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Jesus Christ and Human Flourishing: An Incarnational Perspective

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In recent years, philosophers, psychologists, and social scientists have produced an enormous body of literature about human flourishing. This discussion has led theologians to reflect on the relationship between human flourishing and Christian faith. Christians hold distinctive views about, among other things, human beings as “fallen,” Christ as Savior, and salvation as an eternal beatific vision. In the Gospels, Jesus tells his disciples to deny themselves, give up their possessions, and love their enemies. The central symbol of Christianity, the Cross, suggests a way of life that is anything but the path to human flourishing. This impression is reinforced by the cult of martyrs, the asceticism of the monks, and the strict sexual morality that binds even ordinary believers.

Jesus instructed his followers to be faithful, not to flourish. A grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die (see John 12:24). Some Christians believe that discipleship calls on us to transcend our natural desire for happiness. They regard Aristotle’s quest for eudaimonia, or flourishing, is simply egoism with an aristocratic pedigree and they regard its alleged virtues as really just refined forms of pride. Christians learn about agape not from their own experience or desires, Timothy Jackson says, but from the story of Jesus Christ and especially his atoning sacrifice.¹ The “strong agapist,” he argues, is committed to an unconditional willing of the good for the other, equal regard for the well-being of the other, and passionate service open to self-sacrifice for the sake of the other.² Agape is a necessary condition for the proper realization of any human values (see I Cor 13:1-3). “Strong agapism” does not “vilify” human flourishing, but neither is it either justified or motivated by the quest for human flourishing.

¹ Timothy Jackson, Love Disconsolored (New York: Cambridge, 1999), 10
Other Christians offer a strikingly different way of relating Christ to human flourishing. All healthy religions teach virtues that enable people to flourish. If they didn’t they wouldn’t survive. Bioethicist Stephen Post maintains that we only attain true flourishing to the extent that our lives are marked by unconditional love, particularly as manifested in compassion and mutuality. The Christian life attracts followers when it is seen as enhancing rather than diminishing our lives. Jesus showed us that true human flourishing lies in authentic and healthy love. In communicating his Spirit to the world, the risen Christ empowers unconditional love today. Contemporary scientific studies of empathy and altruism show us the deep wisdom in the core teachings of Christianity. If we want to live well, we do best to focus less on ourselves and more on helping others.

We can call the first view a “dialectical” and the second a “humanistic” interpretation of Christianity. The first stresses the distinctiveness of Christian love and the second our common human capacities for empathy, love, and generosity. Though they diverge on many points of theology, these two positions share the conviction that self-giving love is necessary to human flourishing. The dialectical view holds that agape protects us against our selfishness. Agape is not against human flourishing; on the contrary, it is a necessary condition for human flourishing. Flourishing is the effect of agape, but not its inspiration, motive, or justification. When they compete, agape trumps our well-being. “Participating in Christ and being used by the holiness of God is the key Christian ideal.” Agape gains its unique deontological character as a command of Jesus. Jackson is so suspicious of self-seeking in any form that he urges his readers to suspend all talk of eternal life or the “heavenly banquet.”

These two broad Christian approaches to Christ and human flourishing provide the context for this essay. I would like to propose that an Incarnational, sacramental theology can

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accommodate the key insights of each position, that is, both the dialectical appreciation of the radical challenge agape presents to all forms of egocentrism and the humanistic appreciation of the living presence of divine grace in the life of every person and every community. Jesus of Nazareth displayed what this love means in concrete, historical terms. His story is the definitive revelation of the love that lies at the center of every truly flourishing human life—albeit usually, as Karl Rahner notes, “unthetically and without name.”5 The gospel proclaims the event of Christ as the cause of the communication of the Spirit to the world. This means, Rahner held, that “this Spirit is everywhere and from the outset the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Logos the God who became man.”6 In grace, the Spirit of Christ is present to every human being.

We can begin to explore the relevance of Jesus Christ for human flourishing by looking at two concrete cases: Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, and members of a lay Dominican community in the state prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts. Because they involve Christian discipleship in difficult circumstances, these cases provide an interesting context for thinking about what it means to flourish and how we might connect it to Christian faith, union with God, and joy.

After a brief sketch of these two cases, we will venture an interpretation of them from the point of view of two influential ways of thinking about human flourishing: the positive psychology of Martin Seligman and the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. I hope to show that an Incarnational theology can accommodate the insights into human flourishing offered by these schools of thought while also accounting for the insights of the dialectical and humanistic theologies just mentioned.

