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“THE SWEETNESS OF NOTHINGNESS”.
POVERTY AND THE THEOLOGY OF CREATION IN BONAVENTURE,
ANGELA OF FOLIGNO, AND MEISTER ECKHART¹

Abstract

*Although mendicant poverty has been critiqued both practically and theologically in recent years, it captures an insight into ontological reality as contingent beings that Francis of Assisi aimed to capture in his *Canticle of the Creatures*, and one that should be explored more deeply. Through a reading of the Franciscans Bonaventure and Angela of Foligno and the Dominican Meister Eckhart, this essay explores the evocative power of radical poverty as a spiritual practice and theological symbol. Indeed, I will argue that the theological significance of the “symbol” of poverty emerges properly only through the embodied practice of evangelical poverty itself. In this light, the theoretical critiques of poverty remain just and only that – anemic theoretical dismissals without a lived sense of practice. If Paul Ricoeur has rightly argued that “the symbol gives rise to thought,” we might add, in this case, practice gives rise to symbol.*

Mendicant poverty is doing rather poorly in scholarship of theology and religious studies over the last decade or so. Kenneth Baxter Wolf’s *The Poverty of Riches* (2003)² questioned whether the voluntary poverty of St. Francis of Assisi had perhaps the counter-intuitive effect of distracting attention from the involuntarily poor. Francis, the icon of self-emptying humility, emerges in Wolf’s treatment as a particularly destructive instance of the privileged class’s well-meaning penchant for “slumming.” Around the same time, John Milbank began to critique the elements of the Franciscan movement that together gave birth intellectually, culturally, and politically to an unhappy “Franciscan modernity,” the legacy of which we still seek to escape³. More recently, Milbank and French philosopher Olivier Boulnois have contributed articles to an issue of *Communio* dedicated to “Poverty and Kenosis” that lay much responsibility for our modern state of affairs –

¹ A very early version of this essay was presented at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting in Montreal, November 2009 and taken up anew in April 2016 in an invited lecture at Boston College. I am grateful to Mark McIntosh, Boyd Taylor Coolman, Willemien Otten, Sarah Coakley, Denys Turner, and Brian Robinette for their helpful comments and conversations. This essay is far better for the input I received. Any errors, as we say, remain my own.

² K. Baxter Wolf, *The Poverty of Riches: Saint Francis of Assisi Reconsidered*, New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2003.

³ J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed., Malden MA: Blackwell, 2005; Id., *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People*, Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014.

philosophical, theological, and political – at the feet of Francis and his followers⁴. For Boulnois, the ‘absolute novelty of Franciscan poverty’ causes a ‘true fracture’ in intellectual history, and the aftershocks of this rupture are at the root of “the whole modern reflection on politics.”⁵ Francis could never have imagined that casting off his clothes in the public square could have such catastrophic effects.

The case against Franciscan poverty usually lands most squarely upon the friars’ focus upon freedom of the will as a central attribute of both divine and human action⁶. By turn and by turn, the antinomianism of Francis’s intentional refusal of ownership of any property or money for his community seemed, on this account, to yield a nominalist vision of God as absolute freedom that tends to sever God’s rational relation to the created order and a parallel vision of the human as willing being that generates the modern discourse of rights and property. To develop this argument in greater depth and to respond to it directly is not my intent today. I can only say that I note that most of the critiques of Boulnois and Milbank are contingent upon arguments that develop in defense of the canonical status of poverty⁷, and my instinct is to query whether the shift of the locus of reflection to the sphere of canonical, legal justifications of this or that practice had already changed the terms of argument in such a way that neither side can win⁸. My intent in this essay, then, is not at all to answer or refute these charges, but instead to tell a complementary story that may bring some theological and spiritual ballast to the argument. If the cases made by Boulnois and others tend to rest upon the results of polemical exchanges over canon law and institutional status, I hope to shed light on a different and specifically theological legacy of mendicant poverty, one that stays more closely attuned to theological reflection on the practice of apostolic poverty in the mendicant life and less focused upon the canonical and juridical battles over the legitimacy of the mendicant orders. Apostolic poverty – as a spiritual practice engaged and experienced within the mendicant movement – provides rich soil for fundamental reflection on the paradox of fullness and emptiness in the doctrine of creation, wherein the metaphysical mendicancy of the creature itself becomes the opening up of its intimate union with the abyss of divine mystery. Only when we take account of this *mystical theological legacy* of apostolic poverty can we properly assess and balance the institutional squabbles that framed and followed its practice. Apostolic poverty should

⁴ O. Boulnois, “Most High Poverty: The Challenge of the Franciscan Experiment,” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 52 (3/2015): 448-465. John Milbank, “The Franciscan Conundrum,” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 52 (3/2015): 466-492.

