Chapter 2

The Life of Grace

The last chapter drew on the work of Albert Borgmann as part of an extended reflection on the characteristic shape of modern living in a technological world. But is Borgmann simply calling us to a more meaningful or "eloquent" human existence? Or can his plea be further illuminated by reference to the Christian life of grace and discipleship? In this chapter I will suggest that there are Christian resources within our tradition that support the call to preserve vital focal things and practices in our daily life. Principal among these theological resources are Christian understandings of the doctrine of the Trinity and a theology of grace.

Reflections on Trinitarian Faith

The Christian tradition considers the doctrine of the Trinity one of its central teachings. One might assume, therefore, that any spirituality that goes by the name Christian would be grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity. I am inclined to believe, however, that much the opposite is the case. In fact, much popular Christian spirituality is more "unitarian" in character. That is,

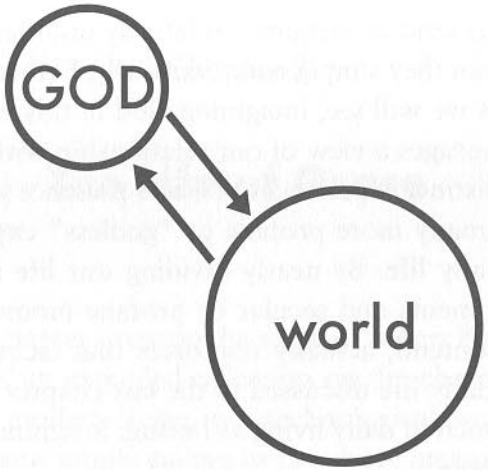
Christians tend to imagine a relatively undifferentiated God whom they simply name variously, Father, Son, or Spirit. As we will see, imagining God in this way actually encourages a view of our relationship with God as a set of distinct experiences of God's presence set alongside the many more profane or "godless" experiences of our daily life. By neatly dividing our life into religious moments and secular or profane moments, this view, I contend, actually reinforces that technological view of daily life discussed in the last chapter that dismisses much of daily living as boring, insignificant, and burdensome.

Let us consider two alternative spiritual frameworks and the understandings of God that they presuppose.[1] These two frameworks or models might be called, first, unitarian or solitary theism and, second, trinitarian or relational theism.

Unitarian or "Solitary" Theism

The unitarian or solitary theist view of God tends to emphasize the distinction and distance between God and the world. God is conceived as an individual being who is bigger, better, and more powerful than ourselves, but an individual being nonetheless. The alternative, which actually differs little, is that God is viewed as a community of *three* individual beings, one of whom we will tend to address in prayer. In either case, God will always be another individual being "out there somewhere" (see figure 1 on the following page).

I believe this to be the common view of God even



Unitarian or Solitary Theism

for the majority of Christians who profess orthodox trinitarian doctrine. It is quite possible to have our language say one thing while we continue to act out of an alternative imaginative framework.

This unitarian framework, I believe, actually dominates the religious imagination of most Christians today.[2] It has been reinforced by a philosophical approach to God that emerged gradually several centuries ago. With the rise of modern science people no longer needed to appeal to God to explain natural events like the movement of the planets or weather patterns. Modern science seemed to make God irrelevant for understanding our world. What was left was an image of God as the divine "clockmaker." God first creates that great clock, which is our universe, and then stands

back to allow the clock to mark time on its own, intervening only occasionally to make the necessary adjustment of the hands.

Two practical consequences follow from this unitarian theism. First, if God is an individual being among other individual beings, another individual in the "larger household of all reality," as the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner put it,[3] then God will inevitably have to compete for my love and attention. My whole life will be an endless tug-of-war between the matters that demand my attention in the daily course of human affairs — preparing classes, buying groceries, playing with my children, talking with my wife — and my religious obligations to God. Regrettably, in Catholic thought theologies of committed celibacy still assume this perspective and consequently suggest that the committed celibate, free from the "distractions" of marriage and family, is better able to love God.

Second, because in this view God is an individual outside my ordinary world, my encounter with God will depend on some kind of episodic intervention. I encounter God only in response to prayer or through the reception of the sacraments or some such thing. My life is construed as essentially profane and godless, punctuated by brief encounters with the sacred. In consequence, the spiritual life will be a mad attempt to insert as many "sacred" moments as possible into the profane structure of daily life hoping thereby to sanctify that life. This "episodic" spirituality in turn leads to the "thingification" of grace, that is, the tendency to

imagine divine grace as a kind of spiritual fuel, and the church and its ministers as sacramental grace dispensers.

