33. Fletcher, "Wealth and Taxation."
34. On this point, as previously noted, I am in close accord with Sondra Wheeler in her essay in this volume.
35. Most public discussion and ethical debate about the justice of government economic policy focuses on fiscal policies. It is important to note that government monetary policies also exercise enormous influence over economic activity, both for good and for ill. For a helpful treatment of monetary policy in theological and ethical perspective, see John B. Cobb Jr. and Herman E. Daly, "Afterword: Money, Debt, and Wealth," in For the Common Good, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 407–42.
36. Other integral features could be summarized in terms of the general statistics regarding state and national poverty statistics, educational attainments, health care coverage, and other dimensions of material well-being. More poignantly, the statistics about world hunger, disease, poverty, and death would accent the fact that there is hardly anything ordinary about the experience of most Americans in the context of the prevailing global conditions for human existence. The disparities of wealth, power, and quality of life on the planet are so well known, and yet remain so overwhelming, that it may seem pointless to call attention to them. Nonetheless, if any other human being is potentially one's neighbor, then the fact is that most of our potential neighbors lack the basic necessities fully to realize their God-given capacities as human beings. We can hardly ignore this reality in our thinking about Christian giving as an expression of our calling to love God and neighbor.
37. Patty Stonesifer, in an interview titled "Evaluating the Gates Foundation: A Response from the CEO," Chronicle of Philanthropy, 22 March 2007, 52 (emphasis added). Stonesifer's view, which I share, runs counter to the claim made by Paul Schervish in this volume to the effect that current levels of wealth in the world are sufficient "to accomplish what the world has never been able to do before—to solve so many of its pressing needs for so many of its people." It may be that current levels of wealth, if put at the disposal of the appropriate agencies, would be financially sufficient to meet the most pressing material needs of most people in the world today, but clearly other sorts of resources, as well as various sorts of systemic social, political, economic, and other structural changes are also necessary.
38. The latest available statistics continue to show a huge and growing income gap in the United States, with the incomes of the wealthiest growing the fastest. The latest tax data, based on 2005 figures, show that the top 1 percent of Americans, with average annual incomes well over $1 million, now have the largest share of national income since 1928. Meanwhile, cuts in government services in recent years have had the most negative impact on those with low incomes. (See David Clay Johnston, "Income Gap is Widening, Data Shows," New York Times, March 29, 2007.) The inequities that accompany this widening gap in incomes and the corresponding and even more dramatic gap in wealth are hardly to be remedied by traditional philanthropy. Only changes in taxation and social policy are likely to make much difference.
39. I am thus in basic agreement with Franklin Gamwell, who argues that all Christians who inhabit a liberal democratic society are under a general obligation to engage in political activity as part of their calling "to pursue the community of love and to act for justice as general emancipation"; see Gamwell, Politics as a Christian Vocation: Faith and Democracy Today (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5.

"Freely Give": The Paradox of Obligatory Generosity in Christian Thought
SONDRA WHEELER

The question of how to live faithfully with possessions—how to sustain our material lives in the world and yet keep from being corrupted or held captive by what we own, how to decide what we may keep and what we are to give away—these are just particular, and particularly difficult, forms of a more general question: How are we to live? That question is more ancient than Christianity—one posed to Moses on Sinai, to John at the Jordan, to Jesus on the road, and to the apostles outside the upper room. It is, in fact, the origin of all religion, rooted in the human sense of dependency and awe, and it has driven every human culture we know anything about to ask, what do the gods demand of us? The trouble is, if the Christian gospel is true, the question posed in that way can never be answered truthfully. Or to put it a little more exactly, the answer is always both "everything" and "nothing at all."

On the one hand, Christians share with Muslims and Jews a doctrine of God as transcendent—manifested in creation but not contained within it, the absolute Author and Source of all that exists. Moreover, God's claim on us and on all life is not merely the claim of the Maker upon what is made. God has also blessed and nourished and sustained all things, "giving each creature its food in due season" (Ps. 145:15), as the psalmist sings, ordering all according to the divine will. Regarding humankind, God has further condescended to enter into covenant: first with Noah and then with Abraham, and through him with all of Abraham's children and with the church, which is incorporated into the people of God by adoption. That relationship makes comprehensive claims on how we live—from how we sustain our bodies, to how we order our communities, to how we relate to those outside them.
For Christians, over all these claims stands the ultimate obligation: the response to God's grace in Jesus Christ, which is the life of discipleship. This is modeled on the one who offered all without reservation and was "obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). Thus, it is proper to say that we are obliged to and by God at every point, without limit or reserve, so that Jesus himself can say, "Anyone who does not hate father and mother and even his own life cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). This is the "everything" piece of what God requires. John Wesley, eighteenth-century Anglican priest and founder of my own tradition of Methodism, captures it in a characteristically vigorous sermon passage:

