Introduction

The mystery of birth fills our existence with joy, hope, and wonder, but it does more than this as well: it calls us to ponder the mystery of the positivity of being. There are several layers of meaning to the mystery of being born, and these layers, though intrinsically and circularly related, are distinct but not independent. The first meaning, perhaps the most obvious but not the least important, is the biological. Life, the fruit of the loving union between a father and a mother, is given to us with and through a corporeal, organic existence. Our very body continually refers us back to our birth insofar as our bodily being is truly ours—to be born is to be given to oneself. Simultaneously, the body reminds us at birth that our life is a life that is received. This reception has to do with both the moment of conception and also with the entirety of our historical existence. Just as we cannot give birth to ourselves or completely manipulate this bodiliness at will, so we cannot exist without receiving the light, the warmth, and the language that enable us to see, create, and speak.

Our corporeality reflects in its particular mode the second, ontological meaning of the mystery of birth. We come into existence from a dual, nuptial union and, as was also the case for all who went before us, our own being remains distinct from this origin. In an additional reflection of its origin, our being is itself a dual unity. Our "to-be," our existing, is unique to us and at the same time is common to everything that exists. We soon come to learn what we are. At the same time, we never cease to grapple with what seems to be the truest and most beautiful mystery about us: *that* we are. *What* we are is not deducible from the mystery *that* we are, and this mystery of the irreducibility between *what* we are (our essence) and *that* we are (our *esse*) brings to a quick end the temptation to believe that what we are lies simply at the disposal of our reason and will.

The mystery of birth also has a spiritual meaning. Ours is in fact the birth of a spirit; that is, of someone who becomes aware of him or herself in a free and affective response to the other. The finite spirit grows insofar as

it listens to, discourses with, and freely dwells in the source that generates it. This process takes place through the riches of life as well as through its dangers, failures, and tragedies. To be born is to be given to ourselves, to be free, with the task to contemplate the mystery of our being and to be what we are. This spiritual sense also reveals that birth encompasses both a historical circumstance (the temporal beginning of life) and a permanent dimension of existence. All the so-called rebirths we experience after having been born, such as falling in love, becoming a father or mother, being forgiven, and so on, are expressions of and a new flourishing of our own birth. These events, in fact, connect us to the origin of life in a way that is as novel and unprecedented as it is ancient and familiar.

The spiritual meaning of birth opens up the fourth layer, the theological meaning. This aspect, which is perhaps the most difficult to perceive, is illuminated if we recall the surprise that greets the news of a new child coming into existence. This surprise is, at its core, a signal of the relationship with the ultimate source from which it is given to the child to be. The justice of pointing to this theological meaning (as opposed to forcing an interpretation on a neutral event) is underscored when we reflect that the child is a new person, a new spirit, who is irreducible either to his own parents or to the biological process through which he came into being. Births that do not come from a genuine act of love between a man and a woman do not call into question this experience of wonder; they presuppose it. Moreover, the light of a new existence has within it the capacity to correct from within the meager measure behind its conception. Irreducible to parents or biological laws, the child is born into a solitude that no human companionship, not even that of his own parents, can eliminate. The solitude of this twofold irreducibility is not one of loneliness, however; it is rather a sign of a deeper communion. The child is placed in a dialogue with the ultimate origin of existence, which theology has always expressed through the term "God." This irreducibility, forming a constitutive element of the person, also indicates that the relationship with God is at the chronological beginning of our existence and also at every moment thereafter. We are not our own. The theological meaning of birth grounds not only the ontological and spiritual meanings, but also, to return to the beginning, the somatic meaning. The body, while expressing the difference from God who is pure spirit, also reveals the divine, original generosity. From within its own finitude, the body reflects divine life through the interpersonal relationships of man and wife, parents and children. Furthermore, our historical existence, precisely as existence in time, images the unmoving movement of the eternal being. Rather than an arc stretching from nothingness to the unknown void, corporeal and historical existence is a movement towards the original giver that

contains the hope that our finite "be-ing" may be confirmed in the relation with that giver. Birth, both as the inception of life and a permanent dimension of existence, provides a stance for thinking about the whole: a mystery that illuminates the positivity of finite existing and of being as such.