Dorothy Day

6 Ibid., 318.
Dorothy Day was the co-founder of the Catholic Worker, a movement dedicated to Christian love for the poor and marginalized. Day was always passionate about the working poor and the underclass, but she led a rather turbulent and rootless existence before her conversion to Catholicism. After moving from one relationship to the next, she fell in love with Foster Batterham. They moved in together and she came to experience the greatest domestic happiness of her life.

When Day became pregnant with her daughter, Tamar, she felt a profound sense of gratitude that she directed to God. Vague religious longing became a focused desire to allow God to play a more important role in her life. She began to pray, to go to church, and to investigate the tenets of Christian faith. In time, her probing turned into a decision to convert to Catholic Christianity. Her decision would be costly. Batterham strongly opposed religion in any form. As a Catholic, she could not continue with him without getting married but he opposed the institution of marriage. She did not want her daughter to go through the chaos that marred her own young life, so she decided to have her baptized. Once Day completed her instruction in the essentials of the Catholic faith, she was baptized as well.

Day converted to Catholicism neither from emotional desperation nor guilt feelings, but rather out of an overwhelming feeling of gratitude to God. She came to see this God as revealed fully in Jesus Christ, the way to “eternal life.” She felt called to sacrifice her present, “natural happiness” with Batterham for the sake of Christ. Decades later, she rehearsed the same religious logic. Do I love God?, she asked herself. The only test, she wrote, is whether she is willing to “sacrifice present happiness and present love” for the sake of Christ. This is not just a single dramatic decision: “one must keep doing it, day after day, beginning over and over, to count all things as dross compared to the life of the Spirit which alone is able to bring joy, overcome fear—‘Love casts out fear.’”

Growth in faith led Day to appreciate the multi-dimensional character of the Christian life. She saw it is a life-long process of putting off the “old self” and putting on the “new.” Moving from self-centered love to love of God and neighbor requires us to reject pride, idolatry, lust, and “works of the flesh” and to love instead according to the Spirit of Christ. Christian life also has an ascetical dimension of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The “stripping” of the self takes place mainly in our relationships with other people in that paying attention to them requires us to forget about ourselves, at least for a time.

Christian life also has spiritual, sacramental, and liturgical dimensions. The spiritual dimension of the Christian life is centered on “practicing the presence of God” and “abandonment to divine providence.” The sacramental dimension makes us sensitive to seeing Christ in one another. We have a duty to delight in the goodness of the world and one another and especially to delight in the activity of divine grace in our lives. These can take place in the “breaking of the bread,” in solitary prayer, or in a sacred encounter with Christ in the stranger, but also in ordinary moments like walking on a beach at sunset or reading a great novel. Finally, the Christian life also has a social and communal dimension. “Supernatural happiness” is attained in and through the church, the Mystical Body of Christ, and it leads to the “communion of saints.” We are “members one of another,” as Day never tired of saying.

Day’s piety, ethics, and social commitment were rooted above in the actions and teachings of Jesus, but also in the lives of the saints and the writings of Christian mystics. Christian love is not sentimental and falsely comforting, but difficult, costly, and even, as Dostoevsky said, a “harsh and dreadful thing.” Self-giving love hurts because it forces us to go beyond our spontaneous self-centeredness. We must turn the other cheek, seek out the lost, and forgive seventy times seven. The Cross is the culmination of this love and it requires us to prefer fidelity to Christ to “natural happiness.”

God is good and wants us to flourish. “I felt even at fifteen,” she writes in her autobiography, “that God meant man to be happy, that He meant to provide him with what he
needed to maintain life in order to be happy, and that we did not need to have quite so much destitution and misery as I saw all around and read of in the daily press."8 While the Christian life requires us to love even when doing so entails suffering, it does not seek out suffering as an end in itself. Day prayed for the grace “to alleviate the crosses around me, never to add to them."9 She did not shun natural happiness. She enjoyed good meals and conversations, spending an afternoon with a great novel, and the beauty of nature. She valued connection to family, sexual intimacy, and bonds of solidarity.

Christ is the path to supernatural happiness. Hope for supernatural happiness thus does not negate our desire for natural happiness, including the comforts of home, the satisfaction of achievement, and the affirmation of social esteem. But when the temporal good of natural happiness competes with the eternal good of supernatural happiness, we must choose the latter. Unfortunately, they seem to compete a lot.

Day’s description of happiness was at times hampered by her reliance on the “two tiered” universe of neo-scholastic theology that shaped the Catholicism of her day. It assumed that we can attain natural happiness apart from grace. She could sound more dualistic, as when she refers to “our enemy the flesh”10 or when she makes this spiritual resolution in 1939: “To pay no attention to health of the body but only that of soul."11 At other times, though, she recognizes that God wants the whole person to flourish—both soul and body, in this life and in the next. This is why the “corporal” as well as “spiritual works of mercy” are so important.

