

A Charity of Mutuality and Hospitality: L'Arche's Witness to Catholic Theology

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Author's Note: *As this article was already in production with the publisher, the leadership of L'Arche International announced the conclusions of an independent inquiry into credible allegations of emotional and sexual abuse by Jean Vanier of several adult women (without developmental disabilities). For all of us who are involved in the work of L'Arche, the revelation of these events was shocking and very much in conflict with our public perception of Jean Vanier's personhood. Consequently, the following article now functions as a kind of swan song to scholars' initial appropriation of Vanier's legacy, one that upheld his writings and life with great enthusiasm and with little or no concerns. I ask readers to keep this context in mind as they read the article; doubtlessly, if it were written after these revelations, the article's central argument would be articulated very differently. To state the obvious, scholars will now need to be much more critical about Vanier himself. But L'Arche must go on, for its spirit is embodied in the life of numerous core members, their families, friends, and assistants, spread around the world in more than 150 locations. Fundamentally, the work of L'Arche is the work of the gospel, a proclamation that all people are created in the image of God with invaluable gifts to be nurtured by, and shared with, their communities.*

Through the writings of Jean Vanier, this paper encourages Catholic theologians to examine critically their theological sources and their own rhetoric for the context of developmental disabilities. Specifically, this thought experiment is an invitation for the Catholic academy to consider how its theologies of charity can assist the church to reflect on its pastoral ministry to people with developmental disabilities. Some Catholic discourse is built on an assumed one-directional concept of charity that emphasizes the agency and gifts of the giver over the receiver. Such a one-sided model of hospitality tends to emphasize the giver as the person without developmental disabilities, whereas the person with disabilities is described as the receiver of hospitality; their own gifts and agency thereby are either unacknowledged or downplayed. This paper argues, instead, that Catholic theologies of charity, particularly regarding developmental disabilities, should be built on a mutuality that affirms each person's agency to be both a giver and a receiver of charity.

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ALTHOUGH the writings and fame of the recently deceased Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities, are well known in the field of disability studies, his insights are little incorporated into academic Catholic theology in general. L'Arche, begun by Vanier in 1964 in France, is a global network of communities that strive to live with those with developmental disabilities in friendship, and not simply out of charity. L'Arche communities recognize and nurture the agency of those with developmental disabilities. Vanier and L'Arche thereby prompt the Catholic theologian to examine one's theological rhetoric so as to uncover assumptions or language, particularly regarding theologies of charity, that may prove detrimental to people with developmental disabilities. To this end, the present article serves as a thought experiment in the vein of practical theology.¹ My hope is to encourage other theologians to examine critically their theological sources and their own rhetoric for the context of developmental disabilities. Specifically, this thought experiment is an invitation for the Catholic academy to consider how its theologies of charity can assist the church to reflect on its pastoral ministry to people with developmental disabilities.

In this paper, I argue that a problem that plagues some Catholic discourse regarding developmental disabilities is that it is built on an assumed one-directional concept of charity that emphasizes the agency and gifts of the giver over the receiver. Such a one-sided model of hospitality tends to emphasize the giver as the person without developmental disabilities, whereas the person with disabilities is described as the receiver of hospitality; their own gifts and agency thereby are either unacknowledged or downplayed. Instead, a more just form of charity would be defined by a mutuality that affirms each person's agency to be both a giver and a receiver of charity. Academic Catholic theology can either further the problem of the one-directional dynamic for charity or it can encourage a correction by formulating and encouraging theologies of charity based on mutuality; to this latter end, Vanier's writings and the experience of L'Arche become an invaluable resource for theology. As Vanier notes, "Admittedly, church and society recognize that it is important to 'do something' for them and their distraught parents, but rarely do they see that these people (i.e., people with

¹ By practical theology, I am following the "basic definition" of John Swinton, who argued that "*practical theology is theological reflection on the praxis of the church as it strives to remain faithful to the continuing mission of the Triune God in, to, and for the world.*" See John Swinton, "The Body of Christ Has Down's Syndrome: Theological Reflections on Vulnerability, Disability, and Graceful Communities," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2003): 66–78, esp. 66; italics in the original.

developmental disabilities) truly have something to offer in return.”² In the course of this investigation, I turn to the experiences of L’Arche, as described by Vanier, Henri Nouwen, and others, to examine a model of charity—and its underlying theology—based on a hospitality built around mutuality, in which the categories of giver and receiver are often flipped from conventional understandings; this model thereby disrupts problematic theological rhetoric that casts people with developmental disabilities primarily as objects of charity. Finally, L’Arche’s model calls believers in the theological guild to examine and rework their theologies of charity to further the spirit of mutuality exemplified by L’Arche at its best. As an example of such a correction, I construct a dialogue between Vanier’s writings with Karl Rahner’s famous argument on the indissoluble unity between love of God and neighbor in the Christian life. While accepting the basic premise of Rahner’s thesis, I argue that, without careful, critical interpretation, a reader may easily understand his rhetoric as aligned with the conventional charity model, for Rahner’s language often describes or implies the neighbor as the passive receiver of the giving Christian’s charity. Finally, I conclude with some speculation about how L’Arche can inform recent anthropological debates regarding developmental disabilities.

Several qualifications are in order at the beginning of this investigation. First, my focus on L’Arche indicates that my context will be developmental/cognitive disabilities, not physical disabilities.³ But even if I am confining myself to the specific context of developmental disabilities, what right do I have to discuss this issue? Here, I am echoing the worries of Stanley Hauerwas, who wonders if one needs to know people with developmental disabilities as friends so as to prevent the danger of using others to pursue one’s own theological projects.⁴ As a former live-in assistant at the L’Arche Spokane community, I was once able to describe “core members” (i.e., the members of a L’Arche community with developmental disabilities) as authentic friends. Now, after a long stretch of time and distance, I doubt I could do so. Nevertheless, my hope is to further the conversation so as to encourage

² Jean Vanier, *The Heart of L’Arche: A Spirituality for Every Day* (Toronto: Novalis/Geoffrey Chapman/Crossroad, 1995), 28.

³ Nancy Eiesland, in her now classic *The Disabled God*, points out that the phrase “people with disabilities” covers an extensive range of conditions. As Eiesland insists, people with physical disabilities do not need others to engage in theological reflection on their behalf, and it would be condescending to do so. See Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 23–24.