When we look at the fourfold dimension of the mystery of birth—biological, ontological, spiritual, theological—the complexity and paradoxical nature of the unity of our being emerges. It is complex because we come to be ourselves as the fruit of a nuptial union and, while remaining distinct from our relations with God, parents, and others, we do not exist apart from them. This complexity is present in all four dimensions of the mystery, but we may particularly consider our ontological structure, a dual unity of being and essence. The unity of being is paradoxical because, as we are born into a communion that precedes us, we are born in and to the promise of being, which is fulfilled through a relation with what we are not. The mystery of our being, which is truly given to ourselves and yet incomprehensible without the constitutive relation with the giver, instills in us the desire for the unity we have been given, that is, for the unity of our own being what we are in time, and for the union with those to whom we are entrusted and to whom we are called to entrust ourselves. Thus our ontological structure grounds our desires to know and be known, to love and be loved, to build and to endure. These desires are prompted by and are an expression of our nature: of being born in and to a unity of being that both precedes us and deepens anew through us. Human existing seeks a form that gathers all its various elements into a unity, which, however, it cannot give to itself.

The mystery of birth holds out the possibility of understanding the unity of our being, and of being as such, in terms of gift. Our positivistic culture's widespread idea that birth, and so finite existence, is merely the fruit of chance or necessity cannot account for the surprise that is proper to the sheer existence of life; the existence of the spirit and its irreducible wholeness. Yet, the meaning of gift is not obvious. To suggest that the unity of our being has the form of gift means that we are not our own, that our "to-be" owes itself most deeply to another. Today there is a great need to retrieve the meaning of creation. Nevertheless, gift as the form of the unity of being means more than the fact that concrete singular beings are created, although this is both important and true. The positivity of being concrete singulars requires examining in what sense being, man, and God (the ultimate source of our birth) are gift; that is, in what sense God is gift in himself and in what sense being and man participate in the divine gift-ness.

Our inquiry cannot stop at considering only the singular being and God in terms of gift. The concept of gift also extends to the spiritual, transitive relation between the original giver, the gift, and the receiver. To examine

in what sense being, man, and God are gift requires seeing in what sense the bond that ties them together—while simultaneously preserving their difference—can also be accounted for in terms of gift. If gift indicates the form of unity, unity indicates the permanence of the gift. This permanence is the source and significance of the negation within the term "indissolubility." In this light, the relation between original giver, gift, and receiver can be viewed in terms of being if it is also viewed in terms of time. Here the modern temptation to juxtapose time and eternity arises, in response to which we can say that if the unity of the concrete singular reveals the permanence of the gift, it is because eternity is the very center of time. The permanence of the gift proper to God, which we call eternity, is the ground of the permanence that is proper to the concrete singular. Rather than the "conditions of possibility" for something to happen, the spatial term "ground" points to the occasioning, sustaining, and ordering in being of the concrete singular. The hoped-for, final confirmation of the singular gift does not appear then as a leap out of time into eternity, but rather as the gratuitous, unexpected, victorious re-giving of the gift of being. Hence, to think of the unity of being as the permanence of the gift permits the relationship between the original giver, the gift, and the receiver, between time and eternity, to emerge in the light of asymmetrical indwelling. The giver makes it possible for the gift and the receiver to be, and it is also up to the giver, not without the participation of the gift/receiver, to confirm the original donation. To remain in being, in the unity of being, is to dwell in the unceasing donation of the gift that God is. Time and eternity are bound up with being because each is the enduring of the gift of being: while eternity is its own beginning, time is the permanent letting the concrete singular be and become itself.

We can now try to formulate what we would like to ponder in this book: gift is the form of the unity of being and unity is the permanence of the gift of being. One point that helps to avoid reducing the horizon of this investigation is that any reflection on the gift from the aspect of action, important as it is, rests on the human being's capacity to give himself. An account of the act of giving something, whether from God to man, man to God, or among men, calls for some explanation of how the concrete singular, permanently given to itself, participates in the original gift of self not only by further giving but through its very ontological constitution. Given our cultural context, marked as it is by the atheistic claim that fragmentation is more primordial than unity, to fail to give an account of the relationship between *esse* and essence, between God and the world, and between men in terms of gift would collapse the act of giving into either a technological interpretation of causality and human making or a philosophical hypostatization of human giving. Gift, instead, brings all its richness to bear on the

question when it is first thought of as a principle, rather than a "present" that is offered to someone. In other words, to root ethics in ontology allows us to perceive the real newness that an act of giving represents with regard to the ontological gift-structure of the concrete singular.

