

LIVING THE DIVINE LIFE

*An Essay in Honor of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of
Pope Saint John Paul II's Encyclical Letter Evangelium Vitae.*

© Father James Dominic Brent, O.P.
Dominican House of Studies
Washington, DC

Many Catholics are unaware of the gift that was given to them in their baptism. The greatness of the gift far surpasses anything that meets the eye, and it holds the secret to a life and joy beyond all telling. For what was given to us in our baptism was the gift of life, not just any life, but the very Life of God. Every human being is conceived and grows in human life. Such life can be called natural life, or biological life, and this life is God's first gift to us. But it is not his last gift to us. Our natural, biological life is the crucial context in which God gives us something more in our baptism. But just what is this "something more"?

In order to catch a glimpse of the magnitude of it, it helps to consider various orders of life with which we are familiar in the world around us. At the bottom of the universe, we find the material elements that make up the world. These things are not even alive, but merely serve the makeup of living things. But one step up from material elements we find the lowest form of life: plants and other vegetative life forms. These things are more than the elements, since the plants are living things. The plants live out their life as bodies or as organisms, and each has a soul to animate it.¹ Above the order of plant life or vegetative life, there are the animals or the various forms of zoological life, and these too live out their life as bodies or as organisms. The animals, too, live out their life as bodies or organisms, and each has a soul to animate it. Now, above the animals comes the order of human life. Human life in its natural, biological form, too, is always the life of a human body or organism, and where there is a living human body there is a human being.² What animates the human body or organism is a soul, but one different in kind from plants and animals. The human soul is a spiritual soul, each spiritual soul in particular is specially created by God, and each spiritual soul is capable of receiving from God whatever further gift it pleases him to give us.

Now, there are higher forms of life beyond that of plants, animals, and human beings, and this higher order often goes unnoticed. It is so different from what we experience in the plants, animals, and ourselves that it is hard to imagine or describe, for we are talking about pure spirits or angels. The angels can be called living, but it must be said that their mode of life is quite unlike plants, animals, or human beings. For the angelic life is free from matter and is totally spiritual. Angelic life – or at least the life of the holy angels – consists of contemplation and love,

¹ In scholastic philosophy, it is commonly said that plants and animals have soul in the sense of an inner principle or source of life, but that is not to say that the plants and animals have a rational, spiritual, or conscious soul as human beings do – as is explained later in the paragraph.

² In *Evangelium Vitae*, 81, Pope John Paul II tells us that at the core of the gospel of life "is the affirmation of the inseparable connection between the person, his life and his bodiliness."

silent communications, the worship of God, and carrying out missions from him. The life of the angelic order is mysterious indeed.

But far above even the highest of the angels there is a life more mysterious still. It is not the life of plants or animals, men or angels, but the very life of God. God lives his own, totally unique, singular, and special form of life. We can call it *divine Life*. It differs from every lower form of life in many ways. Like the angels, the divine Life is totally spiritual, but unlike the angels it is without beginning or end. Divine Life is eternal. It is Life altogether and at once perfect and complete, without duration, without before or after in it. It is not limited in any way, but is boundless and infinite. It is an ineffable mystery, an ocean of Light and Love, and equally an ocean of Wisdom, Peace, and Joy. The divine Life belongs to God alone, it is the source of all life lower than him, and all lower forms of life are but faint imitations or passing resemblances of the divine Life. No human being, indeed no angel, could ever know what divine Life is just by using one's natural powers of cognition. The divine Life is all-surpassing. It surpasses life as we know it, and surpasses all our powers to know what life is. For this reason, Scripture says "no one has ever seen God" (Jn. 1:18). The divine Life is, so to speak, God's secret. But the divine Life is real. It is nothing less than God himself. It is the Life he lives in the abode of eternity where he dwells in unapproachable Light (1 Tim. 6:16).