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, “Timeful Friends: Living with the Handicapped,” in *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas’ Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology*, ed. John Swinton (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2004), 13–14.

other theologians to consider how our theologies can recognize the agency of people with developmental disabilities and more fully incorporate them into church life.⁵

L'Arche's Model of Hospitality

A persistent problem, as several commentators have observed, is that the Catholic tradition has been better about recognizing those with disabilities as in need of protection and assistance than in granting them space to be active participants in their communities. For example, in the Catholic tradition, Mary Jo Iozzio notes that while the church consistently seeks to protect the basic human rights of those with disabilities, "it remains somewhat indecisive about institutionalizing practices that intentionally include people with disabilities."⁶ Of course, to speak of a tradition as ancient, diverse, global, and multivalent as the Catholic tradition stands is to attempt a description of a fluid and ever-developing reality. Nonetheless, two prominent examples may serve to illustrate Iozzio's observation. These examples are not to engage in debates concerning specific pastoral practices, but rather to illustrate how certain assumptions built into a text's underlying theology may contribute to the perception that charity, in the context of developmental disabilities, moves predominantly from the normatively abled person to the person with the disability.

The first example can be found in a text prepared by the Vatican's Committee for the Jubilee Day of the Community with the People with Disabilities from 2000 that is entitled: "The Person with Disabilities: Privileged Witness of Humanity." The committee's series of often praiseworthy texts describe the person with disabilities in language that implies a kind of passivity in the face of disabling conditions:

⁵ In this sense, I am following the example of Jennie Weiss Block, who notes that she can speak only for her own opinion and cannot claim to speak for other people with disabilities. See Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 12.

⁶ Mary Jo Iozzio, "Catholicism and Disability," in *Disability and World Religions: An Introduction*, eds. Darla Y. Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 116. Of course, this issue is not confined to the context of developmental disabilities. Speaking from a Kenyan perspective, Samuel Kabue, who self-identifies as blind, describes his frustration with faith-based organizations that consistently emphasize their service as "helping" those in need. In other words, people with blindness are not always recognized as capable of self-sufficiency or encouraged to develop their talents and gifts. Samuel Kabue, "Living with Disability," in *Interpreting Disability: A Church of All and for All*, eds. Arne Fritzon and Samuel Kabue (Geneva: WCC [World Council of Churches] Publications, 2004), 32–33.

This person (i.e., the person with a disability) is almost by definition and structurally the “poor one,” the one who is in a condition to have to accept that his need, his dependence on others is shown almost without discretion, without infringements to mask that non self-sufficiency which triumphant individualism fails to recognize and which yet, in the end, belongs to all of us.⁷

The document’s description of a person with disabilities as the “poor” to whom believers are called to minister would be criticized by some writers. For example, Jennie Weiss Block argues that “perhaps the most harmful religious perception that plagues people with disabilities is the idea that they are automatically ‘the least of my people’ because of their disability.... However, we must remember that their poverty and oppression are a result of the way they are perceived and treated by society.”⁸ The concern in such criticism is that it fosters a perception among many believers that people with disabilities are the recipients of charity, but cannot manifest charity themselves. Hospitality, then, would always operate in one direction, with the person with disabilities as the recipient, and never the giver, of hospitality.

Further, the document’s title describes those with disabilities as “privileged witness of humanity,” a description that could encourage, at least unintentionally, a kind of patronizing attitude on the part of those without disabilities. There is an implied characterization that although those with disabilities might be spiritually rich (because they are the “privileged” witnesses that reveal the illusion of “triumphant individualism” that many of us embrace in the Western world), their dependence on others thereby provides invitations to believers to demonstrate their faith through acts of charity. But, as Thomas Reynolds observes, this can in fact encourage a dismissive attitude regarding disabilities by overly exalting the person with disabilities in such a way that, ironically, becomes condescending. Well-intentioned theologies, Reynolds points out, become problematic when they “glibly dismiss the concrete reality of impairment and its personal and social consequences by treating disability in romanticized terms—that is, as a means for non-disabled persons to demonstrate their charity, a theological example from which Christians can learn, or a kind of virtuous suffering.”⁹ Again, in such understandings of disability, the agency of the giver of charity is always emphasized

⁷ Committee for the Jubilee Day of the Community with the People with Disabilities, “Preparation for the Jubilee Day,” Part Two, “The Person with Disabilities: Privileged Witness of Humanity,” December 3, 2000, http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/jub_disabled_20001203_scheda2_en.htm.

⁸ Block, *Copious Hosting*, 51.

⁹ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 38.

much more than those without disabilities. If those with disabilities possess a recognized gift, it is the gift that they allow others to demonstrate sincere charity.

My second—and more recent—example of a problematic, ecclesial description of charity within the context of developmental disabilities is *Amoris Laetitia*. As Anne Masters summarizes, “The essence of what concerns me throughout the text is that it reinforces a sentimental view of individuals with disabilities that focuses on what ‘they’ can receive from ‘us’ and the gift ‘they’ have to offer is the good ‘their’ presence brings out in us.”¹⁰ Section 47 of the apostolic exhortation contains the longest passage on disabilities. In it, Pope Francis first quotes the synodal document *Relatio Finalis*, and then adds a concluding comment:

The Fathers also called particular attention to “families of persons with special needs ... People with disabilities are a gift for the family and an opportunity to grow in love, mutual aid and unity ... If the family, in the light of the faith, accepts the presence of persons with special needs, they will be able to recognize and ensure the quality and value of every human life, with its proper needs, rights and opportunities. This approach will promote care and services on behalf of these disadvantaged persons and will encourage people to draw near to them and provide affection at every stage of their life.”¹¹ Here I would stress that dedication and concern shown to migrants and to persons with special needs alike is a sign of the Spirit. Both situations are paradigmatic: they serve as a test of our commitment to show mercy in welcoming others and to help the vulnerable to be fully a part of our communities.¹²

Although this section contains much beauty, there is also a consistent, unstated emphasis that the person without developmental disabilities is to provide assistance and love to those with developmental disabilities. Again,

¹⁰ Anne Masters, “An Opportunity for Charity? A Catholic Tradition in Understanding Disability and Its Impact on Ministry,” *Journal of Disability and Religion* 20, no. 3 (2016): 223. Coincidentally, one starting point for Masters’ article is the same as the catalyst for my investigation. See David M. Perry’s article, “Pope Francis Needs to Do More than Kiss the Disabled,” on the blog *CruX*, June 14, 2016, <https://cruXnow.com/commentary/2016/06/14/pope-francis-needs-kiss-disabled/>.

