the Saints,” 205.
existential questions” they do “help us locate our lives in the context of grace” through the existence of relationships with the saints and others.119

In contrast to the facsimile of beauty that the thin ideal provides, the saints are beautiful “iconographic dynamisms for us to ponder and emulate as we seek out the contours of our own discipleship.”120 They are reminders not only of the human telos, but of the closeness of Christ and the Holy Spirit as one journeys toward that telos. They not only provide a relationship between the person on earth and the saint in heaven, but remind the individual of the constancy of Christ and the Holy Spirit’s presence and the relationship that exists therein. The manner in which people on earth in this day and time live is particular to them and their context; the saints provide examples of the beauty of a deep inner relationship to God that is manifested in the uniqueness of their time, and their personalities. Part of the beauty of the life of the saint is hope for the future:

The lives of the saints are not to be explored simply because of their spiritual or mystical experiences or because they are models of moral living; rather, the life of a saint is to be listened to because she shows us that God is with us, that our lives are being incorporated into the coming kingdom of God. Saints are testimony that God’s promises of redemption and reconciliation are true.121

There is hope for eternal life, for the end of earthly struggles, and for the transformation of those struggles akin to the transformation of Christ’s wounds in the resurrection. The beauty of the saints’ lives is frequently found in the transformative growth that results from the wounds and suffering of their lives. Hope for the transformation of vision also

119 How one might imitate the saints’ holiness is a perennial question, but Keating and McCarthy point out that it must extend beyond mimicry due to the uniqueness of individuals and the times in which they exist, instead looking to the saints as embodiments of stories that end in communion with God. Their exemplism extends beyond that present in Aristotelian or Kantian frameworks. See page 209-213 of “Moral Theology with the Saints,” Modern Theology 19, no. 2 (April 2003).

120 Keating and McCarthy, “Moral Theology with the Saints,” 206.

121 Keating and McCarthy, “Moral Theology with the Saints,” 208.
exists in the saints. Their examples, writings, and prayers can help those in the world learn to see it through God’s own eyes via the development of the spiritual senses—the kind of transformation that is needed in light of the thin ideal.122

VI. CONCLUSION

Virtue ethics’ positive role in the process of recovering from an eating disorder, especially in the context of community, makes clear its importance in a theological response to eating disorders. By directing women and girls away from misguided moralism to the pursuit of human flourishing in light of a Christian vision of a human telos, Thomistic virtue ethics re-orders the desire to attain the beauty of goodness. Aquinas’s unity thesis, especially prudence, and temperance offer a means of pursuing virtue in the context of grace which engages the whole person’s life, responding to the tendency of one who struggles with an eating disorder to isolate themselves from community. Applying virtue ethics in the context of a graced community and detailing the ways that community can support the reintegration of the self not only details the fruits that can come from engaging in the recovery process in the context of a community, but also offers insights on the role of community in virtue development to the field of moral theology.

While the possibilities of Thomistic virtue ethics, grace, and community for eating disorder recovery are prolific, it is also necessary to acknowledge that not everyone recovers. Eating disorder research is divided on what full recovery looks like;

an abstinence model is not possible, and frequent relapses throughout women’s lives are reported alongside stories of full resolution like Claire’s from Chapter One. Why are some people healed, and others are not, especially if grace can heal all ills? Like many questions about suffering in the Christian life, the answer is a mystery, although hope that one day the answer will be clear in heaven remains.

Shelly Rambo in her text on Resurrecting Wounds acknowledges that some wounds persist, remaining invisible beneath the surface of peoples’ lives. She reminds readers that Christ returns after his death with his wounds and explores three insights from this encounter that are insightful for the unpredictability of eating-disorder recovery. First, she reflects on Christ’s body as bearing the wounds inflicted by the social forces of his time. Like Christ, women’s bodies bear the marks of their times—teeth with enamel worn away from frequent purging, bodies with stretch marks that have been filled and deflated from weight yo-yo’s encouraged by diet culture, and hair and nails grown brittle from a lack of nutrition. Women, too, bear the marks of the power of misguided beauty ideals and the social structures that continue to feed and uphold them. Second, artistic depictions of Thomas’s finger in relationship to Christ’s wounded side permit a variety of distances between them. In this project of developing a theological response to eating disorders, I seek to bring theology close to the wounds of those with eating disorders, just as Thomas stuck his finger into the wound in Jesus’s side. The goal is to both offer aid to those who struggle with eating disorders, disordered eating, and