[We see that] there are no works of supererogation; that we can never do more than our duty; seeing all we have is not our own, but God's; all we can do is due to Him. We have not received this or that, or many things only, but everything from Him therefore, everything is His due. He that gives us all, must needs have a right to all: so that if we pay Him anything less than all, we cannot be faithful stewards. And considering, "every man shall receive his own reward, according to his own labor," we cannot be wise stewards unless we labor to the uttermost of our power, not leaving anything undone which we possibly can do, but putting forth all our strength.

But this is only half of the answer, and this answer is such that, alone, half of it tells not half of the truth but no truth at all. For as the whole of Christian tradition is at pains to express, Christian faith does not begin with human beings: not with their condition or their actions, not with their duties or with the often pathetic character of their performance of them. Rather, Christian faith begins with and rests wholly upon what God has done: freely, preemptively, gratuitously, with no thinkable antecedent but God's sovereign mercy. The gospel is the news, good beyond all understanding, nearly beyond all believing, that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). And everything, everything else—the conduct of Christians as well as their confession—comes from and depends upon the ability to receive that word. To his credit, Wesley can express this side of the paradox with equal passion and power:

Thou ungodly one, who hearest or readest these words! Thou vile, helpless, miserable sinner! I charge thee before God the Judge of all: go straight unto Him, with all thy ungodliness. . . . Who art thou, that now seest and feelest both thine inward and outward ungodliness? Thou art the man! I want thee for my Lord! I challenge thee for a child of God by faith! The Lord hath need of thee. Thou who feelest thou art just fit for hell, art just fit to advance His glory; the glory of His free grace, justifying the ungodly and him that worketh not. O come quickly! Believe in the Lord Jesus, and thou, even thou, art reconciled to God.

I have used examples from Wesley's preaching because they are rhetorically clear and emphatic, and thus they serve to make their respective points compactly and unmistakably. But though he is at once an heir of high church Anglicanism and the inadvertent founder of an influential branch of Protestantism, in doctrinal content Wesley is anything but original. Apart from copious quotations from Scripture, he cites an eclectic range of sources from patristic to medieval to classical Reformation texts, and his theology is notable only for its synthesis of elements gathered from across the broadest spectrum of historic Christian thought. His insistence upon the pure initiative of divine grace is no idiosyncrasy but is fundamental to theologies, Catholic and Protestant, Eastern and Western alike.

What this means is that Christian life does not and cannot have obligation as its deepest root. Instead, the life of faith is entirely responsive, springing from gratitude rather than duty. Its obedience is an expression of the love awakened by God's love, born of a desire to please and not to grieve such a Lover. It is the celebration of a reconciliation already accomplished and not the condition of that reconciliation, part of the wedding feast and not the courtship. Do not misunderstand: real faith prompts real transformation; and faithfulness, obedience, the active love of God and neighbor, are all inseparable from the life of Christians. Martin Luther himself was quick to say that any supposed Christian not occupied in acts of love was simply a person without faith. But such acts are offered to God like the ring of the bridegroom is offered to the bride, not to win acceptance but in token of a love already secure. Only when this essential priority of grace is grasped is one rid of the endless and insatiable anxiety about how much is enough, and only then can one be freed from the obsessive self-interest that pervades and corrupts all efforts to satisfy God. I have done nothing so far but restate the Pauline insight, central to the Reformation, that salvation is the gift of God, received by faith, and not the consequence of works. This is the other piece of the answer to what God requires of us: "nothing at all."