At this point, it is worth noting the congeniality of this unitarian view of God and the spirituality it engenders to the account of technology's impact on how we experience daily life, as we discussed in chapter 1. Consider again the peculiar logic of technological devices. One way to describe how they shape our lives is to speak of the "commodification of goods." By this I mean the extraction of a particular good from the context in which it is produced, such that this good can now be quantified and measured, making it subject to economic exchange, manipulation, and control. When goods become commodities, the good is stripped of its particularity, the way in which its "goodness" is derived, in part, from the particular context out of which it emerges.

Let me offer an example from my childhood. One of the prized pastimes of my youth involved collecting baseball cards. My father was a Red Sox fan and so I grew up a Sox fan as well. Thus, I always sought to collect cards of my Red Sox heroes both from the past (for example, Ted Williams) and the present (for example, Carl Yastrzemski). These cards were symbols of my undying allegiance to the Red Sox, tangible connections to hours spent watching baseball games with my father. Baseball cards are still quite popular. Indeed, an industry has grown around them. At huge baseball memorabilia expos you can ascertain the worth of your cards and engage in exchange. We exchanged baseball cards when I was a child, but there were always some cards that I insisted on keeping. Today, however, children appear to have little personal attachment to the cards. The baseball card has for many become reduced to a commodity, and the value of one's collection is determined by a professional collector and not by the wealth of memories and dreams that perusing the collection evokes. As I am using the term then, a commodity is a good that lacks context, a particular framework that gives it value; it is now packaged, mobile, subject to my manipulation, control, and exchange.

The technological device turns goods into commodities. Returning to Borgmann's example, a home-cooked meal is a good that is rich in context — it cannot be separated from the activities and interactions that transpired from supermarket to kitchen to dinner table, all necessary for the good of this meal to be realized. The microwave meal, on the other hand, is for the most part a good turned into a commodity — it has no particularity, no context. Every package with the same label is essentially the same meal.

I believe that this commodification of goods has been extended to the religious sphere in our age. Episodic spirituality — in which religious experience is simply a subset of human experience, placed alongside other kinds of experiences — says something about the contemporary packaging of grace. In this technological world, the spiritual seeker often turns to "technique" to encounter the transcendent, whether it be some form

of meditation or through a particular dietary discipline. In this way, religious experience is assigned its proper "place" together with the other commodified experiences of our world. Religion becomes a commodity that can be prepackaged so as to fit into our busy lives.

Examples of this abound in so-called "New Age" religion, but let me add similar examples from fringe traditionalist groups in the Roman Catholic tradition. In an op-ed piece in *Commonweal* Jim Bowman wrote of his experience at a liturgy of the Society of Saint Pius X (associated with the late schismatic Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre):

> These are traditionalist Catholics who reject Vatican II as the work of freemasons and Protestants and running-dog liberals. For them the Mass says it all. If it isn't Tridentine . . . it's not a Mass. That's not my position, but I like their Mass. It has Latin and Gregorian music and incense and long periods when we pewsitters have nothing to do but let the music and smell of incense and overall ambiance of set-piece reverence wash over us. At the kiss of peace, we do not turn to shake hands with our neighbors — the virtual highlight of the Masses I usually attend. Instead we concentrate on God above. . . . I count myself a modern churchgoer, but my baptism did not entirely take as a member of the new church, it seems. For one thing, I relish the passivity of this worship experience. No song leader is up there waving and weaving in order to help me to be a good Catholic by singing up a storm. No celebrant looking me in the eye, sometimes like a veritable talk-show host, eliciting (extorting?) my response to his "The Lord be (or is) with you." No neighbor in the pew is looking for my hand at the Lord's Prayer. None turns to me at the handshake of peace. I'm alone with God and I love it.[4]

Here we have a description of religious experience that is radically divorced from all human, communal contexts. God has been injected into this man's world by way of incense and bells.

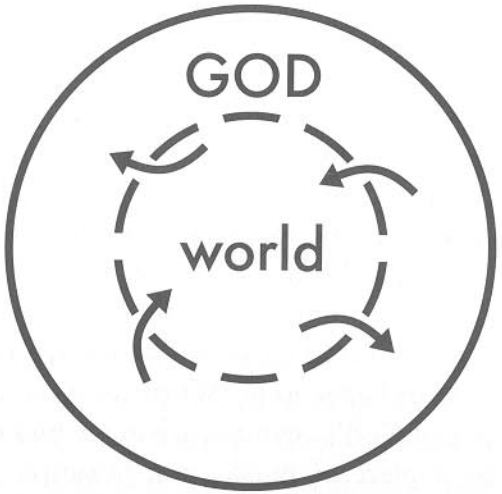
Yet at its heart, is not the doctrine of the incarnation the fundamental subversion of this radical separation of the sacred and the profane? Did not Jesus Christ come, not just to save individual souls, but to redeem the world? As I hope to demonstrate, the retrieval of an authentic trinitarian spirituality challenges this separation of the sacred and the profane, along with the commodification of grace. We need a new understanding of the life of grace that resists both the technological tendency to turn all human goods into commodities and the allure of hyperreality that might encourage us to excise the "down time" in our lives when nothing seems to be "happening."