¹¹ *Relatio Finalis*, 21. See Synod of Bishops, *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World: The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis*, October 24, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html.

¹² *Amoris Laetitia*, 47, March 19, 2016; https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

charity moves mostly in one direction—from those without disabilities to those with disabilities.

Three observations about this passage support this conclusion. First, the quoted passage from *Relatio Finalis* refers to people with special needs as gifts to their families, gifts by which the family may come “to grow in love, mutual aid and unity” such that they may then come “to recognize and ensure the quality and value of every human life.” Second, through acceptance of those with special needs, families will hopefully grow closer to those with special needs, so as to “provide affection at every stage of their life.” Masters notes that “this statement indicates that these ‘disadvantaged persons’ are passive receptacles for pity. It provides no indication of recognition that they have anything to offer, nor allow for any individuality and uniqueness.”¹³ Third, Pope Francis aligns the treatment of people with disabilities and migrants together by arguing that both groups are tests of hospitality, a demonstration of Christians’ commitment to welcoming the stranger to become integrated into their communities.

But left unremarked is how this integration is to occur. At the very least, we would regard any person integrated into a community as one who has the agency to share and develop gifts appropriately with that community. Mary Carlson remarks that “a number of theologians have stressed that inclusion in the life of the church means much more than physical accessibility for persons with disabilities—it means engendering in them a sense of belonging.”¹⁴ A full sense of belonging, I would argue, means that the gifts of those with developmental disabilities must not only be recognized, but also allowed to develop according to the unique situation of each person. A full sense of belonging for any community involves the opportunity for an individual to develop one’s gifts appropriately.

It is this “engendering in” people with developmental disabilities “a sense of belonging” for which L’Arche serves as an invaluable witness to Catholic theology. As L’Arche historian Kathryn Spink points out, L’Arche upends conventional notions of charity and hospitality. She discovered that it was the core members—again, those with cognitive disabilities—who often modeled hospitality. Spink describes how “in each community I learned to trust that it would be the ‘handicapped’ people who would most astutely sense my weariness, feelings of strangeness or inadequacy, my own poverty and, in an intuitive, subtle way, effect some healing.”¹⁵

¹³ Masters, “An Opportunity for Charity?,” 221.

¹⁴ Mary Carlson, “Making the Invisible Visible: Inviting Persons with Disabilities into the Life of the Church,” *Horizons* 45, no. 1 (2018): 46.

¹⁵ Kathryn Spink, *Jean Vanier and L’Arche: A Communion of Love* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 7–8.

Spink's remarks indicate three interwoven themes that are essential to the kind of charity and mutual hospitality embodied in L'Arche communities—weakness, space, and time: weakness, in that authentic relationships must be based on a mutuality in which the caregiver and “abled-bodied” person comes to recognize one's own poverty; space, in that L'Arche communities are built around the core members and create a space where conventional boundaries between the strong and weak crumble; and time, in that only with time can relationships deepen with trust and blossom, ideally, into friendship. Let me begin with the theme of weakness, for this insight was taught to Vanier through his experience with people with developmental disabilities, and, to my eyes, is the lens through which to view the issues of space and time.

First, in the conventional charity model, there is a clear imbalance of power, for the giver chooses when, where, and how to give charity. The receiver has little or no power. The giver possesses the authority to decide not only on the time and space for charity, but what kind of charity and to what degree. Of course, this is not to deny that a receiver may refuse charity, and perhaps can express gratitude (or perhaps not). Regardless, the power dynamic remains lopsided. One could render the acceptance (with or without gratitude) or refusal of charity as a kind of power, but this pales in comparison to the giver's power. In a one-sided dynamic of charity, the receiver's agency is effectively deemphasized. Vanier observes that when we try to practice charity with power, we may be able to “change” people with good intentions and generosity, “but we create a cleavage when we want to do good things for people.”¹⁶ Power, Vanier observes, can be a mask behind which we hide our own vulnerabilities. Vanier notes, “But as we live with people who have been crushed, as we begin to welcome the stranger, we will gradually discover the stranger inside of us.... We cannot really enter into relationship with people who are broken unless somehow we deal with our own brokenness.”¹⁷ To practice charity with a sense of one's own brokenness breaks down the traditional gap between giver and receiver and opens the possibility for authentic relationships based on the recognition of universal vulnerability.

A L'Arche community, meanwhile, is built on weakness. Vanier is clear that he intends the model of L'Arche to be a kind of ecclesiology rooted in

¹⁶ Jean Vanier, “The Vision of Jesus: Living Peaceably in a Wounded World,” in *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, Resources for Reconciliation, eds. Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 59–75, esp. 62.

¹⁷ Vanier, “The Vision of Jesus,” 67.

his understanding of the gospel. As he insists, “I’m not interested in doing a good job. I am interested in an ecclesial vision for community and in living in a gospel-based community with people with disabilities. We are brothers and sisters together, and Jesus is calling us from a pyramidal society to become a body.”¹⁸ If we tend to organize community—and society as a whole—around the structure of a pyramid, in which those at the top are prized for their ability—their power—to accomplish the most, Vanier believes that Jesus calls us instead to imagine community as a body, in which all parts are valuable and in relationship with the other parts. Vanier frequently cites Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians as the paradigm of L’Arche’s ecclesiology:

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, compares the human body to the body of Christ, and he says that those parts of the body that are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the body. In other words, people who are the weakest and least presentable are indispensable to the church. I have never seen this as the first line of a book on ecclesiology. Who really believes it? But this is the heart of faith, of what it means to be the church. Do we really believe that the weakest, the least presentable, those we hide away—that they are indispensable? If that was our vision of the church, it would change many things.¹⁹

The theme of weakness—the insistence that the weakest are the most “indispensable” to the communal body—is the gospel’s rebuke of how human beings traditionally organize themselves. But people with developmental disabilities have taught Vanier how to engage with others without the desire to dominate. “The mystery of people with disabilities is that they long for authentic and loving relationships more than for power,” he remarks.²⁰ The ecclesial vision of L’Arche thereby calls its participants to shed the desire for power. As Vanier notes, to become authentically human requires an acceptance of one’s own weakness, vulnerability, and dependency.²¹

Second, in this shared recognition that weakness lies at the core of what it means to be human, L’Arche creates a communal space in which the conventionally disabled and the conventionally abled come together. Assistants and caregivers who commit to L’Arche must undergo, in the description of Kevin Reimer, “downward mobility,” the practice of which consists of living in this

¹⁸ Jean Vanier, “The Fragility of L’Arche and the Friendship of God,” in *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, Resources for Reconciliation, eds. Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 21–41, esp. 34–35.