The Dominican Community at MCI Norfolk

10 Ibid., 75.
11 Ibid., 48.
A second source for thinking about Christ and human flourishing comes from the experience of inmates at the state prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts, where I have serviced as a volunteer with the Catholic Chaplain’s Office.

In the 19th century, Fr. Jean Joseph Lataste, O.P. ministered to women at the prison of Cadillac-sur-Garrone, France, near Bordeaux. Seeing the terrible stigma the women had to live with once they were released from prison, he set up a religious community called the “Dominican Sisters of Bethany” for sisters who sought to share in the same consecration whatever their past had been. Fr. Lataste once observed that, “The greatest sinners have within themselves the makings of the greatest saints.”

In the late 1990s, chaplains at Norfolk prison began to gather inmates who wanted to live a more structured and community-centered Christian life. They invited inmates to begin forming a lay Dominican community. In 2005, the community was given its official status and named the “Our Lady of Mercy Chapter of the Dominican Laity,” which I will abbreviate as the “Norfolk Dominicans.”

As much as their circumstances allow, members of this community seek to live a Dominican way of life centered on prayer, work, study, and action. They pray the Divine Office every day, study Dominican history, spirituality and theology, participate in retreats, attend workshops, and worship together.

These men usually entered the prison system in their early 20s. They were tough, suspicious of others, and ready to fight if disrespected. Because of the crimes for which they were convicted, many of the core members in the Norfolk community are serving long terms and have little expectation of parole. Many have been in prison for 20 or 30 years and some members have already died of sickness or old age in the prison infirmary.

At some point, something—some promise of friendship, or hope for peace of mind, or desire for real forgiveness—lured them into the community. Each of the men decided in their own time to respond to the chaplain, went on a retreat and then started going to worship services and

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12 See http://www.bethanyhouseministry.com/.
attend meetings of the Dominican community. The more involved they got, the more they felt themselves growing into a better way of thinking about their lives. They gradually got some distance from their hurts and grievances, felt less anxiety about what other inmates would think about their new behavior, and began to come to terms with their guilt feelings about their crimes and earlier lifestyle.

Those who decided to go through the lengthy formation process and formally enter the community describe themselves as happier and more joyful than they had ever been on the outside. This report seems counter-intuitive. They had fun in the world when their criminal activities enabled them to have social connections, alcohol, drugs, sex, power, and prestige (at least among their own people). Their pockets full of money, they could go to sporting events and concerts, stay out all night with their friends, and do pretty much whatever they wanted. All this got taken away when they lost their liberty.

Years later, though, these men came to have different views about the real meaning of happiness, freedom, and love. They now think they were miserable on the outside and lead better lives within the prison—and “better” not in terms of “obedience to law” but in terms of peace of mind, self-confidence, and love of other people. On the outside they had fun, excitement, and pleasures, but they now see these as false happiness rooted in their fears, egos, and disordered desires. They thought they were flourishing because that is all they knew, desired, and expected to get if they worked hard.

After they entered a Christian way of life, however, their expectations changed. It should be noted that the Norfolk Dominicans should not be taken as a homogenous group. Some were raised in religious families and their conversion involved a radical deepening of the faith of their youth. Others were brought up in nominally religious families and came into the life of faith with very little background. When those raised in Protestant evangelical families joined the Catholic community, they had to deal with a change in culture as well as faith. Given all of this variety, it is not possible to draw simple generalizations about what Christ means for their flourishing.
One inmate, the late Rocco Balliero, spoke for many others when he said that on the outside he knew the meaning of loyalty but not real love. Loyalty as he experienced it was a matter of reciprocity, “I’ll scratch your back, you scratch mine.” Love, he came to see, is agape, self-giving affirmation of the worth of another person. Rocco’s eyes were initially opened when he met people on a Cursillo retreat who, he came to discover, didn’t have any personal “angle.” They had no ulterior motives. Rocco was blown away to meet such people, and he realized that they “had something” that he wanted. He wanted to allow the Spirit of Christ to enter his life to be freed from the insecurities and fears that had dominated his life. Rocco came back from this retreat, threw away everything in his cell that was part of the life he no longer wanted to lead, and began to take the next steps to Christ.