Trinitarian or "Relational" Theism

Though one can certainly find instances of unitarian spirituality within the mainstream Christian tradition,

I believe that there is an alternative model of God's relations with humanity. This model imagines God not as another individual being competing for our attention but as the loving and creative ground of our existence, the very atmosphere in whom we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). It is a model rooted in an appreciation of the basic insights of trinitarian doctrine. The doctrine of the Trinity has been for so long neglected in Christian life because in popular thought it has been viewed as an insoluble arithmetic problem — how can 3 equal 1? This view misses the insight of trinitarian doctrine completely.

We need a more dynamic perspective that imagines God neither as an individual nor as three individuals bound together in some way, but rather as a pulsing, divine movement toward us in love. Long before trinitarian doctrine became formalized in the definitions of the early ecumenical councils, the church possessed a lived trinitarian faith in which God was encountered precisely as a dynamic movement toward humanity in the life of love. The formal doctrine of the Trinity simply gave formal expression to the way in which Christians experienced this God in history and preeminently in Jesus of Nazareth. Conceiving the triune life of God as a dynamism of divine love reflects the essential insight of trinitarian doctrine, namely, that God's very being, what it is for God *to be,* is loving, life-giving relationality. God does not just *have* a love relationship with us, God *is* loving relationality. There is no self-contained, divine individual residing in heaven far



Trinitarian or Relational Theism

away from us; there is simply a dynamic movement of divine love, which *is* God. Greek Orthodox bishop and theologian John Zizioulas describes this trinitarian vision of God as Being-as-Communion.[5] This model suggests an alternative way of conceiving the life of grace, a vision of God's way of being present with us that is revealed in the fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, the Trinity (see figure 2).

Our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, however, does not end with God, for the doctrine of the Trinity also implies something important about ourselves as well. We have been created in the image and likeness of God. This means that something is written within our very being that binds us to God. This is, I believe, our own limited but real capacity

for human relationship, for communion. Just as in God's very essence God is loving relationality, Being-as-Communion, so too we are invited to discover ourselves in the life of communion. Just as God is no self-contained individual being, so too, each of us, as persons created in the image and likeness of God, is not a self-contained individual. We discover our true identity as persons only when we abandon the secure cocoon of a privatized existence and reach out to attend to the world around us. When we stand in awe of the wonders of God's creation, when we find ourselves grasped by a piece of music or a beautiful painting, we experience a kind of self-forgetfulness that draws us beyond ourselves into communion with our larger world. In this movement we become, however imperfectly, personal beings-in-communion — we are living the life of communion.

In a particularly profound way we realize the life of communion when we attend to other persons as creatures possessing an infinite worth and dignity. It may be something dramatic and monumentally difficult, as in forgiving our enemies, or it may be something as simple as making sustained eye-contact with a convenience store clerk. These are all acts of communion.[6]

This life of communion finds a wonderful exploration, albeit in different terminology, in the thought of Hasidic philosopher and theologian Martin Buber.[7] According to Buber, there is no autonomous "I" or self, but rather only persons in relation. Furthermore, as persons in relation, only two basic kinds of relation are possible: I-It, and I-Thou. The I-It relation is that quality of relation in which we objectify the world around us, placing everything into distinct categories — in short, in the I-It relation, we impose order on our world. Now the I-It relation is not a bad thing. In fact it is absolutely necessary if we are going to function in this world. As a teacher, on the first day of school, I walk into the classroom and immediately categorize those seated in the room as "students." It is this kind of basic categorization that allows us to function in our world and it certainly has its place. However, Buber contends that we humans have a unique capacity to transcend the I-It relation and enter into another kind of relation, what he calls the I-Thou relation. In the I-Thou relation I no longer seek to objectify the world, making it accessible for manipulation and control by putting people and things into their respective categories, but rather I forget myself in moving out to the world in a stance of attentiveness. Here I simply become present to the world around me; I become vulnerable, receptive, to what the world has to offer. The I-Thou relation is possible in my engagement with creation itself, but it is manifested in a particularly dramatic way in an encounter with another human person. In the interpersonal I-Thou encounter the other person becomes a subject possessing mysterious depths, a person to be encountered, not controlled.