Now it is altogether inappropriate even to speak of the luminous, eternal, and divine Life without also hymning the praises of Life. And therefore "we must celebrate Eternal Life, from which every other life proceeds. From this, in proportion to its capacities, every being which in any way participates in life, receives life. This Divine Life, which is above every other life, gives and preserves life. Every life and every living movement proceed from this Life which transcends all life and every principle of life. It is to this that souls owe their incorruptibility; and because of this all animals and plants live, which receive only the faintest glimmer of life. To men, beings made of spirit and matter, Life grants life. Even if we should abandon Life, because of its overflowing love for man, it converts us and calls us back to itself. Not only this: it promises to bring us, soul and body, to perfect life, to immortality. It is too little to say that this Life is alive: it is the Principle of life, the Cause and sole Wellspring of life. Every living thing must contemplate it and give it praise: it is Life which overflows with life."³

Now, the awe-inspiring announcement of the prophets and apostles, indeed, the good news beyond all gladness, is that it was not enough for God to give us simply our human life, but indeed it pleases him to share his very own divine Life with us. And what is most amazing and stupefying of all is the manner in which it pleases him to do so. For God does not want simply to tell us about his Life like a story about some far-off land which we never get to visit nor does God want to give us his Life like a third thing given between one person and another at a birthday party which remains external. Rather, it pleases God to give us his divine Life in a more interior and dazzling way. It pleases God to unite our human nature to himself so that he can live out his very divine Life in our human nature: first in Jesus Christ and then in us and through us. So, how does God bring this union about?

³ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*, 6, 1-3 as quoted in Pope John Paul II *Evangelium Vitae*, 84

The explanation centers on Jesus Christ. When the Scriptures say that “no one has ever seen God,” it immediately goes on to qualify the point. It says “the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (Jn. 1:18). The person of Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of the Father, a divine Person, one of the three Persons of the Trinity. Before the Incarnation, before ever having a human body or soul, he was already a divine Person. Within the mystery of the Trinity he lived the divine Life. And because he is a divine Person, he knows the secret of God. He knows the divine Life because he lives it. He lives it in eternity, from eternity, for eternity as a divine Person, the second Person of the Trinity. Inside the Trinity, so to speak, the eternal Son is generated from the Father, knows the Father, lives under the gaze of the Father’s love, returns love for love to the Father, and enjoys being the Son of the Father. Such a Life is unfathomable to us, but not to him. He knows it. Such a life is beyond us, too high for our reach, but not for him. He lives it. And the Father sent his eternal Son to unite us to the divine Life in a manner beyond all comprehension.

In the Incarnation, beginning in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the eternal Son took a human nature to himself. Without ceasing to be the eternal Son, without ceasing to be eternally generated from the Father, without ceasing to live under the gaze of the Father’s love, without ceasing to return love for love to the Father and abide in the Spirit, the eternal Son “became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14). From that point onward, he lived out his divine Life as the eternal Son *in a human way*. He lived out his divine Life in the form of a living, human, bodily, organism animated by a human soul. He ate, he drank, he slept, he spoke with people, looked them in the eye, and touched them. In each case, God ate, God drank, God slept, God spoke with people, God looked them in the eye, and touched them. The life of Jesus is so mysterious. On the one hand, he is completely human. He had a complete human nature without any missing parts, powers, or properties, and he led a fully human life. On the other hand, he is divine. He was a divine Person living out the divine Life in and through his complete human nature. Thanks to the union of the two natures in one divine Person, two orders of life – the divine Life and human life – meet and become one. God lived out his divine Life in and through one human being in particular, Jesus, and that one human being in particular is ever-exercising *divine* Life through his humanity. And as such he is the source of divine Life for all human beings who are united to him in baptism.

Saint John Damascene tells us that the human nature of Jesus was his *instrument* for living out the divine Life.⁴ But the term “instrument” should not be understood to mean an impersonal, inert, dead, object at his disposal like a tool or machine. On the contrary, the human nature of Jesus was his complete human form: body, soul, powers, and activities, and this complete human form of his was wholly personal because it was simply and totally one with his divine Person. He wholly permeated his human nature, enacted his eternal divine Life in time through his human soul, body, powers, and acts, and by all these means manifested and communicated his divine Life. The divine Life of Jesus Christ radiated and surged through his human soul, body, intellect, will, choices, actions, and passions, and he lived out his divine Life by his free human acts: eating, sleeping, drinking, walking, talking, teaching, healing, exorcising, disputing, praying, and

⁴ *On the Orthodox Faith*. Translated by E.W. Watson and L. Pullan. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 9. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1899.): Book III, 15

offering himself in sacrifice to the Father. The life of Jesus was unique because it was *theandric*: the Life of God-as-man. It was in this manner that it pleased God to share the divine Life with man, i.e. by *actually living out the divine Life as a man*. It is in the man Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the Father living in the flesh, that human nature is elevated to the level of living out divine Life, and the divine Life descends to the level of living out a human life. In him, in the Person of Jesus Christ, God and man meet and become one in a most sublime union, i.e. in one Person. Such is the meaning of the term hypostatic union.