But if this paradoxical point is hard to keep hold of in general, it is harder yet when we try to address the special topic we usually call stewardship. In fact, that term, a relatively recent coinage but one with deep biblical roots, may be part of the problem. It is, of course, very useful for
illuminating the “everything” half of what God requires in the use of resources, material and otherwise. Historically speaking, the steward was not an owner of any kind, but merely a servant who had no claim on the assets over which he had control. In fact, most of the time stewards were themselves slaves, and the goods they managed belonged to a master to whom they were utterly accountable. Consider the cautionary tale in Luke 12:42–48. In it, Jesus warns of the master’s imminent return and describes the fate that awaits the steward found to have neglected the household and squandered the resources in his charge. English Bibles usually translate this as something like “he will be severely punished.” In fact, what the Greek says literally is “he will be cut in two”!

But by itself the metaphor of the steward is not very helpful for displaying the other side, the insistence of the gospel that all is gift, that God’s grace is offered without condition. It misses something key, which is that, in the overarching narrative of the gospel, one becomes a servant only in becoming a son or daughter, one to whom it is truly said, “All that I have is yours” (Luke 15:31). It obscures the fact that the slave of Christ (as the early Christians delighted to call themselves) is the one set free from sin, death, and hell by a welcome so boundless and unconstrained that the only possible response is joyful self-abandonment. To be thus overcome by the goodness of God is, yes, to be “beholden,” as my Southern relatives would say, properly to be “obliged” and to owe a response. But much more deeply, and much more crucially, it is to be drawn into that goodness: to fall in love with grace and thus to delight in sharing its work. All true love makes one generous, because generosity is as natural to fullness as stinginess is to want.

In such a state of abundance and security, giving is not a lessening of that fullness but the very overflowing of its joy. It is a gift and not a duty. For an example of dancing on the edge of this knife, of holding together both obligation and liberty, one need only turn to the second letter to the Corinthians, to Paul’s artfully constructed appeal for funds for the church in Jerusalem.

8:1 We make known to you, brothers and sisters, the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia:
2 that in the midst of a great trial of suffering, the fullness of their joy and the depth of their poverty overflowed into the wealth of their openheartedness
3 that [they gave] according to their ability, I testify, and beyond their ability, of their own choice,
4 fervently begging of us the favor of sharing in the ministry to the saints,
5 and not just as we hoped, but first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by God’s will.
6 As a result, we have asked Titus so that, as he had already begun, so also he should complete this [act of] grace among you.
7 But as in every way you are full—of faith and of speech and of knowledge and of all diligence and of love toward us—see that you are full also of this grace.
8 I say this not as a command, but as using the diligence of others to try the genuineness of your love as well.
9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he being rich became poor, in order that by his poverty you might become rich.
10 And I give you an opinion in this: for it is best for you, who last year began not only to do this but to desire it, [11] now to complete what you began, so that your eagerness in desiring it may be matched by your finishing it out of what you have.
12 For if the eagerness is there, it is acceptable according to what one has, not what one has not.
13 Not that there should be ease to others and suffering to you, but that out of equality [14] your present fullness should supply their lack, in order that their fullness may supply your lack, so that there may be equality.
15 As it is written: “The one who gathered much had no excess, and the one who gathered little had no lack.”

[Author’s translation]

It is important to bear in mind that Paul is here writing to Gentiles accustomed to being scorned by Jews as unclean—in fact, to natives of a city renowned for its vices. Writing to Corinth on behalf of Jerusalem is a little like writing to the denizens of Las Vegas on behalf of Salt Lake City; these are not natural allies. And that, of course, is half of Paul’s point. The collection for Jerusalem is not just a practical necessity: it is a sort of visual aid, a material demonstration of the fact that “the cross of Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:11) and made all distinctions moot. It is, if you will pardon the anachronism, a kind of sacrament, the “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace,” which is the unity of the church effected by Christ.

This is the reason that, from Paul’s point of view, the circumstance of want in Jerusalem is itself a gift, it is an occasion to manifest what God has done. Both need and response, both giver and receiver, have their
place in the encompassing story of God's overwhelming generosity, which has made debtors and magnates of us all. But here Paul walks a delicate line. To live out this reality by sharing material resources is not simply an option that one might decline, but neither, Paul is careful to say, is it a command. He calls it a Xaris, a word that unites the ideas of gift, grace, favor, and blessing.

It is the Xaris of God given in impoverished Macedonia that opens the chapter, and the word recurs five times in these fifteen verses (1, 4, 6, 7, 9). Paul uses it to describe not only the gift of the Macedonians but the collection itself, their opportunity to participate in it, and the divine grace that prompts and finds expression in their generosity. Paul writes, then, in a mood more of celebration than of admonition, offering the Macedonian example of openheartedness to prompt the Corinthians to show the same graciousness, giving evidence by a tangible sign of their love for one another that they have received God's mercy.

