Foreword

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Today it would be difficult for any one theologian to write a complete, new *Summa.* Yet in this wonderful book, Antonio López offers us no less than a short, indicative *Summa theologiae* for our times, which points the way to a new theological and philosophical synthesis.

This synthesis pivots round the concept of "gift." This is no arbitrary, idiosyncratic choice on Fr. López's part, because today, to a remarkable degree, much academic and practical thinking is converging round this theme. Ever since Marcel Mauss, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians have come more and more to realize that human society as such is composed by gift-exchange before it is further cemented by state authority and economic contract. Increasingly it is acknowledged that this remains at bottom true for advanced and modern societies as well as for primitive ones. In consequence, both secular and Catholic social teachings have started to pay renewed attention to gratuitous exchange or reciprocity. It is realized that this unavoidable reality has been undermined by the impersonalism of much modern thinking, and that its recognition and restoration are crucial to solving our contemporary social and economic problems.

At the same time, modern philosophy has been much concerned with the "givenness" of reality and has sometimes understood this givenness as "gift," either in ontological or in phenomenological terms.

Yet here we can note a certain irony. Often the social discourse about the gift has been secular and has allowed that a gift, as a gift, may paradoxically require a return, rendering gift-giving something that always assumes a relational context. On the other hand, the philosophical and sometimes theological discussions of the gift have frequently insisted on a unilateral purism that denies that a true gift can, of itself, assume any return or even reception, nor exist genuinely within a context of preestablished relationship.

In consequence, the gift as "time" or as the ethical imperative is deemed to be at once a transcendental condition for all of reality, all of knowing and ethical action, and yet as "impossible" in terms of actual realization. Either this circumstance is regarded as a ground for postmodern skepticism, or else for a neo-Plotinian mysticism of that which lies supposedly "beyond being."

However, another group of theologians, less publicized in the Anglo-Saxon academy and including Benedict XVI, has developed an understanding of the gift in reciprocalist terms that can be much more related to the realism of the anthropological and sociological understandings of gift as gift-exchange.

Their efforts are brought to a new height of analytic sophistication in the current book, which is nevertheless commendably clear and accessible to a wide educated readership throughout. Because he begins his analysis with "the concrete singular," compounded of soul, body, and spirit and both physically and socially dependent, Fr. López refuses to endorse the idealism and abstraction of the theorists of purified donation. With a simple exactitude that might shame many would-be adepts of vaunted rigor, he rightly insists that a giver cannot give unless he is first already himself a recipient.

Equally he shows that the "impure" gift that is bound up with a reception and return more corresponds to the teaching of Christian theology. Created beings only exist as gift because in being "given to themselves" they are through and through a return of praise to God, even though this return is inadequate and not "needed" by God. The "nuptial" perspective upon Christology is precisely the recognition that the gift of the Incarnation would have been impossible without its reception by Mary and the Church. The traditional doctrine of substantive relations in the Trinity shows that the Father is in a crucial sense passive and receptive in his giving of the Son (as Hegel distortedly realized), while the necessary place of the Holy Spirit shows the essence of gift as reciprocity, while insisting on the asymmetry and non-foreclosure of further gratuity in the reality of relational union. In this sense there is always a "unilateral moment" in gift-exchange, which Fr. López fully incorporates.

Finally, were theology to deny the exchangist perspective on gift, then unilateral "mercy" would be divorced from justice, defined by Aristotle as all the proportional reciprocities that are shared by friends in the city. Then we would be left with a mercy without justice and worse, a justice without mercy. It could be added here that we would also be left with a generosity without economy and worse (just what neoliberalism has left us with today), an economy without charity. Those many recent thinkers who require a giving "outside the economic" need to reflect on how this abandons us

to economic amorality and to an impotently formalistic ethics of "rights" (criticized at one point in this book) that proclaims the dignity of the isolated human being as such, but leaves people as situated in concrete biological, social, and vocational relations outside the sway of dignity altogether.

Christian thinking, instead of dreaming of a non-existent "aneconomic" realm, requires a re-rooting of the falsely disembedded amoral economy of today back in the divine *economia.* Then precisely defined contract would become subordinate to and guided by asymmetrical reciprocity and non-identical repetition of real personal relationships, always seeking the mutual good, even in monetary transactions.

Effectively, Fr. López sees the need to think gift in terms of the genuinely economic, so understood.

But his work has more fundamentally a much wider, metaphysical import. In developing his account of theological gift as reciprocity, he in effect treats gift as a "transcendental" in the medieval sense. This proves a natural intellectual move, since all the main categories and themes of Christian doctrine indeed concern gift at their heart: creation, incarnation, redemption, grace, the Church, the sacraments, virginity, and marriage. But more specifically one could say that this adoption of a new transcendental category achieves three things.

First, it allows one to transit readily from a philosophical concern with the givenness of being to a theological one with creation and grace. The gift character of reality that philosophy is able to ponder only receives an adequate clarification in terms of supernatural revelation.

Second, it allows Fr. López to reinstate a premodern realist and cosmological focus in metaphysics while incorporating what is valid in the modern "turn to the subject." Following the work of Mouroux, Giussani, and others, he realizes that modern subjectivism can only be undone by a kind of counter-subjectivism, not by any simple demand that we return to an objectivist ontology. This is because, for modern people, the meaning of "the objective" has already been determined by the turn to the subject as something meaninglessly given and manipulable. It no longer spontaneously suggests a meaningful donation. To recover this suggestion, we need to return to "an originary experience" that the older, objectivist metaphysics took for granted and so did not discuss. It is even the case, it is implied, that we must renew this experience in an unprecedentedly acute way, because the question must arise as to how it could ever have been lost sight of in the first place. In an ultimately "romantic" lineage perpetuated in our own times by German, French, and Italian Catholics like Guardini, Balthasar, Ulrich, Bruaire, and Giussani (all much cited), Fr. López insists that this experience has aesthetic, affective, and imaginative as well as rational dimensions.