Let us consider a rather common event from daily life. Let us imagine that I am visiting a local McDonald's. As I walk into the store, either relation is

possible. If I do what I normally do, I will walk into the door and as I approach the counter my eyes are already fixed on the menu overhead. I am greeted by the employee, but my eyes never leave the menu and I begin to rattle off my order. Two minutes later, I have my food and the restaurant has my money. This is a classic I-It encounter. My encounter with the employee on the other side of the counter was no more than a functional transaction not much different than if I were using a vending machine. But let us say that instead, as I walk into the store and am greeted by the employee, I stop, look her in the eye, and offer a greeting in return. In that momentary exchange I note that she is likely a new employee. She seems nervous. As she takes my order I see her struggling to enter the proper code into the electronic register as an impatient supervisor hovers near by. Moreover, I note her overall haggard demeanor; she is middle-aged and unlikely to have the energy of her school-age co-workers. I wonder if she is a single mother, if this is her second job. Do I detect a fleeting glimpse of despair in her eyes? She hands me my food and I her money and as we wish each other a good day, I allow my eye contact to linger a fraction longer than I normally would and hope, perhaps in vain but perhaps not, that in it she sees understanding and compassion. This is a moment in the life of communion.

This life of communion is more than just an imitation of Christ. When we engage in the life of communion, when we move beyond ourselves to attend to the world around us in an event of communion, when we orient ourselves to the needs and concerns of others, we are being drawn by the Holy Spirit into the divine life of God. This is one of the most radical convictions of authentic trinitarian faith. Recall that within the functional unitarian perspective God as individual competes with the other concerns in our lives for attention and love. In an authentic trinitarian faith, however, God does not compete with my love for my wife and children. God is not an alternative to my attending to the McDonald's employee. In my entrance into communion with others and the world around me I am simultaneously drawn into communion with God who makes all love, all authentic relationship possible. This lies at the heart of Jesus' message regarding the unity of the first two commandments, love of God and love of neighbor, and it is developed in the mystical love tradition of the Johannine epistles:

> No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us. This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us, that he has given us of his Spirit. . . . God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him. (1 John 4:12, 13, 16b)

Note that it is the Holy Spirit dwelling within us who is the source of all love. In the practice of trinitarian spirituality it is not necessary to inject God into our everyday lives because in every event of loving com-

munion the Spirit of God is already present, rising up within us as both the source and the goal of all love and the interior principle and agent of all authentic communion.

When we imagine God as a solitary individual, grace often becomes a kind of supernatural "stuff" and the life of grace becomes a matter of petitioning God as frequently as possible to bring this "spiritual fuel" into our lives. Churches, and even the sacraments and the liturgy, as we will see in chapter 4, can become technological devices that give us this spiritual fuel on demand. However, a whole new way of conceiving of the life of grace follows from this trinitarian perspective. "Communion" is, in this context, another word for grace. In other words, grace is not so much a divine substance as it is a quality of relation in which the presence of God emerges as we attend to the world around us and receive it as gift. Grace manifests itself whenever we give ourselves over to the way of love. If God is love, and grace is the presence of God in our midst, then grace is a word we give to what happens to us whenever we are drawn into communion with God and God's creation. Quite simply, the life of communion *is* the life of grace.

While this notion of "communion" is not identical to the focal practices described by Borgmann, there are significant resonances between the two notions. For the life of communion, like focal practices, demands an attitude of attentiveness and active engagement with the world and its inhabitants. Just as focal practices resist

turning goods into commodities, so too the life of communion recognizes that grace cannot be commodified. It can neither be earned through pious works nor received mechanistically through either the ministrations of the church or some kind of spiritual "technique."

The rest of this volume will presume this relational theism as the context for further reflection. I believe it is the only adequate theological framework for confronting the tendency of our technological world to transform basic human goods into commodities and to devalue the many mundane engagements and activities that comprise our daily lives. I am further convinced that Christianity (though not necessarily Christianity alone) possesses the theological resources necessary to challenge these features of our technological world. But marshaling these resources requires the development of both a mystagogy of daily life and a renewed Christian asceticism.