Rocco and the other Dominican brothers learned to think very differently about what it means to flourish as a human being. Like Day, this community sees love as the heart and soul of any truly good human life. When they describe themselves as happier inside the prison than they were on the outside, they do not mean they are pleased with the prison administration, corrections officers, or the state corrections system. They are not. But despite the harshness and frustrating nature of the prison system, the community gives them a space in which they care for one another as friends in Christ. This friendship, in turn, enables them to function as peacemakers and witnesses of love to the wider prison community.

It is important to note that each of these inmates continues to wrestle with his particular “demons.” The difference is now that the community, along with prison programs on, for example, anger management, addiction recovery, and restorative justice, makes it possible for them not to be ruled by their “demons.” Faith in Jesus Christ, mediated by this community, provides them with a spiritual home and forms of friendship that they had never experienced.

This experience was so enriching for one inmate, Gary Stewart, that he got depressed when he was told that the parole board had granted his request for release. Gary grew up in rough public housing projects in the inner city. He led a deeply troubled life until a persistent friend in
prison convinced him to talk to the prison chaplain. A key conversation started him down a path that in broad outlines was similar to Rocco’s. Gary was most grateful for the peace of mind that came from his participation in the Dominican community.

Despite some important differences, the Norfolk Dominicans share with Dorothy Day a strong emphasis on Christian life as an imitation of Christ, an emphasis on the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, and a fairly traditional Catholic piety centered on the divine office, personal prayer, and the Eucharist. They are all avid readers of Scripture, and particularly the Gospels and epistles of Paul, and fascinated by the lives of the saints. Charity lies at the center of their lives—a love that both builds up the Body of Christ and that cares for the least of our brothers and sisters.

Positive Psychology and Human Flourishing

In the last twenty years or so, positive psychologists have sought to provide tools that can help people lead more satisfying and meaningful lives. They understand human flourishing in terms of desire satisfaction, subjective well-being, or personal happiness. Many study “hedonic subjective well-being” (how you feel about your life right now) but others are interested in “eudaimonic subjective well-being” (how you assess your life overall). Flourishing requires one to possess and enjoy important goods of life like food and water, health and safety, education, wealth, relationships, and freedom. In some ways, this view resonates with the goals of “self-actualization” and “self-fulfillment” that characterized the humanistic psychology of the second half of the 20th century.

Martin Seligman and his collaborators maintain that people generally pursue happiness in one of three ways: they seek the “pleasant life” (hedonic values like pleasure, enjoyment, and comfort), the “good life” (which he defines in terms of living in ways that allow one to exercise one’s “signature strengths” to achieve one’s goals), or the “meaningful life” (found in serving a
cause or community greater than oneself). Seligman claims merely to describe how people seek happiness, but he also has a normative streak that advises people to stop thinking that pleasure and money will make them happy. He thinks positive psychology gives empirical confirmation to Aristotle’s judgment that flourishing depends on living virtuously.

On the topic of Christ and human flourishing, Seligman is skeptical. He believes that faith in Christ inhibits human flourishing because it is based on a pessimistic focus on sin and guilt that undercuts human agency and optimism. He concedes that the Christian tradition might have something useful to say about virtue and human flourishing but he thinks we can get the same wisdom elsewhere without all the baggage of the Christian religion. Christ, for him, is just a cultural symbol of one among many ways of envisioning compassion.

Positive Psychology and Day

What might positive psychologists make of Dorothy Day? She embraced voluntary poverty to be close to the poor and she exposed herself to many forms of human suffering that most us would rather avoid. Seligman would say she was low on hedonic pleasures and positive emotions, but lived a good life because she used her signature strengths (journalist, writer, “agitator,” leader, spiritual guide) to pursue goals she most valued. He might also say that she lived a meaningful life because she served causes larger than herself—the poor and her religion. She found satisfaction in her work and her lifestyle enabled her to cultivate virtues like courage, justice, humility, forgiveness, and gratitude.

Day’s supporters might point out that the meaning of her life was defined by her faith in Jesus Christ and her obedience to the church. She attributed all of this to grace, the power of divine love active in her life. She would have objected to Seligman’s criticism of Christianity as

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misplaced because he ignores the larger Christian message of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Rather than pessimism, as Seligman charges, Christ offers a message of hope. Trust in divine providence allowed her to persevere in the face of many setbacks and daunting obstacles.

*Positive Psychology and Norfolk Dominican Community*

Positive psychologists would have to be impressed with the way of life of the Norfolk Dominicans. They exercise their signature strengths, experience positive emotions in their community, and, despite the harshness of their wider surroundings, manage to cultivate some key virtues like self-control, courage, humanity, and compassion. They report themselves to have greater life satisfaction than when they had in the world, when they had constantly to hustle to maintain their status and compete with rivals. They have learned to manage stress, avoid conditions that elicit undesirable behavior, and cease giving in to their addictions. They experience the gratification of coming closer to living our their “ideal self,” which Seligman describes as “the image we hold of the very best we are capable of, our highest strengths realized and active.”14 Their religion clearly has an ethical, humanistic value that enables them to exercise some of the strengths allowed within their very confining circumstances.

