

A Priestly Approach to Environmental Theology: Learning to Receive and Give Again the Gifts of Creation

By Norman Wirzba

Abstract: A priestly sensibility is here presented as a way to characterize humanity's place in creation. Sacrifice, asceticism, and gratitude are described as three distinct and practical modalities of a priestly life that contribute to the care and celebration of creation. While a priestly understanding is often associated with Orthodox environmental theology, it has the potential to inform environmental theology broadly construed.

Key Terms: ecology, creation, Orthodox theology, asceticism, sacrifice, gratitude

A Priestly Function

Environmental theology based on the Jewish and Christian scriptures has tended to focus on "stewardship" as the preferred model for understanding humanity's place and responsibility in creation. There is considerable value in this approach, though it is not without problems and critique.¹ In this essay I argue that we also have much to learn from a model that characterizes people as "priests" of creation. By a common priesthood I do not mean that all people are now to be officially ordained by religious organizations. Nor do I mean something like the early Protestant teaching of "the priesthood of all believers." Rather, I argue that people, whether ordained or not, Protestant or not, can exercise a *priestly function* in the work and play they perform; and that in performing this priestly

function they can contribute to the wellbeing and flourishing of creation. Priesthood, in other words, is a powerful way to conceive human identity and vocation. It is a way to re-think in a most fundamental way *who* we are and *how* we are to live in a world understood to be God's creation.

A priestly function centers on receiving and offering the world in a religious way, i.e., in a way that understands the world to *be* only insofar as it is the expression of God's desire to *give* and to *nurture*. My central presupposition is that learning how to do this in ways that honor both creatures and God will go a long way toward addressing ecological concerns. I do not doubt that there are multiple ways to construe the model (the priestly traditions of the world's religions are deep and diverse). Indeed, comparative work along these lines may prove very illuminating. This essay, however, gives what I hope to be a coherent account of one possible approach, an account that draws primarily

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from Jewish and Christian sources.² As I develop my account I focus on three central features of a priestly imagination and life: sacrifice, asceticism, and gratitude. These features, while not exhaustive, put us on a path that leads to the heart of a priestly sensibility.

Sacrifice

It is difficult to speak meaningfully about sacrifice because the term has come to be associated with the subjugation and oppression of particular groups of persons. In wars, for instance, it is often the weakest and poorest classes of people who make “the ultimate sacrifice” for the nation. In households it is often the women who are asked to sacrifice their identities and desires for male ambition. Sacrifice in contexts like these is hard to accept, because we readily see in it the power ploys of the strong played out against the weak.

The sacrifice of animals is also viewed by many as repulsive. What nobility could there possibly be in the slaughter of a healthy animal? Is it not the wasting, even the desecration, of a precious life? Furthermore, is not ritual killing like this abhorrent on theological grounds since it seems to presuppose a bloodthirsty god who delights in the destruction of living beings?³ Many Christians find the idea that God demands sacrifice a relic of an ancient mindset that we have long—and thankfully—left behind.

Given these sorts of concerns, it is easy to see how sacrificial practices have been theorized by some to signal the violent origins and the patriarchal nature of culture.⁴ According to this view, people are assumed to be violent by nature. Sacrifice plays an ameliorating role because it takes violent aggression that might be applied against fellow humans and redirects it to ritually approved blood-letting.

These worries about violence are legitimate and need to be kept in mind. But they should not prevent us from exploring this practice for insights about what it means to live in a world that requires us to eat, and therefore also kill, so that we can

live.⁵ Perhaps our focus has been too much on the killing that happens at the altar, and not enough on the spiritual and practical contexts that lead up to it.

The Ancient Israelites

So, then, why did the ancient Israelites practice sacrifice? It is hard to give a precise, verifiable answer. What I want to do is start with an anthropological observation and then move into a theological picture that I think is coherent. Jonathan Z. Smith says animal sacrifice is always a sacrifice of domestic animals.⁶ This is a very important observation, because it says something vital about how the animal and the person offering the sacrifice are to be understood.