But it is not the example of Macedonia that undergirds the church's practice of sharing, and Paul reminds Corinth of the final measure of giving in a perfectly balanced sentence, the centerpiece of this passage and one of the rare occasions on which Paul's Greek rises to elegance: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he being rich became poor in order that you, by his poverty, might be made rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). And here is the key and the very heart of the paradox. Those who know this grace can lay claim to anything, having received all, beyond any possibility of reckoning the debt, and so all is owed. But what they know is grace, the free gift of God, which stands above all matters of debt and reckoning, a realm in which nothing is demanded—and nothing can be held back. Only those who know the wealth of which Paul speaks, who live with the daily experience of being filled to overflowing with every needful thing, can receive the advice Paul ultimately gives, which is that they give according to their desire: “It is best for you...to complete what you began, so that your eagerness in desiring may be matched by your finishing it.”

Rightly, three and a half centuries later, St. Augustine will put it succinctly: “Love, and do what you will.” But Augustine had long since discovered to his sorrow that love itself could not be decided upon, arrived at by reason, like the conclusion of a syllogism. It must rather be evoked, awakened in the heart as delight and gratitude. Love so awakened overflows into giving and service as a kind of participation in God's own life in the world, for God is among us as one who serves, and meets us there as nowhere else on earth. Such participation can only be a matter of liberty, and it is as an act of freedom that it constitutes a blessing equally for giver and recipient, and a service acceptable to God. Only this does it flow toward what Paul takes to be the natural aim of sharing in the church, that all needs are met, and all equally.

But all of this only brings the problem home more pointedly: How can the puzzle of free but dutiful giving be solved? How can the practice of giving be inculcated and sustained? Indeed, how can it be given the centrality and seriousness it has in Scripture, without the communities that undertake it falling into the twin traps of scrupulousness and condescension? I am tempted to conclude that: it cannot (as witness the clumsiness of my effort even to articulate the tension) and to abandon the effort. But the longer I spend on this topic, the longer I live with the texts that constitute the Christian theological tradition on wealth, the more I am persuaded that we must find a way to communicate this central paradox of grace or else fall silent, knowing that nothing else one might say can be the truth apart from this: those to whom much has been given are not so much expected as invited to give much, and in doing so to enter into the overflowing goodness of God. And it is not just that a biblical theology of stewardship will be faulty if it lacks this grounding in liberty and joy. It is also that it will have no lasting power to form the life and practice of the religious communities it serves.

As teachers and preachers and interpreters of a tradition, we have a responsibility to convey that tradition with clarity and passion and forthrightness, to transmit its deep suspicion about wealth as a hindrance to the gospel, a temptation to idolatry, an occasion of injustice. We must be prepared to voice the fiercest challenges and to confront them together: “If you have means of worldly life and shut your heart against your brother in need, how does the love of God live in you?” (1 John 3:17). But by itself, I am convinced, this will not be enough. However accurate our exegesis, however cogent our arguments about our responsibilities to one another, no one will be won by them to the kind of extravagant and costly giving that Paul describes.

Likewise, while it is easy to make American Christians feel guilty about their spiraling consumption in the face of the world's dire need, no one will ever be brought by that guilt to the fullness and freedom that makes generosity a way of life. Do not mistake me: as an ethicist, I believe in guilt and think we would certainly be worse off, not better, without it. Moreover, to have a sense of sin, a “fear of the Lord” in its original meaning, is
already to be called into the presence of grace. But no one comes to God simply by fleeing sin, or purely in fear of judgment.

In the end, it is not what we flee but what we are drawn to that is decisive. St. Francis did not shed his clothing in the town square of Assisi and take up a life of holy poverty in order to escape his inheritance and the social position that went with it, nor did he do it to avoid God’s wrath. He did it to embrace, without encumbrances, the love of God with which he had become intoxicated. And we will shed our own encumbrances for the same reason or not at all. So, awkward though it might be to say in an academic article, what Christians need is nothing less than to fall in love again, to be awakened once more to the power and beauty of God’s grace as that is known in Jesus Christ, so that they can join in the exultation that closes Paul’s appeal: “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” From such wells alone will spring a genuinely free giving and a Christian practice of stewardship.