¹⁹ Vanier, “The Vision of Jesus,” 74.

²⁰ Vanier, “The Fragility of L’Arche and the Friendship of God,” 30.

²¹ Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 40–41

space with compassionate love.²² This is a space that depends on a mutual form of hospitality. In Reynolds' words, "Hospitality involves actively welcoming and befriending the stranger—in this case, a person with disabilities—not as a spectacle, but as someone with inherent value, loved into being by God, created in the image of God, and thus having unique gifts to offer as a human being."²³ This two-sided form of charity—in which each part of the relationship can both give and receive—must be based on trust and the recognition of others' gifts. Jean Vanier describes the mission of L'Arche as one that seeks "to dismantle the walls separating the weak from the strong, so that, together, they can recognize they need each other and so be united. This is the good news."²⁴ The categories of giver and receiver are deconstructed in the space of L'Arche. L'Arche thereby creates an environment for both the core member and the assistant to demonstrate hospitality, that is, it is a space that invites not simply charitable acts, but sincere relationship.

Ideally, of course, the relationship becomes more than just a means to demonstrate charity—the relationship itself may be transformed into one of friendship. Vanier remarks, "It is not just a question of performing good deeds for those who are excluded but of being open and vulnerable to them in order to receive the life that they can offer; it is to become their friends."²⁵ This is a space that prioritizes presence over action. Vanier observes, "Loving someone means, of course, wanting to do things for them, but more essentially it means being present to them, helping them to see their beauty and value and trust themselves. Loving involves letting others see my own poverty and giving them space to love me."²⁶ L'Arche's form of charity emerges out of presence to the other, a presence grounded in the awareness of one's own vulnerability.

Finally, such a transformation occurs only in time. Vanier argues that the gospels show a clear distinction between those "well integrated" into their society so that they lack time and those who, because of impoverishment or a disability, are on the margins and seem to have a surplus of time.²⁷ With the benefit of hindsight, Vanier recognizes how his relationship with Raphaël and Philippe, two of L'Arche's earliest core members, grew so that he came to recognize the capacity of people with developmental disabilities

²² Kevin S. Reimer, *Living L'Arche: Stories of Compassion, Love, and Disability* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 4, 22–24.

²³ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 14.

²⁴ Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*, 24.

²⁵ Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 84.

²⁶ Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*, 31.

²⁷ Vanier, "The Fragility of L'Arche and the Friendship of God," 30.

to offer friendship and not simply receive care. "It was quite clear," Vanier recalls, "that they had a great need for friendship and trust, and to be able to express their needs to somebody who would really listen. For far too long, nobody had been interested in listening to them or in helping them make choices and become more responsible for their lives. In fact, their needs were exactly the same as mine: to be loved and to love, to make choices and to develop their abilities."²⁸ Vanier discovers then not only Raphaël's and Philippe's capacity to develop their own gifts, but also the capacity to offer specifically the gift of friendship. In Spink's description, Vanier underwent "the change of attitude from that of 'wanting to do things for' to that of 'listening to.'"²⁹ This, as Michael Higgins notes, entails living in true, embodied solidarity with the core members: "Reciprocity, mutuality, and interdependency would now become key features of Vanier's vocation as a Christian: not only to identify with the poor and broken as objects of sympathy and good works but far more radically to enter their world through shared life, eliminating hierarchy and status."³⁰

Time in the context of L'Arche thus allows the space to become one in which the gifts of those with developmental disabilities may flourish. Vanier notes that society frequently expects people with developmental disabilities to plateau, that is, to reach an end stage in the development of their gifts.³¹ But L'Arche takes a different approach. Assistants are not simply to do things for the core members but to encourage core members' own "maturity," a development that will inevitably vary for each person, and one that requires a context of trust.³² This development can happen only with patience and constant presence, a presence, again, that prioritizes accompaniment over simply doing things for the person with developmental disabilities. Vanier observes, "When you are with people who suffer from mental handicaps, you cannot be in a hurry. It takes time to listen to them and understand them. Efficiency is not their strong point!"³³ This listening inevitably involves more than verbal communication, but also body language, and a learned capacity to listen without judgment so as to discern the other's desires and pains.³⁴ As Hauerwas notes, "To join L'Arche at any level requires that you be ready to be slowed down. It is not just 'all right' to take two hours to eat

²⁸ Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*, 27–28.

²⁹ Spink, *Jean Vanier and L'Arche*, 42.

³⁰ Michael W. Higgins, *Jean Vanier: Logician of the Heart* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 34.

³¹ Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 45.

³² Vanier, *Becoming Human*, 27–28.

³³ Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*, 35.

³⁴ Vanier, *The Heart of L'Arche*, 35–36.

a meal with a core member or even longer to bathe a body not easily 'handled.' ... We have all the time we need to do what needs to be done."³⁵ Thus, L'Arche's communal space—structured around weakness—fosters a spirit in which time is not organized around efficiency but around presence to the very different other.

To speak personally for a minute, my own experiences with L'Arche align with Vanier's descriptions. Like many assistants, I believed I would be entering into the community to care for those who could not care for themselves or who had been rejected by their families or society. In other words, I entered the community with the mindset of the conventional charity model: the hospitality in my expectation would move predominantly in one direction. But I discovered that hospitality in L'Arche at a deeper level really moves in both directions, for the core members were in fact welcoming you into their communities, offering you the gift of hospitality, and perhaps in time, the gift of friendship. My experiences are not unusual. In interviews with eighty L'Arche assistants, Reimer notes a common thread: "In their reflections, caregivers commonly observed that they too carried 'disabilities' in the form of personal grievances, broken relationships, and interpersonal shortcomings. Core members unable to dress themselves or control bodily functions insisted that life was a gift, altering the moral landscape of those who care for them."³⁶ In other words, hospitality extended between core member and assistant, each recognized as possessing their own disabilities and gifts.