In an agrarian or pastoral context, and in stark contrast to our industrial and urban context, animals are not commodities or economic units. They are vitally connected to personal and social livelihood. Though animals always have been susceptible to abuse by humans, agrarians understand that such abuse is simply foolish, because in harming one’s animals one also harms oneself. In agrarian cultures, human wellbeing—in the forms of food, fiber, manure, fertility, and power—was intimately and inextricably tied to the wellbeing of one’s animals. The health and size of the herd, besides being a sign of economic wellbeing, also could be a source of pride, because it reflected careful husbandry. This means that the animal presented for sacrifice could hardly be the object of scorn and hatred, or a mere outlet for human aggression. Such aggression would be a violation and contradiction of the care that animal husbandry daily presupposes. We need to try to recall a time in which good shepherding, for instance, was not only honorable but also an opportunity to exercise and refine skill in the arts of care, patience, intelligence, affection, and land management. We need also to remember that for the ancient Israelites one powerful metaphor for God was that of the Good Shepherd.

When we appreciate that care and nurture, rather than violent aggression, brought the animal to the sacrificial altar, we also can begin to see

that genuine sacrifice entails a double offering: the offering of the animal (or first fruit) *and* the self-offering of the person making the sacrifice. To offer to God what was so precious and integral to the economic wellbeing of the family—a strong, healthy animal, or the best, first-fruits of the field—meant that sacrifice could hardly be taken lightly. In giving up an essential portion of one's sustenance one gave significantly of oneself.⁷ In the death of the animal there was also, because of the close identification with the animal, a death of sorts in the one making the sacrifice.⁸ The offering of the animal was simultaneously a self-offering, because in presenting the animal one also offered the hours of personal care and work that nurtured the animal to a full life.

Relationship with God

When we turn to the Hebrew scriptures we find that sacrifice was fundamentally about entering into and nurturing a relationship with God. Sacrifice was the practical means to communicate with God, solicit divine aid, and repair a relationship that was not right. The Jewish scholar Jacob Milgrom writes:

In essence, the system of sacrifice provided a metaphor, a method, for the Israelites to reach God, responding to the deep psychological, emotional, and religious needs of the people. Indeed, this is the meaning of the Hebrew word for "sacrifice"; it comes from a verb meaning "to bring near." Thus a sacrifice is that kind of an offering that enables us to approach God.⁹

In the sacrificial act the ancient Israelites took from their means of livelihood (domestic animals or the harvest of the fields) and offered it as a gift to God. By bringing these gifts into the presence of God, both the giver and the gift were rendered sacred (the Latin roots for the English word *sacrifice* come from *sacrum* and *facere* and mean "to make sacred"). As an offering these gifts could now become a means of communion between God and humanity. In offering a lamb, for instance, the shepherd showed the willingness to calibrate his or her life according to the ways of God the Good

Shepherd.¹⁰ Similarly, in offering fruit and vegetables, one showed oneself willing to become a gardener like God, who exercises detailed care and provision in the garden of creation (Genesis 2). Sacrifice addresses guilt because it is a witness to our commitment to heal relationships that have been degraded and broken by sin. It speaks to the need to reform one's life so that honest and life-giving communion can be restored.

Why is offering, especially the offering of a living being, of such importance when establishing communion? To answer this question we need to recall the basic creaturely experience of interdependent need. For people to live they must eat, which means they must consume the lives of others. This is a humbling and terrifying predicament to be in, because it compels us to acknowledge that we cannot survive on our own but depend on the lives and the deaths of others. No matter how resourceful we are, we are not the sources of our own or any other life.¹¹ How should we receive and become worthy of the countless lives that are given as a means for our own sustenance and good? When we ponder this question we discover an overwhelming disproportion between the extent and cost of gifts received and the human ability to adequately express gratitude for them. We sense a fundamental inability to comprehend our own experience as maintained and nurtured by the living and dying of countless others.¹²

Food as Gift

Faced with what is perhaps an inescapable incomprehension, it makes sense that people would offer in response not merely words but food—the basic, non-negotiable means of personal and social livelihood.¹³ Food, besides being fuel, speaks or signifies as the gift and the means of life. To offer food to another, especially the precious and costly food of animal flesh, is to acknowledge that life is not to be taken for granted or hoarded as a possession to be used however one wills. Though people may work for their food by being directly involved in the growth and harvest of what they eat, and thus have a legitimate claim on its consumption, it is

inappropriate to think that the sources of life have thereby been earned. As a gift, food is something that we must learn to receive and share in such a way as to be always cognizant of its givenness.