Yet it remains that no argument ever made can cause anyone to love, and no logic can bring forth gratitude. Nor is moral exhortation much help. It is true enough to say that gratitude can be owed, and there are many circumstances in which not to feel it is a moral offense, a failure of justice. Yet it is the very soul of generosity that nothing, including thanks, is required in return. Thus, gratefulness cannot be required without being destroyed, for the very thing one is grateful for is the liberty of the gift. Gratitude comes only without constraint, and then it is itself a gift, a grace of its own that evokes a new and distinct blessing for both giver and recipient.

But if not by argument or admonition, then how is gratitude to be kindled and renewed when even our prayers of thanksgiving have devolved into matter-of-fact acknowledgment without gratitude or power? I will tell you outright that I have no answer of my own, but I do have some clues that I have cribbed from the pages of other people’s books or learned from the observation of other people’s virtue. I want to share those with you and to say a little about the implications of all this for stewardship education and formation in the church.

In a volume about the ethics of personal relationships, Margaret Farley argues that love arises from vision, welling up unbidden in the heart when we see the beloved in truth. Under the spell of that vision, we need no prompting to do the deeds of love; indeed, we can hardly be kept from doing them. But, she warns, any number of things can cloud the vision, obscure it, and distract us from it, including the deadening round of duties and habits that are the ordinary daily expression of love. Those who love are eager and extravagant in making promises, as a thousand love songs attest; yet it is not long before the promises begin to bind and chafe, to replace the freedom and delight that gave rise to them with routine and obligation. Renewal requires a pause in the busyness, what Farley calls a kind of “attentive relaxation of the heart,” which allows us to see again the reality of the one we love and thus to recover our joy in the ordinary presence and service of the beloved.

All this is true of our human love for spouses and children, for colleagues and friends, but it is true as well of our love for God. This may be why earlier generations devised not only the regular daily and weekly round of worship but also the feasts and festivals of the Christian year. They serve to break believers out of their routines and confront them once more with the astonishment of manger and cross and empty tomb, and thus to startle them into seeing once more what is there at all times. And as with love, so also with gratitude: just as we lose the capacity to see those whom we love, we also lose, over time, the capacity to notice the gifts that surround us, and so to take joy in them. In particular, it is hard for anyone to remain aware of the abiding wonder of God’s grace precisely because it is the starting point, the ground from which all human being is set out. But without such an awareness, gratitude can be owed but not felt. Our debts are acknowledged in a kind of numb recognition but without the rush of joy and confidence that real gratitude would bring. Thus, we experience emptiness and hunger in the midst of God’s plenty, and we are, God help us, too impoverished to be generous.

It sounds simpleminded to say it, but I have come to believe that what Christians need in order to renew the springs of stewardship is nothing so much as to hear the gospel again. The church is often accused of preaching to the choir, but in truth I suspect it is the choir that most needs the preaching and most rarely hears it. Theologians are so busy trying to work out the systems of Christian thought and figure out the implications of Christian convictions that they forget how deeply and how continually we need to be nourished and re-converted by our own most basic proclamation. Those of us who are seasoned in the faith might learn something from the fact that much of the surviving correspondence of Paul, like many of the sermons and stories of Jesus preserved in the Gospels, have at their center no abstruse and difficult theological construction, but a thousand variations on the one theme: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself, not counting trespasses (2 Cor. 5:19), but coming
to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), who are and always will be none other than all of us.

Hard as it sometimes may be to believe the gospel, it is harder still to live with the truth of it. The gospel requires us to accept a verdict that condemns all our best efforts and makes nonsense of our dearest illusions about ourselves. It obliges us to accept not acquittal but pardon. It means learning to live at peace with a permanent indebtedness, and it is hard on our prized self-esteem to draw daily sustenance from a mercy that is forever undeserved, forever ours by gift and not by right. More difficult yet is the painful discipline of forgiveness imposed upon those who cannot bear the justice of God and thus are on impossible ground when they demand justice from one another. But all of Christian life has its intelligibility and its importance only in this: that it bears witness to the truth of the gospel.