A prominent example of an assistant who discovers the transformative experience of a core member's hospitality is Henri Nouwen, as he narrates in his last completed book before his death, *Adam*. Nouwen movingly recalls his feelings of incompetence upon learning that he was assigned to care for Adam shortly after Nouwen's arrival at the L'Arche-Daybreak community near Toronto. In Nouwen's description, Adam was perhaps the person with the most disabilities in the community. At first, Nouwen treated Adam's morning routine—one that could take a couple hours—as an unpleasant task to finish quickly before he could attend to other, more comfortable duties. Gradually, Nouwen came to recognize that he had to slow down and become attentive to Adam's pace. As time progressed,

³⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, "Finding God in Strange Places: Why L'Arche Needs the Church," in *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*, Resources for Reconciliation, eds. Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 43–58, esp. 47.

³⁶ Kevin S. Reimer, "Road to Guadalupe: Hope and Moral Identity in L'Arche Communities for the Developmentally Disabled," *Christian Scholar's Review* 38, no. 3 (2009): 359–73, esp. 361.

Nouwen came to conclude that his time with Adam, so much of it spent in silence, “became like a long prayer time,” as if Adam was teaching Nouwen to worry less about what Nouwen could do for Adam than to be present to him. And it was the care of Adam that allowed Nouwen both to discover a unique form of friendship and also to become integrated into the L’Arche community as a whole.³⁷ In other words, L’Arche created a space and moved at a pace in which the normal rules of charity and hospitality were expanded beyond the conventional emphasis on what the seemingly abled body can do for the seemingly disabled body with the most efficiency. Finally, Nouwen became convinced that Adam was a kind of disciple in his own way. This does not mean that Adam could give catechetical instruction—he was, after all, nonverbal in his communication—but it does mean that he embodied God’s love through his hospitality toward others, such as Nouwen, or toward the community’s frequent guests. To describe Adam as a kind of disciple may strike some as odd. But, as Swinton points out, our theological rhetoric often distorts understandings of faith and discipleship such that people with developmental disabilities are prevented from developing and displaying those gifts. He argues that “when we find ourselves paying attention to discipleship in ways that reduce it to an intellectual task with communal consequences, it becomes *individual* rather than *corporate*, something that we *are* as individuals rather than something we *do* and *become* together.”³⁸ For Nouwen, Adam very much was a disciple for the gospel, a disciple through whom Nouwen came to discern more deeply his own poverty and weakness.

Nouwen’s description that his time with Adam was “like a long prayer time” demonstrates that Adam’s unique form of discipleship manifested itself most explicitly through Adam’s gift of presence. By this, Nouwen means that Adam did not have any explicit gift that he practiced through obvious action. Adam could not speak, eat, dress himself, walk, and so forth. His gift was his presence to others. Many core members do have gifts that can be developed through obvious actions, but some do not. The concept of “gift” then is very broadly understood in L’Arche and relates back to the earlier discussion that being present to another person takes priority over completing tasks for that person. Actions are important, and from a caregiving perspective, necessary, but the gifts of core members emerge fundamentally from their presence, and only secondarily from their actions.

³⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Adam: God’s Beloved* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 40–52.

³⁸ John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 99; italics in the original.

L'Arche then fosters a space that allows the core members and assistants to grow in their unique discipleship over time. This occurs through a community built on shared vulnerability and impoverishment. Out of this mutual weakness comes a charity based on a mutuality in which all can be givers and receivers of hospitality and friendship. L'Arche thereby can be a guide for a critical examination of any theological document—whether an official ecclesial text or an academic one—that seems to regard people with developmental disabilities primarily as objects of charity, instead of possessing gifts and agency that should be developed according to an individual's means and context.

A Theology of Charity Reinterpreted in Light of L'Arche

In this embodied hospitality, L'Arche has something to teach academic theology. Take for example our theological discussions of the two great commandments of the synoptic tradition that we are to love God and neighbor and Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:40 that he is present whenever we help the least among us. Now, my point is not to critique Jesus! But experiences of L'Arche demonstrate the danger of applying the rhetoric of the gospel to the context of developmental disabilities through the narrow lens of a one-directional charity model. So how can contemporary theologies of charity navigate this danger? One approach is to qualify and correct our existing theologies through the framework of mutual hospitality that I have discussed with L'Arche. My goal in this regard is to rework our theological texts and not to construct a new theology from scratch, not to reinvent the wheel, so to speak.

As an example, let me briefly consider Karl Rahner's famous argument that we can only love God through concrete love of our neighbor. I am selecting Rahner's argument not to target him unfairly, but more to model the kind of approach that, I believe, can be carried out with other theologies of charity. The advantage of Rahner's theology of charity for this discussion is that it is well known and continues to be influential on Catholic theological ethics. Admittedly, many critics would take issue with various aspects of Rahner's argument; this is not the context to revisit these issues in detail. Instead the question for the present investigation is this: Does Rahner's theology of charity portray the problems of the conventional charity model as previously described?

Rahner insists that authentic love of God is inseparable from love of neighbor, and, more daringly, that authentic love of neighbor is already at least implicit love of God. To justify this position, Rahner cites not only the great

commandments and Matthew 25, but also 1 John 4:20, that is, the teaching that one cannot love God, who cannot be seen, if one does not love the visible human other, whom one can see.³⁹ Rahner's argument builds on his theological anthropology and theology of grace, which, in Rahner's thought, is God's free self-communication in love to the creature, a gift available to all at all times; thus, Rahner is not talking about *natural* love, but very much love due to grace.⁴⁰ Further, he develops his argument out of his concept of the fundamental option, that is the positive or negative orientation toward God that occurs either through an acceptance or embrace of grace. A person's fundamental option toward God can occur in selfless moral acts of love, even if the person consciously has no belief in God or the gospel. As Brian Linnane remarks, "A positive fundamental option must always be expressed as love or *caritas* because in Rahner's view it is the only appropriate response to the holy mystery the human person encounters as love."⁴¹ Without further rehashing in detail Rahner's argument, well known, no doubt, to many readers, I will merely return to my question: Does Rahner's understanding of love of neighbor imply a one-sided charity model?