To offer food to another thus expresses a profound insight into the gifted and interdependent character of the human condition. In this offering people acknowledge that as creatures they are beneficiaries of an incomprehensible and costly generosity and hospitality. The clearest sign of this acknowledgment is that people themselves become generous and hospitable with others, offering from themselves and their livelihood what they already have received. To invite another to one's table and share food with them is to communicate that life is not a possession to be jealously guarded. To share food is fundamentally to share life. To open the table to another is, in a variety of senses, to give oneself to them. It is to participate in the nurture and the strengthening of the memberships of creation. "True giving is participating, participating in the life and work of the donee, participating in one's universe as a sympathizing member. No one can participate without giving first. Giving is essential for a meaningful existence . . . All communication begins with giving, offering."¹⁴

Following these brief observations we are now in a position to see that sacrifice is about much more than the killing of an animal on an altar. It is about moving into a profound understanding of the world as a costly and precious gift that requires of us the offering of ourselves. Though we may no longer feature sacrificial altars as the focus of our worship, this does not mean that we can dispense with altars—understood as the places or sites where the movements of self-offering are made—altogether. Altars must remain in some form, perhaps most basically as kitchen and dining tables, as a perpetual reminder that our living is made possible by the reception and sharing of gift upon gift. Altars, and the offerings they make possible, communicate that we have taken an approach to life and the world that stresses gratitude and sharing, protection and care.

This brings us to a central feature of a priestly sensibility: the fundamental recognition that we live in a world that is God's love made visible, fragrant,

and delectable. The world is much more than the amoral or valueless realm we often associate with the term "nature." It is *creation*, the daily work of God's hands and the precious and cherished realm of God's gift-giving. To exercise a priestly function is thus to commit oneself to receiving, nurturing, and sharing these gifts, and to help others move into this same sensibility. It is to appreciate, however imperfectly, that creaturely life is a membership in which all the members thrive only insofar as members are constantly giving and being given to each other. A priestly life is focused on learning how to receive and give again the world.

Grasping and Hoarding

A critical retrieval of the priestly role will, therefore, need to develop the moral and spiritual contexts that equip people to understand life and the world as gifts rather than as possessions. How can we approach the world with open hands rather than with a grasp? Can we receive the world in such a way as to share it rather than hoard it? These seem to me to be essential environmental questions, particularly when we appreciate how much of creation is being destroyed by our desire to own or control it. But it is also no easy matter, particularly in a culture of capitalist consumerism. Secondly, we must focus on what it means to offer anything at all. Again, this is difficult because the shape of postmodern, global, economic life makes it unlikely that we are in the practical position to cherish the world enough to dedicate ourselves to its offering.

An example of the difficulty of our situation can be found in the observation of cultural critic Thomas de Zengotita:

The aim of modernity fulfilled means this: humanly created options that endow ordinary people with entitlements no mortal in history, no matter how exalted, could ever have assumed before. While these entitlements are now limited to a relative and privileged few, this cohort already comprises many millions, shows every indication of expanding, and is, in any case, the source of the global zeitgeist. Members of this cohort

either have, or can realistically anticipate, the obliteration of all barriers of time and space, instant access to every text and image ever made, the free exercise of any lifestyle or belief system that does not infringe on the choices of others, custom-made environments, commodities, and experiences in every department of activity, multiple enhancements of mind and body, the eradication of disease, the postponement of death, and the manufacture of their progeny in their own image . . . Plus improvements.¹⁵

Here de Zengotita describes a cultural context in which individual self-fulfillment and flattery have become the goal of life. Technological media, advertising slogans, political maneuvering, education, and religious campaigning are each designed to convince consumers and clients that their wishes are of the greatest importance. Officials and brokers of each of these domains communicate that the world is ours to enjoy cheaply, instantaneously, conveniently, easily, and on demand. A mediated culture creates in people the very desires we now know to be destroying the earth, resulting in consumption practices that require deforestation, strip mining, species loss, catastrophic climate change, soil erosion, and toxic build-up in our landfills and waters. Our culture teaches us to grasp rather than offer. Consumerism and priestly life, we could say, stand on opposing ends of a spectrum on ways to relate to the world.