The foregoing discussion suggests two things for Christian theologians who are thinking about nurturing the practice of giving. One is that Christian preaching and teaching about stewardship cannot be separated at any point from the ever-renewed proclamation of God's mercy revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, stewardship education will always look like basic evangelism and like the beginning of every Christian catechism, except that the converts and the catechumens will always be all of us. The other is that formation for stewardship will be identical with spiritual formation generally, for stewardship has the same wellspring as all forms of holiness: simply the knowledge and love of God. We who profess that God is the origin of every good should not be surprised to find that the practice of giving in the church cannot survive cut off from its source, from the practice of the presence of God. If, as Paul assumes, Christian giving is a Xaris, a kind of participation in the blessing of God bestowed upon giver and recipient, then it is only natural that it be dependent on what Christian tradition calls “the ordinary means of grace.” These are just the stuff of our ongoing life with God in prayer and worship, in mutual care and mutual accountability, in the sacraments and the study of Scripture and the singing of hymns. Whatever crisis we may now confront in Christian giving is just a late symptom of a more fundamental crisis in Christian nurture. It is there that it must be addressed, and for reasons incalculably more important than the mere financial health of our religious institutions. Without a deep renewal of basic Christian formation, even our ailing institutions may outlast the living faith that gave birth to them.

But there is a danger in this account. Linking the practice of giving to gratitude and holiness may suggest a motive too rarefied and rare, and thus give us an excuse to wait for the character we need before giving—waiting until we detect no admixture of guilt or anxiety, no tincture of pride or condescension or resentment to compromise our charity. It may be that freedom has to be learned, partly by being practiced before it fully exists. Circular as it may seem, it appears there is no way to learn to be generous without being generous beforehand, just as there is no way to learn to play the piano without sitting down to practice playing it before you know how. This is why we make small children share their toys long before they have the least interest in their playmates’ satisfaction, long before they have learned to take pleasure in the pleasure of another; we hope to form the behavior while we wait for the motive to develop. And that may not be all bad. Indeed, it may well be that we cannot know the sweetness of the shared life into which God invites us until we have taken the beginning steps that will allow us to meet and know Christ in those we serve. To make that point persuasive, I am going to recount a little history. It is none other than the story of the man whose preaching on what is and is not required of us by God I quoted at the start of this chapter. His example is instructive, because John Wesley started out as far as anyone could be from the model of free giving that I have been taking as normative.

When Wesley was a young man at Oxford, his brother Charles and four other young men asked him to lead their Bible study. He led them in a study of the Scriptures and other devotional books as part of an effort to develop holiness of life. These earnest young men encountered the words of Matthew 25:45: those who did not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the imprisoned, had passed Christ by in the street and thus were at peril of their souls. By precept and invitation, by example and preaching and pointed narrative, Christ had enjoined the care of those in need. So John Wesley and those under his informal leadership, seeking to please (or perhaps at least to appease) God and acting in the straightforward fashion of obedience, went out to “preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:19).

What they saw led them to set about securing food and medicine, education and decent living conditions for a group of families who were among the victims of England’s Industrial Revolution. They did it not as a matter of social engineering, or social work, or even social ethics. They were simply heeding a basic imperative of the gospel, believing that to refuse was to court judgment. They came to instruct people in the basic
tenets of Christian faith and the norms of Christian life. The crucial thing was that they went to their hearers. They did not wait for some sinner to come to a Bible study at Oxford, nor did they send a bus to bring these folks into a more respectable part of town. They went themselves, week in and week out, into the homes of the poor, into the workhouses that offered the meandest subsistence to the desperate, into the few and impoverished schools that existed for the children of the lower classes. It was this steady contact and firsthand exposure that educated Wesley about the grinding misery of the poor, that awakened him to the underside of the economic transformation then going on in England.

In the succeeding years, Wesley's understanding of the faith would change; his account of grace, his preaching, and his teaching would all undergo substantial transformation. The one thing that would remain constant was his involvement with the poor. This took multiple forms: there was the distribution, always in person, of food staples, medicine, clothing, blankets, and fuel. The sick were not only visited but physically cared for. The Methodists brought books and instruction in everything from hygiene to history into homes as well as founding and staffing schools for the children of the poor long before the establishment of public education. The list goes on and on, making modern Methodists like me feel both exhausted and guilty. But it is not the good works that are Wesley's chief legacy. It is what happened to him in the doing of them.