In these pages, therefore, gift is considered primal. The term "primal" has a twofold meaning: *arche*, the "permanent principle of origination and ordering," and the temporal aspect of being "first" in time. Gift, on the one hand, is a permanent source of originating, ordering, and restless rest. Reading the second connotation in light of the first we can say that gift is, on the other hand, an ever-new beginning—and not simply the commencement of being. Although this perception of gift and of the nature of the unity of being in terms of gift is radical and comprehensive, it does not propose a system built on a concept (gift). As the Hegelian project demonstrates, the attempt to elevate a concept as adequate to the whole is liable to end up on the shores of nihilism despite the best of intentions. The following reflections wish to offer, then, rather than a system, a synthesis of the type of unity that is proper to man, being, God, and the relations among them. The term "gift" reveals the sense in which God and the concrete singular are placed together (*syn-thesis*).

Three methodological criteria specified by the subject itself deserve mention. First, the present work attempts to keep the integral mode of being of the concrete singular and of God, as well as their analogical relation, clearly at the forefront. The opening remarks on the meaning of birth, which will come up again later, were not a rhetorical overture. The concrete singular requires its interlocutor to approach it in its entire, multifaceted wholeness. It is the concrete singular that "is," and not the principles that account for its being. *Esse* and essence, matter and form, act and potency, are principles of the singular being whose physical or spiritual self-standingness (*substance*) carries the ontological memory of its belonging to the whole. The constant temptation in the attempt to examine the positivity of the unity of being is the desire to possess the object of thought and to make a definitive pronouncement about the *logos* of the object and its existence. The haste to give an account for things can lead to overlooking the inexhaustible wealth of the concrete singular and to simply eliminating various aspects that do not fit easily into a given schema. It is tempting to take the concrete singular as either the starting point or the conclusion of a reflection. Yet to lose sight of the concrete singular during the process of thinking turns thinking itself into a unilateral exercise. To consider the unity of being requires the poverty of acknowledging that one does not possess the measure of being, and of never wearying of seeking and receiving the wealth of being that has been communicated, however inchoately. The claim to have a firm grasp on the

wealth of being at the beginning, and its twin, the claim to take and give the measure of being (which views the beginning as a sheer undetermined void), both lead to an abyss of contradiction. When the integral mode of being takes on only a minor or supporting role, the claim seems to emerge that the real essence of donation is contradiction (for example, matter-form, act-potency, body-soul, parents-children, etc.) and that dialectics is its anointed method. Gift is understood in either univocal or equivocal terms and precludes reflection on either the distinction or the unity between the giver, the gift, and the receiver. The integral mode of being always leads back to the mysterious wholeness of the singular: both in its permanent being given and in its being gift.

The concrete singular in its integral mode of being brings us to the second methodological criterion. The point where anthropology, metaphysics, and theology meet in all their distinction to shed light on each other offers the privileged place for contemplating the gifted unity of being. Anthropology provides an entryway to being in one sense because the human person recapitulates in himself the cosmos and has the task of uniting it to the ultimate source. In another sense, being is most perfect at the level of the person, not at the level of substance. At the same time, metaphysical reflection grounds the anthropological approach and dispels the specters both of an ever-present romantic, neopelagian understanding of morality (which identifies the person with a self-determining freedom blind to its own having been given to itself) and of the psychological reductions of the person. Mutually illuminating as they are, anthropology and metaphysics remain incapable on their own of accounting for the positivity of being that is constantly brought forward by human experience and the mystery of birth. By becoming flesh, the eternal Logos of the Father not only pronounces himself within the parameters of the concrete singular. He, the concrete universal, to speak with Cusanus, also reveals the ultimate meaning of God, the world, and man as gift. The hypostatic union of the two natures in the person of the Logos, who intends the radical offering of himself to the Father on the Cross, is not an instance of philosophical gift-giving, but rather represents the archetype of gift. Christ's "eventful" existence confirms the positivity of being that is suggested by human experience by bringing it to a new, unforeseeable depth. As John Paul II wrote in *Fides et ratio*, philosophy and theology must not be isolated in self-enclosed castles; they must rather encounter each other and acknowledge the enriching circularity that unites and distinguishes them.[1] This circularity is possible precisely because man's reasoning is open to and constantly seeks the divine mystery that unforeseeably took

1. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, nos. 73–74, (AAS 91 [1999], 61–62).

flesh in Mary. Two simultaneous poles guard against collapsing theology into philosophy or reducing philosophy to a stepping-stone toward theology: (1) the unity of being and gift revealed in the person of Jesus Christ (1 John 4:8 and 16), in which all are called to participate (John 17:22), has its speculative measurement in the ontological difference between *esse* and essence; and (2) the revealed theological insight regarding the coextensiveness of being and love is the ultimate ground of the ontological structure of the concrete singular. The ontological is open to the theological order and finds therein the fulfillment that renews it. In light of this, the "place" from which to examine the mystery of being and its gifted unity has in a sense a twofold center. It is first the human being himself, as he is engaged with all of his own self, with all of reality, and with the triune God who is the center of both. Yet the center is also Christ, in whom all things consist and who holds everything in being.