Insofar as we live in a “mediated” culture, a culture that clearly depends on massive, often wasteful and destructive, possession and consumption, it is unlikely that something like a priestly attitude or sensibility will take hold. This is why a priestly understanding of humanity will need to pay careful attention to the role of spiritual formation. In particular, priestly functions can best take root within a communal context. Communal direction and support will need to play an important role in a viable priesthood of the future. People need the help of each other to recognize and correct the self-obsessions of mediated culture. Without this correction it will be very difficult to cherish the world’s integrity, sanctity, and giftedness, and then move into a position to offer and share it with

others. To recognize that life and creation are gifts presupposes that one no longer sees the world in terms of personal satisfaction and ambition. Instead one sees the world as a place to be cherished, cared for, shared, and celebrated.

Asceticism

A priestly conception will entail a recovery of asceticism. Asceticism often has been characterized as body- and world-denying, and so would seem to be of little value to an ecological concern that cherishes the world enough to want to offer it. From the point of view that I develop, this characterization is a mistake. Far from being a denigration of embodiment and materiality, priestly asceticism works on (and tries to correct) the kinds of personal attachment that make it difficult for people to receive gratefully the gifts of the world. Think here of Thomas Merton:

We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached from ourselves in order to see and use all things in and for God . . . There is no evil in anything created by God, nor can anything of His become an obstacle to our union with Him. The obstacle is in our “self,” that is to say in the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external, egotistic will.¹⁶

Asceticism is not about denying creation but about denying the self-obsessed will that desires to control and possess others for its own benefit and enhancement. Practices like fasting, for instance, are thus practical means to teach us that life is not about us and does not revolve around personal flattery or satisfaction.

Asceticism is difficult. It is hard for us to recognize how personal anxieties, fears, and insecurities, as well as arrogant ambition, shape our thinking and behavior in multiple, often unforeseen, ways. It is even more difficult to eradicate these forces from our lives, especially when living in a consumerist

culture that succeeds by promoting them. As we move forward we should consider what can be learned from spiritual writers who understood that human passions represent a serious and constant impediment to the realization of a faithful life. In developing my brief account of asceticism I follow the outline of Dimitru Staniloae, a Romanian Orthodox theologian, who builds his own account on the inherited wisdom of writers of the early church.¹⁷

Passions and Purification

Asceticism is a path that leads through purification and into illumination and the perfection of love. Purification begins with our coming to understand how the passions operate in our lives. Passions reflect a basic thirst in us, a thirst that is good when properly directed to God, but is most often perverted and misdirected into a desire for personal and material satisfaction. The objects of this desire can be various: food, sexual gratification, personal power, physical ease, and comfort. What the passions represent is the effort to secure one's own standing at the expense of another.

It is important to underscore that food, sex, the exercise of a life, and physical blessings are not in and of themselves evil. They cannot be, because they are gifts of a good God and elements of God's creation. What happens, however, when these gifts come under the power of the passions, is that their giftedness is forgotten or denied. This is why Staniloae says, "the forgetting of God is the ultimate cause of the passions..."¹⁸ Rather than pointing to God as the source of their goodness, these material gifts become perverted by being made into possessions that serve us.

When the gifts of creation are made to serve us, it is inevitable that forms of irrationality and disorder will be let loose upon the world. According to many church writers, most notably St. Maximus the Confessor, God created the world through Christ. As made through Christ, each member of creation participates in and reflects God's eternal wisdom (*logos*), a wisdom that leads to the harmony and wholeness of life. Put in a more ecological

idiom, we could say that God creates the world by establishing and nurturing patterns of interdependence among creatures, patterns that enable habitat flourishing and resilience. Human passions, however, distort these patterns by making natural elements serve us rather than the common good of creation (a wetland, for instance, is simply drained so that a golf course can be built). The web of interdependent relationships begins to unravel because creatures no longer achieve their divinely desired end, which is for them to flourish and multiply (Genesis 1). Human desire, we might say, has usurped God's desire for the world.