Now, it pleases God for Jesus Christ to be the source for each of us to receive the *same* gift, the *same* divine Life as there is in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it pleases God to reproduce and live out all over again the *same* divine Life in and through the human nature of each of us. And what is more amazing still, it pleases God for our individual human natures to belong to Jesus Christ, and to become an extension and conduit of his divine Life. Just as he once lived out his divine Life in *his* human nature, so he lives out the same divine Life in *my* human nature – body and soul – thanks to baptism. To be clear, it is not that in any one of us who are baptized our human nature is *assumed* in the Person of Jesus Christ as the human nature of Jesus was assumed into his divine Person in the hypostatic union. Such a union between human nature and the divine Person is proper to Jesus alone. But it *is* the case that through baptism our individual human natures are *incorporated* into Jesus Christ, the man who lives the divine Life, and he lives out his divine Life through the human nature and life of each of us who are so incorporated into him. “I am the vine, you are the branches” (Jn. 15:5). It is not just a metaphor, but a causal statement. Just as the sap, energy, nutrients, and life flow from the vine to the branches, and the branches live from and by virtue of the same life as the vine, so too the divine Power, Energy, Light, Love, and Life of Jesus flows from him to us, and we live by virtue of the same divine Life as Jesus Christ. Indeed, we live the same life. “Because I live you will live” (Jn. 14:19). “Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?” (2 Cor. 13:5). The expression “in you” here does not only mean a little Jesus in the tabernacle of our hearts (a homunculus), but it means Christ is “in you” in the sense of being all throughout one’s whole being, working through the whole of one’s being in its entirety, and bearing all it endures in its entirety. For the baptized, it is Jesus Christ who lives and acts and works through our body, soul, intellect, will, memory, imagination, and passions, and Christ will do so increasingly more to the degree we withdraw from sin and submit to his Presence operating all the powers of our soul. The higher Life takes over the lower one, and seeks to live through the lower, so that the lower might live the Life of the higher and enjoy his Life indeed.

Although God is with us in many ways prior to our baptism, something special takes place in our baptism and because of it. The divine Life is born in us who are but human, and who up to that point have no life but a human one. From the moment of our baptism, however, our life – though still human – is more than just human. In our baptism, the divine Life commences its work of living out in us and through us the theandric existence of Jesus Christ. How shall we understand the effects of baptism?

Baptism is an engrafting. Engrafting is the process by which a gardener takes a twig from one plant and fuses it with another plant, and the twig begins to grow from the life of the new plant. To be baptized is to be engrafted into Jesus Christ, and to begin to live from his divine Life. From then on, he lives in us and through us unless we turn against the gift by mortal sin. Mortal

sin is mortal not because it kills the human life in us, but because it puts an end to the divine Life surging through us from our baptism. To sin mortally is to put to death “Christ in you” (1:27). Thanks be to God he has established for us the Sacrament of Penance, and its marvelous work of restoring the divine Life in us after such a fall.

Baptism is supernatural adoption. In the natural order, someone who is adopted is taken from one family and placed in another. Now, in natural adoption, no matter how well the adoptive family loves the adopted child and takes him or her into their hearts, there remains a difference between the adopted child and the adoptive family. The adopted child has all the *legal rights* of a child of the adoptive family, but does not have the very *lifeblood* of the adoptive family. Such are the limits of adoption in the natural order. But in supernatural adoption, something of the very lifeblood of the adoptive family flows into and through the adopted child. The adopted child truly becomes one of the same stock as the adoptive family. The baptized are of the same lifeblood and stock of Jesus Christ. His divine Life is ours, and our human life is his, and his divine Life works in and through our human nature making each of us and our lives to be his, indeed, to be Him. Baptism, supernatural adoption, divinizes us.