The twofold center from which to examine the unity of being as gift helps clarify a third methodological aspect. The circularities touched upon so far (the ontological structure of the singular and its action, metaphysics and theology, unity and gift) are more than the regular swing of a pendulum or unconscious redundancies. Circularity here means a reciprocal, perichoretic illumination and a continual deepening into the subject matter. These circularities grant a vision of what is new by permitting it to flourish at a new level, not by opposing one element to another. Novelty, in this sense, is a re-acquaintance with the whole. Newness, recapitulating what preceded it, discloses more fully the mystery of being. To express this fullness, thought finds its greatest ally in paradox. Paradoxes, rather than contradictions, allow us to see the complex unity of the whole without letting go of its inexhaustibility. If we turn to look again at the three circularities already mentioned, we see first that the gift-ness of the ontological structure is reflected at the level of human reciprocation of the original gift. The human being can give gifts or give himself because his very being shares in its having been given. This reception and reciprocation, however, rather than the payment of a debt, represent the coming into being of something new: the receiver is himself by being one with and in the giver, without ceasing to be himself. Second, the relation between being and action reflects at its own level the incomprehensible mystery of the divine act. As we shall see, God is one in being a triune communion of persons and vice versa. The unity of the gift is not just a matter of piecing elements together; it is a whole that is present from the beginning and that, as a whole, is something other than its parts. Lastly, the relation between Christology and anthropology allows us to understand who the human person is and leads to a reflection of God that is irreducible to his image. Christ's renewal of the gift of being does

not resolve the human drama or silence every question. On the contrary, it allows the encounter of the divine and human freedoms—this encounter is what we call drama—to take place anew by fleshing out in history the dialogue with the Father in the Spirit that constitutes him as the eternal, beloved Son. From this place, the concrete singular can contemplate the mysterious inexhaustible wholeness of God, can become like him in affirming its radical otherness, and can let everything that is called into existence be and remain in the communion for which it was created. This new place, as we shall see, endlessly intensifies and deepens our questioning and contemplation of the whole.

A brief presentation of what follows is now in order. In order to justify looking at the unity of being in terms of gift, the first chapter examines the structure of man's originary experience. Originary experience represents the most comprehensive and concrete approach to the reality of gift. This approach permits an elucidation, in the second chapter, of the structure of the singular being in terms of gift. Benefitting from the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition, we will attempt to show how, in contrast to Derrida's thought, the Entity of a concrete singular participates in its being given. This ontology of gift and a non-technological perception of causality enables chapter 3 to inquire into the adequate response to the original giving. A foray into the meaning of reciprocity results in an exploration of the irruption of nothingness introduced into history by the free rejection of the gift. Chapter 4 turns to the archetypal role that the hypostatic union of the two natures in the person of the Logos plays in an adequate understanding of the nature of gift. The christological illumination of the unity of gift enables us to see the continuity and discontinuity between philosophy and theology. The question of Christ's human experience of his divine filiation guides the attempt in chapter 5 to approach the mystery of the person of the Father as the origin of all giving. The chapter goes on to consider in what sense (in contrast to Hegel) the Father's giving is an absolute donation: he is the unpreceded giver, the source of the communion of love that is the triune God. To look at the unity of the gift in God requires seeing in what sense the giving and the receiving are one in him and, furthermore, what it means for the gift of God to be gratuitous. The pneumatological reflection of chapter 6 takes up these two questions. The last chapter considers God's unexpected response to the original rejection of the gift. Giving anew the gift of being, forgiving, the triune God communicates unexpectedly the permanence of the gift of being, and thus the permanence of his union with the concrete singular. The eternal permanence of the gift renews from within the original donation and causes the concrete singular to be.

While this book is born from a dialogue with many authors of diverse and sometimes contrasting philosophical and theological positions, I owe special thanks to Luigi Giussani (1922–2005). Although what follows is not a systematic presentation of his thought and the responsibility for this book's content and flaws is mine, this attempt to ponder the unity of being in terms of gift could not have taken place without his immensely rich and profound work.