*The Capabilities Approach to Human Flourishing*

We now turn to the second major secular account of human flourishing, that developed by Martha Nussbaum in collaboration with economist Amartya Sen. Unlike the positive psychologists, they seek to construct a theory of human flourishing that can inform deliberations over public policy that address the suffering of hundreds of millions of people around the world who are deprived by external circumstances of any effective opportunity to lead good lives. They speak of flourishing

as attained by the exercise of personal agency made possible by capabilities afforded by one’s larger circumstances. Nussbaum lists the following capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotional attachment; practical reason; affiliation; relationship with other species; play; and control over one’s environment (both political and material). There are many ways to flourish as a human being, but any reasonable conception will recognize these capabilities as conditions present in any lives we would call flourishing. To flourish is not merely to possess and enjoy important human goods, but to do so as agents who act in accord with virtues like justice, compassion, and courage. The best human life is one marked by the exercise of virtuous agency.

Nussbaum faults Seligman for philosophical vagueness on the relation between positive emotions and both the “good life” and the “meaningful life.” A warrior, she argues, can be described as “happy” when he acts in accord with virtue, even if in doing so he incurs considerable pain and does not experience positive emotions. Nussbaum appreciates the connection Seligman makes to Aristotle’s notion of eudaimonia, which she describes as “something like flourishing human living, a kind of living that is active, inclusive of all that has intrinsic value, and complete, meaning lacking in nothing that would make it richer or better.” We can see that neither Day nor the inmates of the Dominican community come anyway near flourishing in this sense, but they nevertheless clearly manifest many excellences of character. The suffering of their lives, and their difficult external circumstances, have made them more compassionate, reflective, and honest people. They have also become better citizens, at least in the sense that they care much more about how our political process harms or helps people and their communities, and particularly the most marginalized sectors of society.

16 Ibid., 589. Nussbaum uses Wordsworth’s image of the “happy warrior.” As a pacifist, Day would object to Nussbaum’s use of this image but she could nonetheless take Nussbaum’s point that happiness should not be reduced to positive emotions.
17 Ibid., 590.
Capabilities Approach to Dorothy Day

What would the capabilities approach make of Day? Day accepted the Christian construal of complete flourishing as salvation and the beatific vision. Her commitment to the spiritual and corporal works of mercy made her liable to forms of human suffering that she could have avoided. She made herself vulnerable to stress by living in a slum, eating food that was donated, and spending time with troubled people. She was pained, sometimes greatly, when caring for the movement meant neglecting her daughter. She made herself vulnerable to physical illness, emotional fatigue, and social disapproval. Her religious commitment led her to leave her lover and live the rest of her life as a celibate. Nussbaum would admire Day’s social concern but probably frown upon such morally stringent convictions. She might even think that Day’s faith led her to have an unreasonable conception of what it means to flourish as a human being.

At the same time, Day had access a remarkably wide range of opportunities within which she could exercise agency. She ran the CW newspaper, wrote columns, established Houses of Hospitality, and generally lead the movement with Peter Maurin. All these activities gave her ample opportunity to exercise practical reason. Maurin, Day, and their fellow Catholic Workers had some control over the environment of their own community, but they had a faith that a benevolent God who providentially shapes the course of events in the world. Day had to learn how to take care of herself so that she was not overwhelmed by the challenges of the Catholic Worker. This meant spending time on a Catholic Worker farm (Nussbaum’s capability of relationship with other species), going on retreats, or just spending afternoons reading or walking on the beach (play). She had opportunities for many forms of friendship, particularly within the community (affiliation).

Ultimately, though, Day was willing to sacrifice any of her own “capabilities” for the sake of her neighbor, and she was willing to do so because of her faith in a transcendent God of
love. She effectively acknowledged the significance of what Nussbaum and Sen call fundamental human “capabilities,” and much of her work was devoted to trying to help the “least” of her brothers and sisters attain them. Day recognize the importance of community, human dignity, shared agency, and the virtues that promote them.

The Capabilities Approach to the Norfolk Dominican Community

External circumstances obviously impose significant limits on the capabilities of the Norfolk Dominicans. They do not have the all of the basic requisites as determined by the capabilities approach to human flourishing. They live in an environment of routine physical threats, sub-standard medical care, systematic discrimination, and institutional coercion. Corrections officers govern their movement within the prison; they are subjected to search at any moment; they live in an environment that is bleak, institutional and bureaucratic.