Divinization, according to the Fathers of the Church, is like a sword plunged into red hot fire for a long time. The sword takes on the properties of fire and becomes all red hot, radiant, and fiery. And the sword becomes all fiery without ceasing to be a sword. Now, in Jesus Christ human nature was plunged into God by the special union of his human nature with God, and as a result his human nature, without ceasing to be human, was filled like none other with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19). Jesus Christ was the first divinized man, and “from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace” (Jn. 1:16). And we receive his grace in our baptism. In our baptism our human nature is plunged into Christ, incorporated and engrafted into him, and as a result our human nature, without ceasing to be human, is flooded like his with all the fullness of God. And for this reason Saint Athanasius did not hesitate to say, “God became man so that we might become God.”⁵ Yet to be clear, no baptized human being, no Saint, not even the Blessed Virgin Mary, lives the divine Life in a manner equal to Jesus Christ. For divine Life in him is always more than all of us combined, and each of us is but a participant in the mystery of his all-surpassing Life. But participants we are indeed, and what Jesus Christ is by nature we truly are by grace.

In the tradition of the Church, many have been granted a sense of the mystery of how Jesus Christ himself lives out his divine Life in and through our humanity, and some have even come to the point of being profoundly aware of another source of Life living in them and operating the powers of their soul. St. John Eudes, for example, says:

He belongs to you, but more than that, he longs to be in you, living and ruling in you, as the head lives and rules in the body. He desires that whatever is in him may live in you: his breath in your breath, his heart in your heart, all the faculties of his soul in the faculties of your soul, so that these words may be fulfilled in you: *Glorify God and bear him in your body, that the life of Jesus may be made manifest in you.*⁶

⁵ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*. 54, 3 as quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 460

⁶ From the Second Reading for Matins of the Memorial of St. John Eudes in “From a treatise on the Admirable Heart of Jesus, in *The Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol. IV (New York, Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1974): p.1331

But Saint John Eudes is only one representative. In her *Prayer to the Holy Trinity*, Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity prays:

But I feel my weakness, and I ask you to “clothe me with yourself,” to identify my soul with all the movements of your Soul, to overwhelm me, to possess me, to substitute yourself for me that my life may be but a radiance of your Life.

It is clear that she wants to get out of the way of Christ living in her, become wholly identified with him, and simply allow him to live through her human nature. And a few stanzas later she prays for as much in even clearer and more radical terms to the Holy Spirit:

Consuming Fire, Spirit of Love, “come upon me,” and create in my soul a kind of incarnation of the Word: that I may be another humanity for Him in which He can renew his whole mystery.

In these words, Saint Elizabeth testifies that she has understood the depths of the inspired Scripture: “It is no longer I who live, but Jesus Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). These words were engraved on the back of her profession crucifix, and she lived them to the end. In so doing, she anticipated a mystic of the twentieth century named Blessed Concepcion Cabrera de Armida (Conchita). Conchita was a devout and prayerful housewife and mother who spoke at length of a grace available to us, namely, the grace of the *mystical incarnation*.⁷ In effect, it is the grace to live one’s baptism to the full, or better, to allow Christ to live his divine Life in us and through us which is the whole point of baptism.

What is the appropriate response to the gift of Life given to us in our baptism? In a way, all of the teachings and all of the practices of the holy Catholic Church are an answer to this question. The first and most essential response is to *believe* in the magnitude of the gift that has been given to us in our baptism. God has ingrafted us into the divine Life of Jesus Christ, and Christ lives in us and through us. So, too, *hope* or confidence in God and in his merciful work of transforming us into himself is critical. And, of course, *love*. In the Synoptic Gospels, the first word Jesus preaches is “*repent!*” That means *metanoia* or a transformation of the mind, and that means letting go of every intention and attachment standing in the way of “Christ in you” (Col. 1:27). It means becoming centered anew on the Trinity. Only such *metanoia*, which God works gradually in us by his grace, opens our hearts in freedom to love and be loved in the amazing way in which God would have it, i.e. by living his divine Life in us. And so many exterior practices cultivate the divine Life within us too, but especially silent prayer, *lectio divina*, and the Rosary. But without a doubt, the greatest and most important thing of all, the center of the whole life of the Church on earth, is the Eucharist. By the power of the holy and awesome Sacrament of the Altar, God himself nourishes the divine Life within us, fortifies and protects it, renews it and revitalizes it. Such is the ordinary and normal effect of the Bread of Life. Faith, hope, love, repentance, silent prayer, *lectio divina*, the Rosary, and all other such practices, are but preparations and formations to celebrate the Eucharist. In the Eucharist is realized the dream of God. “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him” (Jn. 6:56).

⁷ Marie-Michel Philipon, *Conchita: A Mother’s Spiritual Diary*. (New York: Alba House, 1978)