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124 Shelly Rambo, Resurrected Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 150-152.
body dissatisfaction in a social media age and to offer new insights back to the field of theological aesthetics and virtue ethics in light of the experiences of those with eating disorders. The exchange between experience and theology yields fruit and new developments in the other. Third, Rambo envisions the community that gathers around Christ’s wounds, a site which can be one of “crossing and [the] potential transfiguration of wounds.”

The community’s proximity to Christ’s body reveals that truth can be accessed through the body when the intellect fails. Not only does this insight underscore the role of community in recovery, as has been discussed in this chapter, but it emphasizes that the “meaning of faith is evidenced in the cultivation of the practices of care and companionship.”

There is great hope in the resurrection, even with wounds—a hope that is present even if healing is not immediate or completed on earth.

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125 Shelly Rambo, *Resurrected Wounds*, 151-152.


CONCLUSION

“The primacy of God is not really achieved if it does not include man’s corporeality.”

The previous chapters of this dissertation have each detailed a particular contribution of the Catholic intellectual tradition toward the development of a theological response to eating disorders in today’s thin-idealized, social-media driven context. Together, they claim that theologically, eating disorders may be thought of as conditions that are produced and fostered by a debased vision of beauty, a self-negating rather than self-transcending conception of kenosis, and a distorted pursuit of goodness of “misguided moralism” that results. Each chapter has demonstrated in turn the contributions of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and its connections to divine Beauty and glory; his work on kenosis and its inherently communal nature; and Aquinas’s virtue ethics presents goodness in such a way that it is understood as a relational gift rather than an individual achievement to a vision of human flourishing linked to a telos ordered toward divine life which will result in authentic human happiness.

The present work attended to interdisciplinary work from addiction studies, anthropology, sociology, medicine, psychology, and philosophy, in order to establish what they identify as central themes in eating disorders and disordered eating. A variety of sources also identified the role of the feminine thin ideal in the self-concept of girls and women, as well as their experiences with eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction. It mined the work of Balthasar’s theology to offer a vision of beauty rooted in divine glory, a personal beauty that reaches into and takes on earthly suffering.

in the Logos taking on flesh in the person of Jesus. Balthasar’s sense of the co-existence of the act of encounter and mission compels a theological reflection on how an encounter with Christ changes how one lives, and perceives the beautiful. Beauty exists in and because of a communion of persons in the Trinity. This truth both underscores the difference in how one sees beauty when one knows–intellectually and through encounter–it to be coextensive with divine life and rejects the societal idea that beauty is earned and possessed by means of strict diets or exercise regimes, or by engaging in eating-disorder behaviors.

Analyzing Balthasar’s approach to kenosis through both his Christology and Trinitarian theology with the aid of feminist scholars led to a vision of kenosis that is both self-transcendent and recognizes the inherent worth of the human person as imago dei. It also responds to critiques leveraged by feminist scholars, who claim that Balthasar’s theology of sexual difference is problematic, and provides a way to engage his kenosis in a manner which helps women and girls understand both the uniqueness of Christ’s kenosis and the love it magnifies. His work on the spiritual senses offers a theological means for exploring the interconnection between Christ’s kenosis and the transformation of sight. While faith and an encounter with Christ does not necessarily immediately heal or fast-track an individual through recovery, it can reorient one’s perspective such that one sees themselves and the world around them differently. The choice of entering into relationship as a result of an encounter with Christ, too, is a source of grace and relational sustenance for the most difficult parts of the recovery journey.