A New "Mystagogy"

Authentic Christian spirituality insists that the encounter with grace does not happen by acquiring the goods we desire in ever more efficient and effortless ways through technological devices and hyperreal existence. Rather it invites us to see that it is the very ordinary activities, practices, and engagements that technology often strives to eliminate as burdensome and unnecessary that can become mediations of grace, occasions of divine blessing. This attentiveness might

well begin by plumbing the mystery of creation itself. Annie Dillard, the Pulitzer award-winning naturalist whose writings are remarkable for their shimmering spirituality, observes:

> Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf. We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise.[8]

More often than not it is the poet who presents to us the divine mystery disclosed in creation, whether it be Gerard Manley Hopkins's portrait of a world "charged with the grandeur of God,"[9] or the evocative biblical allusion to Moses and the burning bush in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's narrative poem, *Aurora Leigh:*

> Earth's crammed with heaven,
> And every common bush afire with God;
> But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—
> The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries
> And daub their natural faces unaware
> More and more from the first similitude.
> If a man could feel,
> Not one day, in the artist's ecstasy,
> But everyday, feast, fast, or working-day,

> The spiritual significance burn through
> The hieroglyphic of material shows,
> Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings,
> And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,
> And even his very body as a man. . . .[10]

Among theologians, perhaps no one has done more to highlight the graced character of every aspect of human existence than Karl Rahner. Rahner's transcendental analysis of human existence led him to reject any extrinsic theology of grace as a merely episodic intervention of God in a profane world. Rahner affirmed that in the basic dynamisms of the human spirit in questioning, loving, hoping, and acting, God was always already present as Holy Mystery. God is the absolute depth and infinite horizon of any truly human experience.[11] While known for his often dense and even opaque philosophical theology, Rahner could write movingly of God's luminous presence in the human experiences of loneliness, the courageous acceptance of death, the unconditional offer of forgiveness, and the sheer delight of human laughter. Rahner was convinced that the very future of Christianity depended on its ability to bring the ordinary believer to an appreciation of the presence of mystery in daily living:

> The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all. If by mysticism we mean, not singular para-psychological phenomena, but

> a genuine experience of God emerging from the heart of existence, this statement is very true and its truth and importance will become still clearer in the spirituality of the future.[12]

Following the lead of Rahner, I suggest that what we need today is a new "mystagogy"[13] in which humankind is guided to a more profound recognition of the presence of God as Holy Mystery emerging from within the warp and woof of our daily lives. We will need special skills to cultivate the capacity to see that "the very commonness of everyday things harbors the eternal marvel and silent mystery of God."[14] This mystagogy would go beyond traditional appeals to some set of widely accepted religious practices (for example, reading the Bible, celebrating the sacraments, practicing pious devotions), however important these may be, to features of ordinary human life that are all too often overlooked in traditional Christian spirituality. At the same time, these are the features of ordinary human life that are most affected when technology flattens out the rich texture of human relationships.

Let me offer two examples. I attended a dinner party several years ago at which a guest movingly recounted a family outing on the Fourth of July. They were celebrating the holiday on the shores of Lake Michigan. As the sun went down you could see small campfires marking the beach at regular intervals up and down the long stretch of sand. The campfires cast shadows of family and friends at play. Then out of

nowhere, fireworks began to shoot off into the night sky. Some were quite beautiful, others were barely visible. Families spontaneously gathered to coordinate this incendiary display and applaud one another's efforts. The dinner guest recalled stepping back to gaze up and down the beach at the dancing flames of campfires and the fireworks illuminating the night sky. She listened to the sounds of waves rhythmically nestling up to the beach and of children playing tag in the sand and felt blessed by the moment. This moment, with its unique composition of a spontaneous experience of human community, the haunting beauty of evening campfires on the beach, and the simple delight of children at play, was for her a graced encounter. Doubtless, on that evening, there were more brilliant exhibitions elsewhere, with commercial pyrotechnic performances set to the sounds of the "1812 Overture." But spectators at those events were just that, spectators. If real celebration took place, it was in spite of, not because of, the technologically sophisticated pyrotechnics they watched. What transpired on the shore of Lake Michigan was a mysterious and blessed coming together of humans to create something wondrous — they were not spectators but participants. And in the communion forged on those shores, there shimmered the grace of God.

Let me offer a second example from my own life. When my wife, Diana, and I had our twin boys, David and Andrew, I was just completing my doctoral studies. In the first few months we were up repeatedly in

the night to feed the babies and change their diapers. I recall awakening in the middle of one particular night and being grasped by a profound awareness that has always been somewhat difficult to describe. I realized that right then, changing my son's diaper, I was doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing; I was engaged in an action as vital and fundamental as any I would have in my life. It was a mundane action (a tad unpleasant), part of the daily routine that generally went without significant discussion in our lives. But that basic action of care for our child engaged me in one of life's most vital relationships, a parent nurturing a child. That encounter with my son was a moment of communion and surely a graced moment.