⁵ O. Boulnois, “Most High Poverty,” 464.

⁶ O. Boulnois, “Most High Poverty,” 453. Milbank, “Franciscan Conundrum,” 481.

⁷ In fairness, Milbank also expresses fundamental concern about the Franciscan piety of *imitatio Christi*, fearing that this model of literal imitation tends to constrict the options of Christian discipleship, “in danger of obscuring the sense that the following of Christ must always be analogical and nonidentical, precisely because we are all unique individuals.” J. Milbank, “The Franciscan Conundrum,” 472. This, too, would require a slightly different argument, although I think the fruits of this study, highlighting the paradoxical relationship between creaturely nothingness and divine kenosis, may cast doubt on Milbank’s claim that Franciscan *imitatio* constrains the “nonidentical following.” But that must be left to a different argument.

⁸ Indeed, Boulnois is careful to argue that the origins of modern political theology is the offspring both of Franciscan theorists *and their opponents*. See O. Boulnois, “Most High Poverty,” 464.

“be known by its fruits,” even as it is known by the “agricultural regulations” that spring up around it.

In a nutshell, my argument is this: that for Bonaventure, and more clearly in Angela of Foligno and Meister Eckhart (and perhaps for other mendicant mystical authors like Jacopone da Todi), the figure of poverty *begins* as a name for the awareness one has of one’s own sin and “mendicant” need for grace. It then becomes a Christological image of the self-emptying and self-dispossessive work of Christ in the Incarnation. Only then does it become a figure for one’s radical creaturely contingency, and it is *this* kind of poverty, thus christologically transposed, that opens up into other related apophatic images: for Bonaventure, it is the embrace of the naked poverty of the Crucified in the *transitus*, and for later mendicant thinkers, of annihilation and the abyss of the soul. Precisely in and through one’s growing awareness of the poverty of one’s own being as creature, one is drawn into the fathomless abyss of the soul as it dwells in God, and thus into the fathomless abyss of God, where deep speaks unto deep.

1. “*Let us die, then...*” Poverty, Contemplation, and Negation in Bonaventure

When I began to work on this essay several years ago, I was also in the middle of some historical work on Bonaventure’s defense of mendicancy in the disputes in the University of Paris in the 1250s, 60s, and 70s. As I began to unfold this historical narrative, the theologian in me developed a hunch. The hunch is this: The deep sources funding Bonaventure’s trenchant and vigorous defense of evangelical poverty against its secular adversaries was not just a sense of institutional legitimacy and communal pride in the Friars Minor (although that was a factor), and not only a deep-seated Franciscan apocalyptic conviction that evangelical poverty marked the Joachimist “spiritual men of the last age” (although that, too, was present). Rather, the deep structure of Bonaventure’s defense of mendicancy was really a deeply theological, Christological, and mystical sense, that poverty was central not just to the evangelical mission of his order or to their historical connection to Francis’s own practice.

Even more, for Bonaventure, evangelical poverty was a kind of performative metaphor, a practice or discipline or performance, or perhaps even “itinerary,” (if we want to be *very* Bonaventurian) of transformation and divine union. For Bonaventure, the fallen human condition is weak and stripped of its proper goods, “endlessly asking and begging.” “The sinful person is similar to the dust which the wind drives from the face of the earth... this is why it seeks our and move on from innumerable places as it begs for support.”⁹ The condition of sin is a condition of itinerant mendicancy, and poverty’s first figure is this: the poverty of sin.