My tentative answer to this question is a qualified "yes ... and no." First, Rahner's reflections on the unity of love of God and neighbor do not align exactly with the conventional charity model because proper love of neighbor requires becoming vulnerable in one's encounter with the neighbor, an experience of vulnerability that would certainly align with L'Arche. Consider for example the following passage in the context of Rahner's argument that the experience of God, neighbor, and self are intertwined: "... man [*sic*] discovers himself or loses himself in his neighbour; that man has already discovered God, even though he may not have any explicit knowledge of it, if only he has truly reached out to his neighbour in an act of unconditional love, and in that neighbour reached out also to his own self."⁴² On the one hand, there is an openness in Rahner's thought to the neighbor, that is, to the

³⁹ Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," *Theological Investigations*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger, vol. 6 (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1969), 231–49, esp. 234–35.

⁴⁰ In addition to Rahner's own texts, a reader can also find an overview of Rahner's argument in Shannon Craigo-Snell, *Silence, Love, and Death: Saying "Yes" to God in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2008), 82–96.

⁴¹ Brian Linnane, "Ethics," *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, eds. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 158–73, esp. 160; italics in the original.

⁴² Karl Rahner, "Experience of Self and Experience of God," in *Theological Investigations*, trans. David Bourke, vol. 13 (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 122–32, esp. 128–29.

other, a sense that a person discovers their true self only in this openness in love, via which one comes to love God. This touches on the theme of vulnerability previously discussed.

As described briefly, Rahner's argument that one may love God implicitly (that is, without conscious belief) through an authentic love of neighbor has an important relevance to the context of developmental disabilities. For this would mean that the theologian (or any believer) no longer has to "divine" an individual's conscious awareness of one's interior spirituality, whether this person has developmental disabilities or not. For example, Adam could never communicate to Nouwen a specific belief about Christ, God, the sacraments, and so forth. But Rahner's theology of charity and grace does allow at least the possibility that love of neighbor may be an unknowing expression of love of God. Here, of course, I am also alluding to Rahner's argument for the anonymous Christian and its controversial relationship to his argument on the unity of love of God and neighbor.⁴³ Although, again, due to space and time, I cannot address all these concerns, I would merely point out that Rahner's line of thinking allows theology to articulate how theologians can understand grace as operating in a person who may not have the ability to articulate thematic statements on faith, God, charity, and so forth, whether or not they are baptized Christians. More importantly, it gives a language for understanding how a person with severe developmental disabilities may still love God and neighbor without having to speculate on their interior life.

But the more important strength of Rahner's thought is that he insists that the love of neighbor is not merely to be done for God's sake. To put it another way, if one loves the other simply because God commands it, is this truly loving the person as he or she is? Rahner argues that, "love for God's sake"—to be precise—does not mean love of God alone in the 'material' of our neighbour merely seen as an opportunity for pure love of God, but really means the love of our neighbour himself [*sic*] a love empowered by God to attain its ultimate radicality and a love which really terminates and rests in our neighbour."⁴⁴ As Gerald Beyer observes, Rahner fears that Christians may seek to love their neighbor only so as to demonstrate their obedience to God's commandments, but "Rahner objects to this interpretation because it ostensibly instrumentalizes the neighbour."⁴⁵ Rahner's

⁴³ For an overview and response to these arguments, see Gerald J. Beyer, "Karl Rahner on the Radical Unity of the Love of God and Neighbour," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2003): 251–80.

⁴⁴ Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," 244.

⁴⁵ Beyer, "Karl Rahner on the Radical Unity of the Love of God and Neighbour," 259.

concern is certainly valid regarding people with developmental disabilities. If one was to treat a person with disabilities with charity so as to demonstrate one's fidelity to God or prove one's love for God, one would merely be using this person for personal gain. This would certainly not encourage the kind of relationship of mutuality manifested by the spirit of L'Arche.

At the same time, Rahner's rhetoric seems to emphasize rigid categories of giver and receiver in ways that, perhaps, unintentionally conform to the conventional one-sided charity model. So, on one hand, we have the person giving love to the neighbor, and it is through this love that the giver also loves God. There is very little emphasis—again rhetorically—on the mutuality of neighborly love or the agency of the receiver. Instead, Rahner's focus remains on how the individual discovers one's true self, that is, their transcendental orientation toward God, through their encounter with their neighbor. For instance, in "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," Rahner argues that "The one moral (or immoral) basic act in which man [*sic*] comes to himself and decides basically about himself is also the (loving or hating) communication with the concrete Thou in which man experiences, accepts or denies his basic *a priori* reference to the Thou as such."⁴⁶ Or, as he states in another passage, "The act of love of neighbour is, therefore, the only categorised and original act in which man [*sic*] attains the whole of reality given to us in categories, with regard to which he fulfils himself perfectly correctly and *in which* he always already makes the transcendental and direct experience of God by grace. The reflected religious act *as such* is and remains secondary in comparison with this."⁴⁷ Meanwhile, in "Experience of Self and Experience of God," Rahner likewise emphasizes the journey of self-discovery in one's engagement with the human other. He writes, "The only way in which man [*sic*] achieves self-realization is through encounters with his fellow man, a fellow who is rendered present to his [or her] experience in knowledge and love in the course of his personal life, one, therefore, who is not a thing or a matter, but a man."⁴⁸

In these passages, the emphasis is on the individual giver of charity, and this individual's encounter with the human other, which consequently allows this individual to experience grace and to love God in the fullest sense through genuine love of the neighbor. Or to offer another, more succinct, example, Rahner insists that "whoever does not love the brother [*sic*] whom

⁴⁶ Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," 241.

⁴⁷ Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," 246; italics in the original.

⁴⁸ Rahner, "Experience of Self and Experience of God," 127.

he ‘sees,’ also cannot love God whom he does not see, and that one can love God whom one does not see only by loving one’s visible brother lovingly.”⁴⁹ Thus, agency in Rahner’s description predominantly works in one direction. Because Rahner’s argument is focused specifically on tracing the unity between the love of God and love of neighbor, his argument lacks extensive discussion on the importance of mutual hospitality. This is less a fault with Rahner’s argument *per se*—which has a very particular goal—and more a warning to theologians when considering the application of theological speculation to concrete situations.