Yet the inmates do have some capacity to make choices and to act as agents in their own right. Many have difficulty maintaining connections to their families, but the Norfolk Dominican community helps them to develop abiding friendships and strong forms of solidarity with one another. The challenge of daily life in prison, and particularly for people who seek to be a constructive presence, constantly calls for the exercise of practical reason. A few of the inmates even have what Nussbaum calls “relationship with other species” when they are allowed to live with a dog who they train as guides for the blind. They also have at least minimal opportunity for play.

As noted above, however, most of the men say that they are now happier, and flourishing more, than when they lived freely in society. This is not because the prison as such has been good to them. It is, rather because their Dominican community gives them something of a buffer from the dehumanizing pressure of their larger prison context. The commitment they have for one another even affords them opportunities for genuine joy.
Christ and Human Flourishing

Having considered the cases of Day and the Norfolk Dominicans, we can now turn more explicitly to the question of Christ and human flourishing. We can begin by noting three broad ways of viewing this matter: what we might call, respectively, the verticalist, the horizontalist, and the integrationist.

First, “verticalist” Christians holds that true flourishing is identical to eternal salvation. Christ is the way to this eternal flourishing and Christians root their lives in Scripture, the church, and sacraments. The Christian verticalist can see that both positive psychology and the capabilities approach tell us something about what distinguishes better from worse temporal circumstances, but these have nothing to do with salvation, the only flourishing that has lasting significance. “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” (Mk 8:36).

The second approach to human flourishing is found among more liberal minded Christians. Flourishing is the result of liberation from human oppression. Horizontalists can appreciate positive psychology for its empirical studies of the conditions that enable people to live well, particularly when it comes to exercising gratitude, creating bonds of friendship, engaging in altruism, and forgiving offenders. They can also appreciate the capabilities approach for recognizing the concrete material and political circumstances that enable people to make choices about how they want to flourish.

If the verticalist regards Christ as the one who saves our souls, the “horizontalist” regards Christ as the compassionate prophet, the one who announced liberty to captives, gathered an inclusive community, and taught them to practice open table fellowship. Jesus exemplified the unconditional love of neighbor be taught: “ Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40).
The third option seeks to integrate the “primacy of the spiritual” of the first position with the historical engagement of the second. It holds that God wants us to flourish in every way possible and that grace enters into every aspect of human existence so that we can grow in friendship with God. A theology based on the Incarnation is primed to appreciate that grace comes into our lives in tangible, concrete ways. They disciples recognized the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread (Lk 24:30).

The full meaning of the Incarnation—the incomprehensible depth and power of divine love—is revealed in the Cross and Resurrection. The Cross points to God’s solidarity with us in our suffering and the Resurrection points to God’s ability to overcome all the causes of that suffering. Resurrection includes the whole human person, body and soul, transformed by grace. It suggests that human flourishing is social and material as well as moral and spiritual, temporal as well as eternal. There is, at the same time, a “scale of values” or an “order of good” that understands material realities as created to serve and to be perfected within spiritual relationships. “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4 citing Deut. 8:3; also Lk 4:4).

Life is lived under the sign of the Cross, but with hope for the transformation of the world rather than simply for our spiritual evacuation from it. Because of the Incarnation, temporal flourishing is important.18 As Day said, you can’t preach to people on empty stomachs.19 On the other hand, this is how she described her vision of shelter for women: “I am not content with just feeding people, just throwing them some food, clothing, and lodging. I love them enough to want them to be happy. I want them to come and make retreats … The house on the island will be a house of hospitality for women, but run decently, with prayers, and singing and retreats.”20

19 See Day, Duty, 13.
20 Day, All the Way, 164.
This integrative theological perspective can learn from both positive psychology and the capabilities approach while drawing them into a higher, more comprehensive vision of the human good. Positive psychology and capabilities theory can tell us something about the natural elements of what Thomas Aquinas called “imperfect beatitude.”

Spiritual and moral development are more likely to occur under conditions that facilitate material and social well-being. As Day noted: “St. Thomas says a man cannot lead a good life without a certain amount of goods. It is impossible for people to keep straight, living under such [horrible] conditions. Whole families crowded in one room, people living in shacks in the open, vice rampant…”

Incarnational theology incorporates natural human goods within a way of life centered on the love of God and love of neighbor. The Norfolk Dominicans would prefer to have their physical freedom, even if they would now strive to live “in the world but not of it.” Day tried to be a normal loving grandmother to her grandchildren, and she worried about how Tamar could raise nine children as a single mother in Vermont. She wanted the guests who visited the various Houses of Hospitality to be able to get jobs that paid a living wage, decent clothing, and affordable housing.