With what seems like irony, Bonaventure proposes that this poverty of sin is remedied by... poverty, but here the kenotic, self-emptying poverty of Christ, who “was in the form of God but did not deem equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself” (*Phil.* 2). Christ, the Incarnate Word, was poor in his birth, poor in his life, and poor in his death. “The cross of Christ is the sign of poverty because on it he was

⁹ Bonaventure, *Commentaria in quattuor libros sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, II, Prologus.

reduced to the utmost poverty, not having had even an old rag with which to cover his nakedness.”¹⁰ The exterior poverty of Christ, naked in the manger and naked on the Cross, is the visible sign and exemplification of his interior poverty, the self-emptying self-dispossession of the Divine Word to become one with us in our poverty of sin and death. The poverty of Christ is “the cause of our opulence,” because it “makes and renders humans fit for heaven.”¹¹

In response to the poverty of Christ, human persons are invited to embrace poverty, now as a virtue: all Christians are called to an interior poverty, a “nakedness of heart” that disposes one rightly to God¹². This “nakedness of heart” is an interior detachment from any goods that might distort one’s desire and elevate any creature above God in our affection¹³. The apostolic poverty of the mendicants is a calling to perfection for a few, then, but their perfection is the both the exemplification and the exterior sign of an interior disposition that should be shared by all the faithful. It is the bringing-into-conformity of the exterior and the interior, in a reciprocal relationship, with each supporting and reinforcing the other. It is in this way that it represents a dimension of evangelical perfection – indeed, for Bonaventure, it is the high-point of evangelical perfection.”¹⁴ But it is so only if it conduces to a full poverty of spirit, interior and exterior. At the end of his life, in his last lectures to his Franciscan confreres, Bonaventure laments the failures of his own community to keep to their founder’s model: “Contemplation cannot occur except in the greatest simplicity; and the greatest simplicity cannot exist except in the greatest poverty. And this is proper to our order: The intention of blessed Francis was to live in the greatest poverty... But we have fallen away from our *status*, so God permitted us to be afflicted” (*Collationes in Hexaemeron*, XX.30). Poverty here is not simply a metaphor, but a vocation and a practice that disposes one to contemplation¹⁵. The signal figure for this contemplation in Bonaventure is the embrace of the Crucified in the *Itinerarium*. This ultimate *transitus*, the ‘crossing over’ into “mystical death,” begins with “relinquishing all intellectual activities.” While this “relinquishing” is often read as some sort of preference for “will” over “intellect” or “love” over “knowledge,” I think here, reading rhetorically within the structure of the argument, it is less a preference of one good activity over another and more a final, culminating reduction into the poverty of mystical death – the cessation of

¹⁰ Bonaventure, *Evening Sermon on St. Francis, 1262*, in R. Armstrong-J.A. Wayne Hellmann-W. Short (eds.), *Such is the Power of Love: Francis of Assisi as Seen by Bonaventure*, Hyde Park NY: New City Press, 2007, 240.

¹¹ Bonaventure, *Sermones Selecti de Rebus Theologicis*, Sermon 2, in *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, 10 volumes, Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1882-1902, v. V, 545.

¹² Poverty is a “*nuditas cordis per exspolationem spiritus ab omni perverso affectu avaritiae et cupiditatis.*” Bonaventure, *Apologia pauperum*, in *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, v. VIII, 279b.

¹³ Bonaventure, *Sermones dominicales*, 4 Pent, serm. 1, in *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, v. IX, 373a.

¹⁴ Bonaventure, *Quaestiones de perfectione evangelica*, q. 2 art. 1, concl., in *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, v. V, 130b.

¹⁵ And note here that, for Bonaventure, the goal of poverty is not the “imitation of Christ” in a restrictive mimesis, but the preparation of the heart, mind, and body for contemplation. This *contra* Milbank, who seems to overdetermine the *imitatio* theme and then blame the Franciscans for the overdetermination.

all activity, and of anything that might be claimed as one's own. "Little or nothing should be attributed to the creature and everything to the Creator of essence, the Father and Son and Holy Spirit."¹⁶ Like Francis, stripped naked and laid on the dust of the earth, the soul is invited to be stripped of all goods. "Let us die, then," says Bonaventure at the very end, "and enter into this darkness." In this last figure of mystical death, we see a glimpse of a kind of poverty as the *annihilation of the soul*, but it is only a glimpse and not fully developed. Nevertheless, we can detect the trajectory of insight, as it were, from the poverty of sin to the poverty of Christ to the poverty (or impoverishment) of the soul in union with God. This trajectory becomes more evident and more explicit in later vernacular mendicant thought, and it's to Angela of Foligno and Meister Eckhart that I now turn for deeper exploration.