To move down the path of purification requires that we learn virtues like repentance, self-control, patience, hope, and humility. We need to appreciate how in our daily living we are playing at being a god, and in this playing bringing harm to each other and to the world. The point of these virtues is not to make us miserable or deny our own worth but to come to the realization of how we need to bring our living into alignment with our creaturely condition, a condition in which our service to each other is fundamental.¹⁹ To bring about this alignment, however, requires considerable restraint, because sinful desire is so driven to expand and secure the self at the expense of another. When embroiled in passionate desire, it is very difficult to receive the world as a gift, let alone commit oneself to its nurture and then sacrificial offering in acts of sharing and celebration.

Illumination

Purification leads to illumination, the stage in which we see things truly because we see them in terms of their need and dependence upon God. To "see" creatures properly we need the mind of Christ, a self-emptying or self-offering mind that serves others (Phil 2:5–11). Staniloae puts this succinctly when he notes that illumination reflects the genuine wisdom that is "the gift of seeing God simultaneously with all things or through them, as the Maker, Sustainer and effective Guide of all things."²⁰ To move into this kind of seeing means

that we have moved to take ourselves out of the line of sight and so can see more clearly the gifts of God as they are. We see them no longer through the lens of our own ambition or fear but in terms of their sanctity and grace.

Perfection in Love

Ascetic purification and illumination are perfected in the work of love, for it is love above all that establishes sympathy, harmony, wholeness, and peace. Love can do this because it presupposes the forgetting of self and a complete turning to the other so that its goodness and beauty can be understood and celebrated. Love amounts to a reversal of what might be called the “natural” attitude that puts self at the center of the world (I begin to see, for instance, that the good of creatures is better served by the restoration of a wetland than by the building of a strip mall). Instead of self, it is now the other who holds the seat of importance. In the act of loving, the other is not absorbed into me but I go out to the other so that its need can be met.²¹

We now can see, I think, how asceticism is of central significance for environmental responsibility.²² We also can see how asceticism goes to the heart of a priestly sensibility, because it addresses our grasping nature and transforms it into a posture of self-offering service and care.

Gratitude

One of the key elements of a priestly conception of human life is that it teaches us in the ways of gratitude. I stress the importance of this teaching because it is not at all apparent, especially given a mediated, consumerist context like our own, that we know what gratitude is or how we might best move into this posture. To see what is involved, we can return to the example of food and then consider the importance of “saying grace.”²³ Saying grace is not simply about uttering a few formulaic words at mealtime. It is, rather, our daily commitment

to enter into and nurture the movement of divine love that eating represents.

Saying Grace

At the heart of a grace-saying act there is the expression of thanksgiving. Though easily reducible to the quick word, “thanks,” thanksgiving is a deep and expansive gesture that has the effect of taking people beyond themselves, leading them into the rich mystery of the world. To be genuinely thankful presupposes that we have made some effort to appreciate and know what we are thankful for, having devoted considerable effort to recognizing the great diversity of gifts that intersect and feed into our living. At root, when we offer thanks for fellow creatures we acknowledge that without them we could not be, let alone thrive. We confess that our health and happiness are entirely dependent on their wellbeing and integrity, and that we have not always served them well. We demonstrate the basic knowledge that we belong to the soil, to animals, and to each other, and then see in our belonging a need for humility, responsibility, and celebration. Grateful people understand that they cannot be thankful for others if they are at the same time knowingly engaged in their destruction.

To say grace, to speak our gratitude to God before others, means that speaking is one of our primary means for bearing witness to the world as the gift of God. Through speech we are invited to take up a hospitable relation to the world, a relation in which we respond to the sanctity of God’s world by carrying that world in our mouths not only as food consumed but as a praise expressed. When we speak well and with a desire for precision and honesty, what we say clarifies and honors the world that inspires us to speak in the first place. Speech opens a space in which the world can be received, carried, and offered to others and to God. When we appreciate that God’s speaking of the world into existence was a hospitable act that made room for creatures to be, then it follows that human speech reaches its pinnacle when it participates in this hospitality by giving thanks for the gifts of others and

by giving praise to the One who calls forth life and speech.²⁴

To carry the world responsibly within one's speech is a difficult and exacting task, because it presupposes that one has been faithful and just to the world one attempts to carry, i.e., that we have been true to the reality and integrity of others because we have not reduced them to the scope of our anxiety or ambition. It is also a very practical task, because being truly grateful for another also commits oneself to his or her flourishing and good. It would be unfaithful, for instance, to misrepresent others in one's speech, or to give voice to them in such a way that they or others would not recognize themselves there. The key is to work so that we do not deflect or get in the way of listeners catching a glimpse of the integrity of those we present in our speaking. The key is not to live in such a way that our desires deny the ability of others to be themselves.