For Rahner’s thought is not incompatible with my argument. Buried in Rahner’s rhetoric is a recognition that love of neighbor ideally travels in two directions: “This love of neighbor will make the loving person over to the other, surrender him or her to the other, ... as a person who surrenders and loses himself or herself in abandonment to God. And vice versa: The beloved accepts the other in this love of neighbor, accepts the other as this incalculably mysterious subject.”⁵⁰ The language of the “loving person” and the “beloved” opening themselves to each other cohere to L’Arche’s model of mutual hospitality, as does his insistence that authentic love of neighbor is a love that reaches beyond mere utility.⁵¹ Further, Shannon Craigo-Snell demonstrates that Rahner’s writings on love of neighbor should be read in conjunction with his frequent thoughts on the importance of silence. She writes that “images of silence in Rahner’s work also indicate a communicative openness that makes room for the voice of the other. Silence indicates attention, space, and time granted to the other in order to hear her word, her silence. At times, silence is used to evoke an intimate communion that goes beyond words.”⁵² Craigo-Snell’s reading of Rahner and the importance of silence in the face of the other reminds one of Nouwen’s experiences with Adam. Authentic friendship with people with disabilities requires time and listening, in other words, silence in the sense of granting space to the other’s agency to communicate, perhaps, in unconventional ways. Again, in this silence, presence is valued more than, for example, what one person can do for another in terms of specific tasks. On this point, Rahner’s theology of charity aligns with L’Arche’s experiences in stressing the inherent dignity of the human other above and beyond a person’s utilitarian abilities.

⁴⁹ Rahner, “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God,” 247.

⁵⁰ Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, trans. Robert Barr (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 99–100.

⁵¹ Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, 85.

⁵² Craigo-Snell, *Silence, Love, and Death*, 77.

L'Arche's Charity of Mutuality and Hospitality: Preliminary Connections to Issues of Theological Anthropology

Previously, I strived to model a retrieval of a well-known theology of charity in the light of L'Arche's witness that people with developmental disabilities can be recognized as agents of charity and not simply as objects of charity. Rahner was simply an example. The true hope of this investigation is that it spurs other theologians to examine their own theologies to uncover harmful assumptions that hinder the full recognition of the gifts of those with developmental disabilities. Further, critical retrievals of our theologies of charity in the light of L'Arche may also inform other theological issues, particularly those of anthropology. This observation can be demonstrated with a brief foray into the debates that have waged over the past decade or so due to the critique of the Thomistic anthropological tradition by Hans Reinders in his book, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*.

Reinders grants that the ecclesial Catholic tradition has been very consistent that all human life is to be protected from the moment of conception. However, he argues that because Catholic doctrine "defines the human good in terms of our capacities for reason and will, there is no way in which human beings with a profound intellectual disability can be said to participate in the human good. They are part of a community of genealogy; they cannot be part of a community of teleology."⁵³ Reinders traces this latter failure to the dominance of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition that defines a human person normatively as possessing a rational soul with the capacity of reason and will, capacities that must be developed to participate in humanity's *telos*. Consequently, he questions how people with cognitive disabilities would be included with "being human according to its *telos*, because they cannot do what human beings do by virtue of their own nature, which is to develop the faculties of reason and will."⁵⁴ Against such a theological tradition, Reinders finds little wonder that a one-sided charity-model has dominated Catholic practice: if certain human beings are deemed to lack the capacity to participate fully in humanity's normative *telos*, then hospitality would normatively move only in the direction of what those without perceived disabilities can do for those with developmental disabilities. If Reinders' reading of the Thomistic tradition is correct, people with developmental disabilities have been historically treated as second-class members of the church due to a theological tradition that recognizes their innate dignity

⁵³ Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 118.

⁵⁴ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 93–94.

but not their agency, and, by extension, their gifts of hospitality and charity themselves.

Reinders' interpretation of Thomas' theological anthropology is, to say the least, contested, especially among Catholic theologians. Peter A. Comensoli argues that Reinders misreads "intelligent nature" in the *Summa Theologica* to refer to rational capacity. As a result, Reinders does not properly distinguish between a person's essential nature, that is, one's inherent substance as a human being, and an individual person's accidents, or a "concomitant quality" that differs one person from another. In Thomas' anthropological language, "a thing's nature," Comensoli believes, "is that which distinguishes it—sorts it out—from every other thing; it defines the kind of thing that it is, essentially. Consequently, this understanding of nature does not admit of degree: either a thing is the kind of thing that it is or it is another thing altogether."⁵⁵ A human being is a human being, in other words, who, created in the image of God, possesses an innate dignity that is not determined by the degree of an individual's rational capacity. A similar defense of Thomas is offered by John Berkman, who argues that Thomas saw reason as an accident, not a substance. Reason, thus, does not define a person's innate dignity. Just as babies, who lack the use of reason, should not be denied baptism, so those with severe developmental disabilities (or *amentes*) should be baptized, for their salvation does not depend on the actual use of reason, rather, it depends on the dispositions given as gifts of the Holy Spirit. Further, in Berkman's reading, because those with developmental disabilities can receive the dispositions toward God in the grace of baptism, but do not have the capacity to sin, they are, in fact, closer to heavenly perfection than those who can receive baptism *and* act, that is, sin. As he argues, "The severely mentally impaired, having been baptised and thus cleansed from the stain of original sin, and having been endowed with the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom as a disposition in their soul, are unable to sin. Since the severely mentally impaired are thus unable to separate themselves from the love of God, they are in a sense sacramental icons of heavenly life."⁵⁶

Meanwhile, Miguel Romero offers another defense of Thomas against Reinders' reading. He notes, like Berkman, that a person with developmental disabilities may have an "accidental *constraint*" that physically prevents their use of their intellect, but this does not substantially change their soul, which is

⁵⁵ Peter A. Comensoli, *In God's Image: Recognizing the Profoundly Impaired as Persons*, ed. Nigel Zimmermann (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 177.