Human flourishing—in this world or the next—as rooted most fundamentally in the love of God and love of neighbor. Jesus is the one who shows us what this love means. In the Gospel of John, he says: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). His “way” is self-giving love. The seed must “fall into the earth” to bear fruit. Like their Master, Christians must be willing to lay down their lives for their friends. This is not a religious calculus in which we are utterly indifferent to flourishing in this life in order to achieve supernatural flourishing in the next. Jesus does not propose a “better deal” gospel. Self-giving love alone is what enables us to lead “a totally satisfying life both here and hereafter.”

Such a life is “satisfying” because it relates us

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21 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.5, a.5; q.3, a.6.
rightly to God, our neighbor, our selves, and all other creatures. It is thus not exactly right to say, as Day does, that Christians must sacrifice natural for supernatural happiness. It is that our greatest happiness in this life is a participation in divine love in through our love and friendship with other people. We live this love not in a separate sphere called the “sacred” but in and through every part of our daily lives.

Neither Day nor the Norfolk Dominicans can be said to flourish in conventional terms, nor in the ways defined by either Seligman or Nussbaum. It would be hard to say that Day achieved a greater balance of positive over negative emotions or that she possessed the full array of capabilities. This is all the more the case for the Norfolk Dominicans.

As we know from heroic Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maxamilian Kolbe, it is possible to love God and neighbor under extremely difficult circumstances. "It is a mystery to me, and always will be," Day wrote in her diary, "how we keep going—these 28 years, with nothing in the bank, and debts piled high. But we survive, and since where love is, God is, and God is Life, we can truly be said to truly live."24 Since joy is the effect of love, we ought not be surprised by the fact that Day and the Norfolk Dominicans experience moments of joy that attend their deliberately and intensely Christian way of life. This joy is rooted in gratitude for the love of God, the goodness of creation and friendship with fellow community members.

Faith in Christ generates joy even among those whose circumstances block their ability to flourish as human beings. As Jackson notes, “As important as love is, it is not sufficient for full human flourishing. To have it without health, meaningful work, political enfranchisement, a happy family life, etc. is to suffer genuine loss or deprivation.”25 In better circumstances, however, love provides the sine qua non of all truly human flourishing. What Day says about “happiness” is also true of “flourishing:” “we cannot be happy unless we love, so it is worth making every

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25 Jackson, Priority of Love, 42.
effort to love.” Positive psychologists, conversely, remind us that the affluent can possess the full array of capabilities but still be miserable. “The only answer in this life to the long loneliness we are all bound to feel is community,” Day wrote. This is not just a matter of “networking,” but of loving as Christ loved: “The living together, working together, sharing together, loving God and loving our brother, and living close to him in community so we can show our love for Him.”

The Practice of Love

We can now revisit the humanistic and dialectical views of Christianity mentioned at the start of this essay. The humanistic Christian agrees with Day that “love is the measure” of how well we live our lives. Gratitude, kindness, forgiveness, compassion, and mutuality are central to any good life. Yet both Day and the Dominican laity are firmly attached to the particular person, work, and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. They are deeply loyal to specific Christian communities as well as to the universal church, despite the fact that, as Day liked to say, to be a Christian is to live in a “state of permanent dissatisfaction with the church.” This focus on particularity might prompt the humanist to ask Day and the Dominicans whether Christians alone know what it means to love unselfishly or to extend compassion to the least of our brothers and sisters. There is of course not question that there are compassionate atheists as well as adherents of other non-Christian religions, who come to self-transcending love in their own ways.

We might suspect that the dialectical theologian would find any purported “other paths” than the Christian to be problematic. Jesus came “in the form of a slave” (Phil 2:7) to show us what it means to give up everything in obedience to the Father. Humanistic generosity gives from

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26 Ibid., 26
28 Ibid.
one’s excess, it might be thought, but agape gives from one’s necessity. Humanistic love serves friends, but agape loves the enemy. Humanistic love balances healthy self-love with healthy love of neighbor, but agape sacrifices the self for the sake of the neighbor. It moves, Jackson says, from “reciprocity to the Golden Rule to cross of Christ.” In short, the Christian humanist sees Christ as the path to flourishing, but the dialectical Christian sees Christ as replacing our desire for happiness with obedience to God.