You cannot manipulate such moments. They simply come to us as gift when we live in such a way as to be open to them. The paradox that a technological mindset is incapable of comprehending is that the mundane, the "dead time" of which modern technology and hyperreality would rid us, is often the arena for grace. In her Madeleva Lecture, Kathleen Norris observed:

> It always seems that just when daily life seems most unbearable, stretching out before me like a prison sentence, when I seem most dead inside, reduced to mindlessness, bitter tears or both, that what is inmost breaks forth, and I realize that what had seemed "dead time" was actually a period of gestation.[15]

Norris recalls the spiritual significance of manna, which was given as nourishment for the Israelites and which Jesus himself alluded to in teaching us to ask only for our daily bread. For it was the nature of manna that it was offered daily. While sufficient for one's needs, it could not be stored up.[16] Manna could be received only as "gift," not as commodity. Was there something of this insight in Satan's temptation of Christ to turn stones into bread? Are we not today madly "turning stones into bread" with our often feverish obsession to fill our lives with more and more devices that give us what we want — instantly, without effort, and without engagement? Yet is it not true that grace, our spiritual manna, can only come to us as gift, in our daily waiting and openness to what might emerge from the "insignificant" corners of our world?

I contend that the mystagogical ministry of the church lies precisely in laying bare fundamental connections between, on the one hand, church doctrine and sacramental life, and on the other hand, ordinary events like those that transpired on the beach of Lake Michigan or on my living room floor. In a society in which the goal of much technology is to free us from the mundane burdens and discomforts of diaper changes and improvised fireworks displays, a new commitment to mystagogy is demanded. This mystagogy must affirm the graced dimension of the clumsy, messy, and somewhat improvisational events of ordinary life that become for us "manna in the desert." Returning to Borgmann's call for a reform of the technological shape

of our lives, I want to suggest that this reform is in fact a spiritual imperative. It is a call to attend to the patterns of our daily living and to secure, where appropriate, the kinds of focal practices and engagements that can make room for God's coming to be in our life.

At the same time, we must acknowledge the danger that a preoccupation with the discovery of grace in daily life may lead us to overlook the demands that the life of grace places on us. Consequently this new mystagogy must be accompanied by a renewed Christian asceticism appropriate to our times.

A New Asceticism

As we noted in chapter 1, part of both the appeal and the danger of modern technology is that it offers us unlimited consumption of the things we value as a packaged set of experiences with no vulnerability, sacrifice, or inconvenience. Recall our discussion of Disney's Wilderness Lodge. When inconvenience, risk, and vulnerability to the natural elements are strained from one's experience of the "wild," as through cheesecloth, does not the "wild" itself disappear? The technological inventions of Disney are a wonder to behold, but what happens when the Disney genius becomes our guiding ethos, when we look to strain all of our existence of that which is painful, fearful, cumbersome — more importantly, what happens when we come to believe we have the power to do so?

Borgmann contends that the chief cultural concern

of our society "is the craving for the unencumbered enjoyment of all the riches the world and imagination can offer." He further observes that the pleasures of such consumption "require no effort and hence no discipline."[17] What is conspicuously absent, or at least feverishly hidden, in this desire for "unencumbered enjoyment," is the acceptance of what we might call, a bit starkly, the "deathly" dimension of daily life. There is, after all, a shadow side to the recent health craze reflected in the flourishing of gyms, health clubs, and in-home/office exercise equipment. This shadow lies in the not so subtle dependence on the Western obsession with youth that fails to embrace the graced possibilities of aging and the natural diminishment of bodily capacities.

The shape of modern technological living reveals one of the paradoxes of the human spirit. On the one hand, a defining feature of humanity is its capacity for transcendence, its ability to acknowledge both finitude and the presence of limits even as it yearns to go beyond these limits. Cultural anthropologists suggest to us that one of the distinctive features of the *homo sapiens* is its capacity to see death as a limit and, through the use of ritual and myth, to project human existence beyond this limit. On the other hand, what modern technology seems to offer us is less a *transcendence* of limits than the *circumvention* of limits. Human transcendence involves the grappling with our finitude precisely as a way of creatively transcending it. The circumvention of limits requires that one sustain the illusion that finitude can be avoided altogether.