It was the barest obedience to Christ's command that brought Wesley into constant contact with the poor and abandoned, and it was the struggle against the injustices he encountered that kept him there. But it is clear in his sermons, letters, and journals that it was compassion, the gift of suffering with, that came to animate his work and to give it the character of grace. Wesley saw with his own eyes the squalor and despair that filled England's slums, held with his own arms the children who died of hunger, put his own fingers into the wounds of the poor whom he nursed. He found that he could not bear to turn his back on these or even to separate himself from them by providing himself with anything beyond what was needful to sustain his work. He lived on 28 pounds a year—for a sense of scale, when Wesley was 82, he spent a Christmas day in London begging for the poor to buy them food and heating fuel, and collected 200 pounds. In his advancing age, some admonished him to eat better food and live in more comfortable surroundings and even to dress as befitted a clergyman. To those friends he wrote, "If you saw with your own eyes what I have seen—-fathers working from light to dark and coming home to the sound of children crying for what they had not to give—could you lay out money in ornaments or superfluities?"

Wesley, I daresay, began his work with the poor with all the prejudices, all the anxieties, all the distaste born of the eighteenth-century gentleman's ignorance of the struggles of the destitute. These would probably have been exacerbated by class bias and an uneasy conscience, which always tends to make us hate those who show us our guilt. Wesley's understanding of poverty, and with it his theology, his faith, and his character, were transformed by his own steady experience until he frankly preferred the poor (about whom he had no illusions). He wrote, after a preaching visit to a prosperous church, "How hard it is to be shallow enough for a polite audience!" Wesley had read—as all Christians have—that Jesus Christ was to be found among the poor, that he could find and serve him by keeping company with the least of his brothers. He went and found it to be true. Thus it was that he came to recognize material sharing with the poor as itself a means of grace.

As Christians talk about the practice of stewardship, wrestle with the predicament of their wealth, and think about how they are to respond to the gospel's insistence on caring for the poor without compromising the grace and liberty of Christian existence, there is much in the history of the church to suggest that they need simply to stumble out there and do it. They will sometimes get it wrong, no doubt. They will say and do and think the wrong thing, I am sure. But they will be there. And they will learn. And if history is any teacher, the practice itself will make them better at it, better in their thinking as well as in their doing. The actual undertaking of care will generate both thought and character, both theology and charity. We may be persuaded in our heads that the opportunity to share God's life by giving is itself a gift, something we might, like the Macedonians, fitly treat as a favor. But we cannot receive the gift it offers unless, some way or other, we begin.

For all these reasons, I suspect that, if we search for answers to the religious problems in giving only through analysis, only by thinking it through one more time, only by drafting articles and books like the present one, we will confront finally a fundamental limitation. Although the critical work of scholarship is essential to the vitality of religious communities, analysis by itself cannot serve as a channel of the grace that comes in doing. In the end, those of us who not only study the texts and traditions of communities of faith but bear those traditions and are nourished by them must find our way to the truth partly through practice, through
the lived life in which alone the tensions are dissolved and the perplexities of giving as a religious discipline give way to the life-giving power of giving as a means of grace.

NOTES

6. Ibid., 58f.
7. For an excellent and compact summary, see Manfred Marquardt, John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1992).

A Catholic Theology of Philanthropy

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[God] who dwells in me does his works. . . . The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.

—John 14:10–12

This essay probes the connection between God and philanthropy in America. There are multiple historical studies, sociological accounts, and exhortational reflections on philanthropy. Surprisingly, however, there are few theological works on it. What follows is my attempt to connect the experience of Christian life with the practice of philanthropy. It will also, I hope, be of use to other traditions since we all share, in however diverse ways, our humanity, the world, and the divine.

FUNDAMENTAL VISION

The basic theological vision I propose can be stated quite simply: God acts in history through creatures. Correlatively, creatures participate in God's action in our world (see Failer, chapter 3 in this volume). This connection, on God's part, is the activity of love; on our part, it can and should be a cooperative activity of love. Philanthropy is one way of cooperating. Let me develop these points.

GOD IS LOVE

Much depends on the image of God that we have. Religions, particularly the polytheistic religions, offer an enormously rich and colorful array of images. Philosophers add their own understandings. This is no idle conversation, since our spiritualities depend on our images of God. For example, if one believes in a sovereign God who punishes sinful people with diseases, then it would be ungodly for a philanthropy to fund research to cure those diseases.