Incarnational theology, though, sees this stark choice as a false dichotomy. The Christian humanist points out that it makes no sense to say that anyone who is not formed by the Christian story is crippled in his or her capacity to love. Nor does the dialectical theologian want to say that Christians alone are the beneficiaries of the healing power of grace. Jackson describes agape as made possible by the grace of God mediated by the Son and the Spirit, but does not say its power is confined to those who profess Christian belief. Faith in a God who loves all human beings leads to the conviction that the divine grace that empowers self-transcending love is offered not only to Christians but to human beings as such. The universality of grace bears important ethical consequences. Jackson writes: “If we judge others bereft of the true and the good, them we will likely not bother about them as fellow sufferers.” Conversely, if we appreciate the goodness of others as well as see them as fellow sufferers, we will be more likely to embrace them in loving and humble solidarity.

I would propose that our authors converge on the primacy of love for true human flourishing. Theologian Werner Jeanrond interprets self-giving human love as grounded in the divine love revealed in the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Human fulfillment as self-abandonment to divine love unites the self-emptying of the Cross and the exaltation of the Resurrection. Jeanrond takes his bearings from Karl Rahner’s account of the unity of the love of

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30 Jackson, Love Disconsoled, 6.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 43.
God and love of neighbor.\textsuperscript{33} Love affirms the “fullness” of God and human beings and is the necessary and central feature of human flourishing. It alone allows us to be fully ourselves and to give ourselves as gifts to God and one another. Because God is present as grace in every human encounter, every act of loving the neighbor is always and also an act of loving God. Every such act is borne by grace, which is always the Spirit of Christ. Jeanrond cites Rahner approvingly: “The love of God is the totality of the free fulfillment (freier Vollzug) of human existence.”\textsuperscript{34}

Love always has an embodied, gendered, and historically conditioned character. Agape is neither simply an ethical principle nor only a divine command, but a concrete praxis. This praxis combines concrete interpersonal encounter with critical reflection. Scripture, liturgy, sacraments, and ecclesial practices of service give concrete meaning to this self-giving love. Living in accord with the Biblical narratives, and particularly the acts and teachings of Jesus, “helps to establish God’s reign of love here and now.”\textsuperscript{35}

An Incarnational integrationist position unites “horizontal” commitment to the love of neighbor with “vertical” devotion to the love of God. It generates a humble ecclesiology of Christian diaspora rather than the domineering ecclesiology of Christendom. Self-giving love in this context is shaped by ongoing participation in the practices of particular local religious communities. In faith, Christians believe God uses these communities to renew both the church and the world. The New Testament, Jeanrond writes, proclaims the “new covenant, the new life, the new wine, the new heaven and the new earth.”\textsuperscript{36} Christians are thus challenged not to settle into a spiritually-based form of middle class complacency or what Martin Luther King, Jr. decried as normative model of the “well adjusted personality,” but rather to participate, if only on a small scale, in God’s transformation of the world.

\textsuperscript{33} Werner G. Jeanrond, A Theology of Love (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 143.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 150, from Rahner, The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 216.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 227.
This transformationist vision can accommodate the insights of positive psychology and the capabilities approach regarding human flourishing. Because human flourishing consists in right relationship to God, one another, oneself, and all of creation, we must promote universal access to capabilities within healthy and just communities. This implies, as we see in Day and the Norfolk Dominicans, a commitment to building communities in which people can become the free and creative agents of their own lives.

Conclusion

This Incarnational theology accommodates the insights of both humanistic and dialectical theologies. It endorses the humanist’s acknowledgement of our common capacities for empathy, solidarity, and altruism, but sees these as properly exercised in cooperation with divine grace. It endorses the dialectical insistence on the radical nature of the Cross, but regards the Cross as the explicit revelation of the true meaning of all acts of genuine love and the spiritual core of all genuine human flourishing.

What does Christ have to do with human flourishing? If self-giving love is a necessary condition of all concrete forms of human flourishing, and if all self-giving love is a reflection of our participation in divine grace, then human flourishing depends in a fundamental way on divine grace. If divine grace is always also the grace of Christ, then Christ is essential to all concrete forms of human flourishing. Christ is present without out explicit knowledge. Indeed, even Jackson is willing to say, “human beings can now love neither God nor others, nor even themselves rightly without the redemptive assistance of God’s Messiah.”37 This is true whether or not one happens to profess an explicitly Christian faith. Day’s life experience taught her that “those who do not believe in God—they believe in love.”38 Because Jesus is what God “looks like”

37 Ibid., 6.
38 Day, Duty of Delight, 294.
in human form, the humanity of God in Jesus reveals what is at the heart of all authentic human love. This is why, for Christians, Jesus is the paradigm of the self-giving love that lies at the heart of every form of genuine human flourishing.