Mark Helprin has captured this paradox in a provocative essay entitled "The Acceleration of Tranquility."[18] Helprin contrasts two "worlds": the projected future of a technology entrepreneur in 2016 and the world of an English diplomat in 1906. The year 2016 offers, he imagines, a world of breathtaking excitement and immediacy. Human beings are miraculously freed from the confines of the office and the traditional workday. The hard-earned wisdom of human history and the entire treasury of human culture are instantly accessible through the computer. This is an intoxicating world filled with immediacy and freedom from almost all forms of constraint. Such mundane skills like handwriting and the ability to perform simple computation are no longer necessary.[19] What Helprin recounts is akin to the world of hyperreality explored by Borgmann. It is a world free of deprivation and, consequently, free of the "compensatory power of the imagination."[20]

The world of Helprin's early twentieth-century English diplomat stands in stark contrast. This individual's life is, by contemporary standards, almost completely circumscribed by limits. Helprin imagines him awaiting an assignment to a new cabinet post while on holiday at Lake Como, Italy. His stay is marked by time spent reading and reflecting. He imagines the graceful silhouette of his wife's body and aches for her presence. He eagerly anticipates a live performance of a piece of music and delights in discerning the author of a just received letter by scrutinizing the penmanship on the envelope.[21] He is able to recall favorite literary passages from memory precisely because he has to — there is no CD-ROM database to which he might refer!

One may of course balk at Helprin's transparent romanticism and rightly point out that the world of 1906 encompassed a good deal more than can be encountered on the idyllic shores of Lake Como. Even Helprin acknowledges that what we must seek is the preservation of a healthy tension between these two worlds. It would be foolish to dismiss the many benefits the world of 2016 offers us. But what that world lacks is "the discipline, values, and clarity of vision that tend to flourish as we grapple with necessity and to disappear when by our ingenuity we float free of it."[22] What distinguished the inhabitants of these two worlds is that the world of 1906 is defined by constraints, deprivations, and necessities that demand the use of memory and imagination. The absence of the giddiness of instant accessibility is compensated for by the perhaps more sublime pleasure of anticipation and contemplation.

Cultural Apathy

What I have described here as the absence of the "deathly" dimension of human experience might be, in fact, a form of cultural apathy. We tend to use the word "apathy" somewhat imprecisely in the sense of a kind of indifference or boredom, a lack of commitment. Apathy certainly includes these elements but the word itself comes from the Greek, *apatheia,* literally, the absence of pathos. Apathy, at its root, refers to the inability to suffer. It is present wherever in our culture

there are people so obsessed with avoiding inconvenience, pain, or suffering that they end up avoiding all human relationships that might require risk and vulnerability. This is perhaps the most significant threat that modern technology presents to authentic human existence. In the single-minded pursuit of convenience and disburdenment, the impetus of modern technology unwittingly encourages cultural apathy. The German theologian Dorothee Sölle writes:

> One wonders what will become of a society in which certain forms of suffering are avoided gratuitously, in keeping with middle-class ideals. I have in mind a society in which: a marriage that is perceived as unbearable quickly and smoothly ends in divorce; after divorce no scars remain; relationships between generations are dissolved as quickly as possible, without a struggle, without a trace; periods of mourning are "sensibly" short; with haste the handicapped and sick are removed from the house and the dead from the mind. If changing marriage partners happens as readily as trading in an old car on a new one, then the experiences that one had in the unsuccessful relationship remain unproductive. From suffering nothing is learned and nothing is to be learned.[23]

One consequence of living in a suffering-free state is that we become gradually desensitized to the suffering

of others. Sölle observes that increasingly in Western culture

> one learns about the suffering of others only indirectly — one sees starving children on TV — and this kind of relationship to the suffering of others is characteristic of our entire perception. We seldom experience even the suffering and death of friends and relatives physically and directly. We no longer hear the death rattle and the moaning. We no longer touch the warmth and coldness of the sick body. The person who seeks this kind of freedom from suffering quarantines himself in a germ free location where dirt and bacteria cannot touch him, where he is by himself, even if this "by himself" includes a little family. The desire to remain free from suffering, the retreat into apathy, can be a kind of fear of contact. One doesn't want to be touched, infected, defiled, drawn in.[24]

This spirit of apathy is directly opposed to the life of communion we described above. For the life of grace and communion is shaped by that most paradoxical of Christian beliefs, the belief that we cannot embrace life unless we accept death.

The Paschal Mystery

At the heart of the Christian faith is the proclamation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ — what came to be known in our liturgical tradition as

"the paschal mystery." For Christians the cross and resurrection of Christ are not simply significant events punctuating, as it were, the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather in the death and resurrection of Christ the distinctive pattern of Christ's manner of living and the distinctive content of his message were fully disclosed. In his ministry and teaching and in his dying and rising Christ revealed to us a pattern of living that offers the possibility of salvation. This life-death-life pattern becomes for us a saving pedagogy. The Gospel of John captures its essence:

> I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me. (John 12:24–26)

In baptism we are drawn into Christ's own death and resurrection and through the life of faith we submit to this saving pedagogy in the imitation of Christ. The working out of our salvation is a matter of making this the characteristic pattern of our lives.