The Practice of Silence

One way to move into gratitude would be to follow the practice of the Shakers who, before commencing to eat, paused in silence to reflect on what they were about to eat and what they were about to do by eating it. This practice is valuable because it calms and focuses the minds of people who are normally preoccupied with matters other than food. One of the great obstacles to knowing the world with depth and insight is the anxiety or arrogance within the mind that clouds and distorts whatever it comes into contact with. By becoming silent, minds can be opened up and made attentive to the world. In this silence the possibility exists that food and eating will emerge as utterly fundamental and worthy of our consideration and blessing. Before the world can enter in and be carried by speech, we must first be stilled so that the presence and voices of others (their need, potential, and integrity) can be felt and heard.

We now can see that when we offer thanks for food, what we are really trying to do is remember and attend to, as best we can, the many memberships that constitute and fortify our lives, and note

that these memberships have their life as a grace received. We remember so we can pledge ourselves to the celebration, maintenance, and nurture of the creatures and processes that nourish us. When we remember truly we also commit ourselves to the re-membering or healing of organisms and communities that have been dis-membered by our greed and carelessness. We seek the health of wholeness and interdependence that comes from diverse creatures living in dynamic and vital relationships with each other. Thanksgiving thus becomes a political act that unites us in solidarity with creation. It confirms our status as creatures among others, always dependent and, given our unique capacities, answerable to others concerning how well or justly we fit in.

A Priestly Sensibility

Sacrificial self-offering, asceticism, and gratitude are three essential elements of a priestly sensibility. My claim in this essay has been that as we move into a priestly sensibility we will be empowered to live more honestly and humbly within God's creation. We will see more clearly that creation is a costly gift that calls us to respond with acts of self-offering love and care. We will see how sinful passions currently are distorting our relationship to the world and contributing to the destruction of creation. And we will see that genuine thanksgiving leads to the healing of the world and makes possible the celebration of God's gifts.

Life is a miraculous, inexplicable gift. It exceeds all economies of exchange. As priests we stand within it, beggar-like, unable to fully or properly receive it, because whatever we would claim or take already exceeds our longing and comprehension. The best that we can do is make our lives into an offering to others, not for purposes of repayment (how could we ever know what sufficient payment would be?) but as the effort to overcome the sinful pride and aggression that otherwise distort or bring life to a halt. In this self-offering we often do not know what we are doing. Nor can we predict or control what the offering will accomplish. What we

can do is open ourselves to the many dramas of life going on around us, trusting that our offerings will enrich the multiple memberships of which we are only one part.

Endnotes

1. For a helpful set of descriptions of “stewardship” as an organizing model for environmental theology, as well as criticisms of it, see R. J. Berry, ed., *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives—Past and Present* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

2. The Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas has given a powerful statement of the priestly role in a set of lectures originally entitled “Preserving God’s Creation” (reprinted together as “Priest of Creation” in Berry, *Environmental Stewardship*, 273–290). In this essay I offer an interpretation of priestly life that builds upon Zizioulas’s work.

3. In the essay “God Does Not Demand Blood” (*The Christian Century Magazine*, February 10, 2009), Daniel Bell gives an accessible account of precisely this view.

4. In *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1983), Walter Burkert develops a theory of sacrifice around the theme of human violence. See also the discussion edited by Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) and Nancy Jay’s *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

5. I develop this issue in *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

6. “Animal sacrifice appears to be, universally, the ritual killing of a domesticated animal by agrarian or pastoralist societies” (see Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Domestication of Sacrifice” in *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Carter [New York: Continuum, 2003], 332).