Turning to Thomas’s virtue ethics establishes a vision of virtue which is restored by the aforementioned forms of beauty and kenosis. This vision provides a compelling
theological alternative to misguided moralism, wherein goodness is better understood as a relational gift as opposed to an individual achievement. The nature of theological virtues as undeserved gifts is reliant on God’s grace, which imparts and enables persons to receive faith, hope, and charity. The cardinal virtues, too, require grace to flourish. Neither can be built by mere moral muscle. Aquinas’s unity thesis, couched in an awareness of virtue as an undeserved gift, offers women, girls, and those who accompany them through recovery an understanding of growing in virtues that are not well-developed, and may aid them in eating-disorder recovery. By focusing on the development of virtues other than temperance, a virtue which is frequently less-developed in those struggling with disordered eating or eating disorder behaviors, temperance can grow by virtue of its relationship to the others with prudence as the guide of all. Developing temperance aids with the appetite’s direction, moderation, and liberation—all of which are central to eating disorder recovery.

Aquinas’s insights on flourishing lay the groundwork for a vision of eating-disorder recovery which is communal, grounded in theological anthropology’s understanding of the human person as existing necessarily in God’s image, and thereby in relationship to others. The role of moral exemplars in Aquinas’s approach to ethics, inherited from Aristotle, creates the possibility of theological reflection on the power of heavenly moral exemplars and those who accompany women and girls struggling with eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction. Those who aid them as they strive to habituate eating the right amount, exercise ordinately, and learn to see themselves (and their bodies) in light of eyes of God instead of the world serve as holy influences, reminding them of their telos and helping them remain oriented to the horizon
of divine love instead of that of diet culture and its income-generating industry. This work stands in stark contrast to the vicious pro-ana, pro-mia, or thinspiration communities that exist online, or the access to images and information that AI might offer in lieu of relationship and companionship. The nature of human woundedness as a source of hope and means of transformation offers a theological vision of suffering which may also be helpful to women on the long road of eating-disorder recovery.

The results of this endeavor to formulate a theological response to eating disorders are both pragmatic tools and theological insights for women and girls in eating-disorder recovery, and the fruit of their challenges for the field of moral theology. By considering the challenge of eating disorders by attending to their roots in contemporary understandings of beauty and feminine value, the study of eating disorders gains insights from the theological resources of theological aesthetics, Trinitarian theology, and the study of kenosis. If each theological area is thought of as a prism made up of many distinct colors of light, then the women and girls who struggle with body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and eating disorders’ experiences offer a new color through which the light of those theological resources shine. Beauty figures in a unique manner in a moral theological consideration of eating disorders in a social-media age. Balthasarian insights about how encounters with the divine that invite the human person into relationship echo into moral theology. Moral theological considerations of the role of human relationship and community, and the ways in which one sees the world and understands human flourishing are given a new prismatic hue as a result of women’s experiences engaged through the lens of Balthasar’s theology. The remarkable, novel synergy between Balthasar’s work, virtue ethics, and the experiences of women and girls with eating
disorders offers both a path toward recovery hitherto unexpressed, and a way for moral theology to think anew about eating disorders in the context of a social-media age.

Moral theological work remains undone on the topic of eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction. The effects of AI on eating disorders and eating-disorder communities needs to be explored, as do the possibilities of virtue ethics’s responses to online communities encouraging eating-disorder behavior. Scope has not permitted attention to the role of the Mass and the Eucharist in both women’s experiences of and recovery from eating disorders, in particular its role in communicating grace and its transformative effects on sight.\textsuperscript{129} The contributions and complexities of the saints, in particular the life of Doctor of the Church St. Catherine of Siena, have been left tragically unexplored. Turning to Catholic Social Teaching to analyze the many justice issues at play in the influence of race on body ideals, poverty on food access, and gender and race on eating disorder diagnosis rates must still be done. And a more robust vision of what \textit{telos}-oriented female flourishing in a thin-idealized social media age looks like must be developed, especially in light of contributions from Catholic Social Teaching.

Further work should also be done to tease apart the distinctiveness of women’s experiences with discrete eating disorders, as well as the distinctiveness of eating disorders, disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction (which have generally been treated together throughout this project). However, this dissertation represents a first step on the journey toward harnessing the resources of the Catholic intellectual tradition to develop a moral theological response to eating disorders in a social-media age. It opens up the

\textsuperscript{129} William T. Cavanaugh’s \textit{Being Consumed} includes a chapter on how the Eucharist forms one to consume rightly, and contains fascinating other parallels to this project (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008).
possibilities present in learning to see creation—especially the manner in which girls and women see their own bodies—as a monstrance of God’s being, glory, and beauty in the world.
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