⁵⁶ John Berkman, "Are Persons with Profound Intellectual Disabilities Sacramental Icons of Heavenly Life? Aquinas on Impairment," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 26, no. 1 (2013): 83–96, esp. 95.

unchangeable, despite bodily limitations.⁵⁷ In addition, although an *amentes* may be prevented from the embodied display of the grace given to them in the sacraments—such as in acts of virtue or an articulation of their faith—they nonetheless can be given through baptism and confirmation the gift of interior contemplation, that is, they can rest in God’s beauty, goodness, and truth. Romero argues, “Specifically, Aquinas’s way of thinking can help us understand the halting and constrained, but essentially unimpaired, contemplative happiness in knowledge and love of God that is possible for Christians who lack the use of reason—while maintaining that everything the human being understands is by way of the sense phantasm and that we cannot desire anything without the intellectual apprehension that comes by way of the senses.”⁵⁸

This perspective raises the obvious question of *how* an outsider is to know (or at least have reasonable grounds for speculation) that a person is given the kind of contemplation described by Thomas (in Romero’s reading). To this question, Romero draws an analogy to children. He writes:

The *delighted awareness* of goodness, truth, and beauty, which we sometimes recognize in children and those who lack the use of reason, is the operation of *actual knowledge and actual willing*. Although these acts do not amount to deliberation and the exercise of freewill, this delighted awareness of particulars is the sufficient condition for “those who lack the use of reason” to be capacitated by sacramental grace for a properly human, contemplative happiness—a happiness comparable to the spiritual rapture that Aquinas identifies in the experience of some Christian wayfarers.⁵⁹

But even if a person with developmental disabilities has this “delighted awareness” of God’s transcendentals in “actual knowledge and actual willing,” is this sufficient for the person’s concrete experience in the present, earthly life? Does not an emphasis on the language of interior contemplation run the risk of downplaying at best, and ignoring at worst, the ability of the person with developmental disabilities to be active in their relationships through the development of their gifts?

Although as a Catholic, I find Comensoli’s, Berkman’s, and Romero’s retrieval of Thomas’ theology invaluable, I would argue that such retrievals of our classical tradition must be reworked within a context of mutuality,

⁵⁷ Miguel J. Romero, “The Happiness of ‘Those Who Lack the Use of Reason,’” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 80, no. 1 (2016): 49–96, esp. 63–64; italics in the original.

⁵⁸ Romero, “The Happiness of ‘Those Who Lack the Use of Reason,’” 65.

⁵⁹ Romero, “The Happiness of ‘Those Who Lack the Use of Reason,’” 95–96; italics in the original.

such as that modeled by L'Arche. Otherwise, our anthropological language for developmental disabilities may imply a one-sided understanding of charity that does not address Reynolds' warning that people with disabilities are not "simply moral lessons or a means of inspiration for non-disabled people."⁶⁰ For example, if Berkman's reading of Thomas is correct in his description of people with developmental disabilities as "sacramental icons" to others, is there a danger that this description may lead to an unintentional objectification? This is not merely an academic question as the language of icon occurs in ecclesial documents, such as Pope John Paul II's 2004 address to the "International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person" in Rome.⁶¹ Admittedly, it is also true that similar descriptions appear in the texts of L'Arche.⁶² But without L'Arche's context of mutuality and reciprocity, to regard people with developmental disabilities as "sacramental icons" seems to imply that those without disabilities are to gaze on those with developmental disabilities (like an icon) for spiritual reflection. What about the issue of agency, however? We might think of an icon "acting" on the perceiver in the sense of God's grace flowing through the icon to the perceiver, but we do not bestow an icon itself with actual agency. My issue here is not with Berkman's reading of Thomas, nor with Comensoli's or Romero's, all of whom I find myself to be in agreement with regarding Thomas' theology; my concern is the gaps in Thomas' theology exposed by the experiences of L'Arche communities, gaps that may still influence contemporary theology. Thus, my hope is that contemporary Catholic theology develops anthropologies that foster the opportunity for people with developmental disabilities to display their own gifts of charity.

Some readers may wonder if my brief discussion of Thomistic debates is tangential, but the aforementioned disagreement among Reinders, Berkman, and Romero demonstrates how theologies of charity and anthropology are inseparable. In other words, how theologians conceive of the human person in general relates to how theologians articulate neighborly love and charitable acts between two or more persons. Are people with developmental disabilities to remain objects of contemplation or charity by the conventionally able-bodied? If so, would that not consign them a condescending anthropological status of "other," that is people who may be part

⁶⁰ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 16–17.

⁶¹ "Message of John Paul II on the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person," January 5, 2004, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2004/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20040108_-handicap-mentale.html.

⁶² For a fascinating exploration of Vanier's relationship to Pope John Paul II, see Higgins, *Jean Vanier*, 54–67.

of a community but never fully integrated into it? In this regard, L'Arche's irreplaceable witness lies not simply in its call to treat those with developmental disabilities with dignity (which is obviously an important dimension of its work), but also in its theological anthropology, one that begins with the shared human poverty of all.

L'Arche, if nothing else, indicates that our theologies of charity, whether in regard to Rahner, Thomas Aquinas, or others, need to be translated into a dynamic of mutuality. If every act of love of neighbor is also implicitly an act of God, then this act of neighborly love is somehow deformed if it does not allow reciprocity, and if the initial giver does not also allow one's self to become also a receiver of charity. Ideally, a relationship forms between two people in which each recognizes mutual gifts and weaknesses of the other. Recently, on the "World Day of Persons with Disabilities," Pope Francis urged that people with disabilities be fully integrated into society so that their presence is recognized as a "unique contribution to the common good."⁶³ To this end, Catholics of all abilities must remember their own poverty and recognize that those with developmental disabilities are givers as well as recipients of charity and hospitality. In a unique way, L'Arche has long modeled unconventional Christian love, a love that requires a suitable space, time, patience, and wise discernment to uncover gifts easily overlooked, but also the courage to risk being vulnerable. L'Arche reveals a starting point for theologies of charity, specifically, that a proper theology of charity must acknowledge that each of us needs to receive hospitality as well as give it.

⁶³ Inés San Martín, "On Day of the Disabled, Pope Calls for 'Full Integration' in Society," *Cruce*, December 3, 2019, <https://cruce.com/vatican/2019/12/on-day-of-the-disabled-pope-calls-for-full-integration-in-society/>.