7. In an agrarian context personal identity is not defined individually. Daily work with animals and in fields means that who one is is inseparable from the relationships that make personal life possible. The autonomous and self-standing “self,” as moderns came to describe it, makes little sense in an agrarian world, because personal life is saturated with the life of the creatures and community that comprise one’s neighborhood.

8. E. E. Evans-Pritchard observes that among Vedic, Hebrew, and Muslim rites, what one consecrates and sacrifices is not simply the victim but “always oneself, and this is sometimes symbolically represented, by laying of hands on victims” (see “The Meaning of Sacrifice among the Nuer,” in Carter, *Understanding Religious Sacrifice*, 201).

9. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 17.

10. Jonathan Klawans has argued that because Jewish sacrifice presupposed the analogy “as God is to Israel, so is Israel to its flocks and herds,” that sacrifice acted as an imperative to improve the care of the animals. “The sacrificial animal must be birthed, protected, fed, and guided—all things that Israel wished for themselves from their God. The meaning of sacrifice, therefore, derives not primarily from what the animals offered Israel, but rather from what Israel provided its domesticated animals, which parallels the care that they wished their God to provide for them” (see “Sacrifice in Ancient Israel: Pure Bodies, Domesticated Animals, and

the Divine Shepherd,” in *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, eds. Paul Waldau and Kimberly Patton [New York: Columbia University Press, 2006], 74).

11. This realization may help us understand why Noah was instructed not to consume the blood of animal flesh (Gen 9:4). To eat or drink the blood, understood by the biblical writer to be the medium of life, is to presume to take and possess (and thereby also control) life itself, and thus no longer to receive it as a gift.

12. The philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien helps us see that this lack of comprehension goes to the heart of humanity. To be in a relation with another, particularly a nurturing relation, requires us to acknowledge “the excess of a human being over himself, an excess of what one is and can be over what one can think and comprehend” (see “Retrospection,” in *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl [New York: Fordham University Press, 2002], 119). Our falling short, however, is neither a “contingent deficit nor a regrettable imperfection.” “It is the very event of a wound by which our existence is altered and opened, and becomes itself the site of the manifestation of what it responds [and relates] to” (122). I would add that the event of a wound is also, in certain respects, an event of blessing.

13. Guy G. Strouma in *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformation in Late Antiquity* (trans. Susan Emanuel [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009]), paraphrases Sallustius, the fourth-century friend of the Emperor Julian and author of *Concerning the Gods and the Universe*, a late treatise defending the practice of sacrifice, to say: “Blood sacrifices represent our own lives, which we are symbolically offering. And prayers detached from sacrifice are worth nothing, because they are nothing but words, whereas if pronounced during sacrifices, they become animated words, *empsychoi logoi*” (62).

14. Jan van Baal, “Offering, Sacrifice and Gift,” in Carter, *Understanding Religious Sacrifice*, 290–291.

15. Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 266.

16. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

17. Dimitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*, trans. Otilia Kloos (South Canaan, Pa.: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2003).

18. *Ibid.*, 81.

19. I have developed this position in “The Touch of Humility: An Invitation to Creatureliness,” in *Modern Theology* 24:2 (2008), 225–244.

20. Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 198.

21. *Ibid.*, 312.

22. Anestis Keselopoulos argues similarly when he writes: “Especially for the present age of incalculable exploitation and violation of the environment, the ascetic and non-consumerist ethos promoted by the Fathers is particularly salutary, since it shows man the way to restrict his greedy appetites towards creation in order to be connected with it in a more real and harmonious way, as God created him to be” (see *Man and the Environment: A Study of St. Symeon the New Theologian*, trans. Elizabeth Theokritoff [Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001], 182).

23. I have developed this theme in *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*.

24. Jean-Louis Chrétien summarizes these themes elegantly when he writes: “In its essence, the speech of praise is a hospitable speech, since it first had a hospitable gaze: it gives voice within itself to the polyphony of the world. Far from surveying what it sings from a remote height, it allows itself to be moved, affected by it. Human speech alone forms the link in which the praise of God for his creatures and the praise of God by his creatures meld together into one single hymn” (see *The Ark of Speech* [London: Routledge, 2004], 139).