In this respect he follows Giussani, who by no means peremptorily dismissed "liberal Protestant" concerns with religious experience, but instead transformed them so as to free them from any connotations of "foundational feelings." In the same spirit, Fr. López listens carefully to the insights of Husserl, Heidegger, and Marion, yet resists any notion of a pure phenomenological reduction to the sheerly given. Indeed, he sees that such an indubitably manifest reality cannot be the gift, because a gift involves always a personal, interpretative response to the relatively uncertain and even ambivalent. In consequence, any surd "given"—however ineffably "saturated" and not merely factual—cannot be a gift, but will remain thoroughly impersonal in character. It is near sophistry to try to associate this very impersonalism with the purity of the one-way gift. For such a gift, without recognizable giver, recipient, or content, can be of no social effect, including, therefore, no ecclesial or redemptive effect. To be sure, for Christianity gifts are given and received by the pure in heart, but any notion that this can be separated from the benefit of the materially poor is refused from the mouth of Jesus himself at the very outset.

Nevertheless, with a necessary generosity, Fr. López incorporates some of the insights of modern phenomenology and of modern linguistic philosophy and hermeneutics. In doing so he contrives to *balance* their respective emphases on the extra-linguistically "given" and on arbitrary linguistic construction or interpretation. For he insists throughout his book that *verbum* and *donum* go together—a point that has ultimately Trinitarian implications. Thus the world is given to us, but as signs that we must read and respond to if we want to receive it at all—including ourselves as gifts to ourselves. Conversely, we will misread these signs if we do not understand them as gifts, because then there would lurk no intention behind them. Merely apparent signs would reduce to the events of our reception of givens that are not gifts, and these events could only conceal an abyss. With an unfailing eye for the way in which Heidegger perversely ruined his own real and astonishing profundity by a kind of philosophical charlatanry, Fr. López shows that he after all closed the question of being by reducing it to the event of our ontic reception of existence. Elsewhere he is equally remorseless in exposing the continued subjectivism of Heidegger's postmodern heirs.

In the third place, and most crucially, the transcendentality of the gift permits a rethinking of the Thomistic metaphysics of act and being that renders it a fully Trinitarian metaphysics. The divine *actus* is already, as in the case of the Paternal origin, in a certain sense receptive in order that it may act at all; equivalently we cannot see any finite reality as an act unless we also see it as a received gift. Here Fr. López, drawing as he did in his first book on Claude Bruaire's "ontodology," makes use of modern idealism while purging

it of what is invalid. Since a gift, in order to be given, must be received, if every being is a gift of itself to itself, then it can only exist as *reflectively* giving itself to itself. This means that consciously spiritual beings are the first and primordial created beings. There cannot be a cosmos without spirit, as indeed Aquinas like the Fathers taught, and equally every non-spiritual creature must exhibit this spirituality in some lesser, analogical degree. I find here a fascinating implication both that some kind of vitalism might be embraced by Christian metaphysics and that a genuine vitalism must derive from transcendence and not immanence, as Bergson and others have supposed.

If even God is receptive, then, conversely, even pure created recipients must be active: gratuitously generous on their own account to others and seeking the end of reciprocal union with others and with God.

It then follows not just that every being *qua* being is a gift and that God is eminent generosity, but also that every being is internally and externally involved in a gift-exchange of initiation, reception, and counter-giving that in God is Trinitarian relation—though Fr. López strenuously avoids any simplistic identification of the three divine persons with these three exchangist moments. Deploying great subtlety and suppleness of argument, he then associates this transcendental reciprocity with the "real difference" of being and essence in Aquinas's ontology; with the relation of Christ's divine being and his secondary and dependent created being; with the "nuptial" circulation between the historical/critical Jesus in his unity with the Christ of faith; and finally with the need for the third person in the Trinity.

Here the Son is indeed identified as the first Paternal gift, but were he not also the Logos who needed to be "remembered" and interpreted as word by the Holy Spirit, then he would not really be gift at all, since this requires a reception, and the Filial reception is identical to the Paternal outpouring. A closed mutuality of Father and Son would collapse into an impersonal, substantive egotism, were it not for their combined will to share the experience of being infinitely loved with Richard of St. Victor's *Condilectus*.

In this way, the Holy Spirit turns out to be at once supremely gift, reflexive spirit, the principle of life, and the ground of the unity of being. In order that the divine essence be not elevated over the persons or identified with the Father, it must be personally expressed as the Holy Spirit.

Thereby Fr. López caps his profound and yet most engaging reflections with the thesis that we cannot conceive of the metaphysical unity of being adequately as monistic act, but must conceive of it as the unity both emergent with and yet presumed by gift-exchange, in the sense of an exchange always already begun. This process only has a "beginning" in the infinite, which is properly speaking never begun at all.

The suggestion would seem to be that it is the revelation of the Trinity through the divine economy of times that alone allows us to complete our obscure philosophical intuitions as to the priority of gift for both being and human social existence.

I find all this thoroughly compelling in the way that the simple and manifest truth is self-evident as radiating forth. Reading this book confirmed me in the sense that the current Catholic intellectual project is by far the most coherent one available in the world today and actually the one that manages to make most sense of the best specifically contemporary intuitions and realizations. It gives me profound hope that in the current century this project will be able to recover and rethink the Western tradition in a way that could even (in the face of increasing global catastrophe) prove universally persuasive.