The paschal mystery has a central place in the Christian spiritual tradition. That tradition, in its many forms and moods, is consistently anchored in the sober recognition that we are called by Christ, often against

our instincts, to submit to a life of vulnerability in which we risk pain and suffering in a life of love and compassion. We do this knowing that it is only through that willingness to feel pain, to suffer, to know real loss, that we can know delight, gratitude, and the joy of life that the Spirit offers us.

Another term for the pedagogy by which this pattern is internalized is *askesis* or asceticism. In his classic work *Introduction to Spirituality,* Louis Bouyer writes: "Christian asceticism . . . is simply the systematic adaptation of our whole life to this Mystery [the paschal mystery] which should become its soul."[25] By asceticism or *askesis,* then, I mean the concrete discipline by which we enter into the paschal mystery in our daily living.

The martyrs of the early church witnessed to the power of the paschal mystery in the most dramatic form imaginable; through the free offering of their very lives they gave eloquent and sometimes shocking testimony to the power of the cross and resurrection. The witness of the early martyrs eventually gave way to the asceticism of monastic and consecrated religious life. Those who embraced the public profession of the evangelical counsels interpreted the significance of their lives in the light of the *kenosis,* or self-emptying of Christ. To make vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and sometimes stability, was to freely accept the limitations these vows imposed, but it was also to recognize that through this free embrace would come life eternal. If asceticism often has been associated with unhealthy exercises in

self-mortification, the essential truth was nevertheless preserved, namely, that in the Christian life, pain, suffering, emptiness, loneliness, and even boredom — the so called negative characteristics of human existence — must be embraced. Moreover, only through the free embrace of these negativities of human existence could life's graciousness likewise be affirmed.

I believe that the recovery of an authentic, contemporary Christian asceticism is vital if Christianity is to offer an adequate response to the technological shape of daily life. For in a technologically formed world, the "deathly" dimension of human existence is the enemy. As was noted above, much of the seductiveness of technology lies in its promise that we can circumvent limits, not accept them. In contrast, an authentic Christian asceticism affirms that in the plan of God human fulfillment can only come from the free embrace of that which technology and modern consumerism tempt us to circumvent: constraint, loss, and the necessary "friction" of human existence. We dare believe that our lives can in some way be enriched and enlarged by an acceptance of the deathly dimensions of human existence.

What I have tried to offer in this chapter is an account of the character of our God-relatedness and the life of grace that avoids the tendency to separate too facilely the encounter with grace from the "nonreligious" dimensions of our lives. Such a separation ends up, in a typically modern way, "commodifying" grace itself. I believe that this trinitarian vision of God and

the life of grace offers a fruitful Christian response to the highly technologized, consumer-oriented society in which we live. The retrieval of this trinitarian account of the life of grace involves, in turn, the recovery of two elements of the Christian tradition, mystagogy and asceticism. Both mystagogy and asceticism are grounded in the basic Christian conviction that grace, blessing, and the possibility of salvation do not come to us in the progressive manipulation of time and maximization of consumption that technology offers us. Rather, they come to us in the conscious attentiveness to the signals of the divine that glimmer in basic human engagements and in the free acceptance of the constraints of time and the "burdens" of human commitment. The true blessings of life can never be simply "ready at hand." Rather, they surprise us in the midst of daily living. This then is the central wisdom of Christianity that needs to be brought to our technological, consumer-driven world: we find human fulfillment precisely when we cease making fulfillment the immediate end of all our actions and instead give ourselves over freely to lives of committed service and love.

In the Christian tradition the cultivation of the work of mystagogy and the disciplined practice of asceticism are never done by isolated individuals. It is in the life of a community of believers that we discover the graced character of daily living, and it is within the life of the community that we are schooled in the distinctive rhythms of paschal living. Mystagogy and asceticism require a community of faith for their full

realization. Yet increasingly in North American culture, the pursuit of spirituality is being separated from the life of Christian community. Spiritual seekers do not see church participation as essential to their spiritual quest. We consider this relationship between spirituality and community in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Toward a Communal Spirituality

In chapter 2 I sketched some of the characteristics of a contemporary spirituality that are appropriate responses to the unique challenges of our technological age. Books on contemporary spirituality are plentiful. Indeed, a new phenomenon emerging on the religious scene is evident in large chain bookstores throughout North America and Western Europe. Alongside the religion section is a new and even larger collection of books on spirituality. The division between spirituality and religion suggests a cultural shift that has been taking place over the last several decades. This shift is reflected in a rather matter of fact comment by Wendy Kaminer in *The New Republic:*

> Spirituality . . . is simply religion deinstitutionalized and shorn of any exclusionary doctrines. . . . You can claim to be a spiritual person without professing loyalty to a particular dogma or even understanding it.[1]