2. Poverty and Annihilation in Angela of Foligno

As many will know, Saint Angela of Foligno is a younger contemporary of Bonaventure, born in 1248 and dying in 1309. She was a married laywoman who emerged as a significant and controversial figure among Umbrian devotees of Francis of Assisi, both clerical and lay, after a dramatic (and rather hysterical) visionary experience in the Basilica of St. Francis in 1285. Her account of her own experience attracted the attention of a Franciscan we know only as "Brother A.," and together, they set out to record Angela's experience and teachings about union with God in her *Memorial*. To this text, later writers added a collection of *Instructions*, and together these texts form the "Book of Blessed Angela." A summary of all the twists and turns of Angela's mystical itinerary is beyond the scope of what I can do here, but suffice it to say that the text is teeming with "steps" and "supplementary steps," and it seems to meander, to double back, so many times that it's difficult to get anything like a clear path through it. And yet Angela's discussion of union with God is itself so compelling for many readers that Bernard McGinn does not hesitate to find in her book "one of the richest accounts of mystical union presented in autohagiographical form in Christian history" and to name her "one of the four 'female evangelists' of the thirteenth-century mysticism."¹⁷

Angela's exploration of poverty begins from the very outset of her *Memorial*. She summarizes twenty degrees of purification and illumination, the substance of which is the stripping away of her possessions and the exposure of her sinful self, along with a deepening identification with the Crucified. "In the ninth step, it was given to me to seek the way of the cross, that I might stand at the foot of the cross where all sinners find refuge... I was inspired with the thought that if I wanted to go to the cross, I would need to strip myself in order to be lighter and go naked to it. This would entail forgiving all who had offended me, stripping myself of everything worldly, of all attachments to men and women... and likewise, of my possessions and even my very self." Similarly, in the twelfth step, she confesses that "I ardently desired to become poor," although "I was

¹⁶ Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, VII.4.

¹⁷ B. McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200-1350*, New York NY: Crossroad, 1998, 145 and 141.

also assailed by numerous contrary temptations.”¹⁸ Angela in these early phases begins to grow into a literal observance of poverty, and when she begins to be able to be poor, she “enclosed herself within the passion of Christ”¹⁹ and begins to experience deep divine consolation.

After the twentieth step, Brother A. her scribe confesses he lost track of how to distinguish between all of Angela’s steps and distinctions, so he tried to organize them into what we’ve come to call seven ‘supplementary steps.’ Much of these are a rather haphazard assortment of experiences, divine locutions, teachings on love of God and love of neighbor, etc. However, in the fifth supplementary step, which, Brother A. tells us, is the beginning of the revelation of Angela’s union with God, we find a deep Christological treatment of poverty:

“Once I was meditating of the poverty of the Son of God incarnate. I saw his poverty... and I saw those for whom he had made himself poor... I saw him poor of friends and relatives. I even saw him poor of himself and so poor that he seemed powerless to help himself. It is sometimes said that the divine power was then hidden out of humility. But even if this has been said, I say that God’s power was not hidden then, because he himself taught me otherwise.”²⁰

Angela gives tantalizingly few details of what she might mean, but the implication seems to be deeply Pauline. The *kenosis* of the Word become flesh, then, is not by any means the self-limiting of God’s power but, to the contrary, its manifestation, made perfect in human weakness²¹. Having herself been stripped of the usual conventions of worldly power, and, even more, of the usual conventions of worldly *dependence*, Angela recognizes in Christ a poverty that is at one and the same time the depths of divine condescension and the beauty of a human nature fully receptive to divine touch.

This Christological transposition of poverty immediately precedes a new dimension of Angela’s reflection on poverty in this stage of union with God, where for the first time, I think, it is explicitly connected to one’s nature as creature: “Pride can exist only in those who believe that they possess something. The fallen angel and the first man became proud and fell only because they imagined and believed that they possessed something. For neither angel nor man nor anything else has being; only one has it, God”²². This makes poverty for Angela “the root and mother of humility and every good,” precisely insofar as it allows one to understand one’s created nature rightly, as the recipient of the gift of existence, never properly one’s own. This is the pivotal insight in Angela’s understanding of poverty: Poverty “makes a person first see one’s own defects, then

¹⁸ Angela of Foligno, *The Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno*, Part I: *Memorial*, I.1. In Angela of Foligno, *Complete Works*, ed. and trans. P. LaChance, OFM, Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1993, 127. Since this is the only really accessible edition of the work, I will cite from here on by page number.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 130.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 179.

²¹ See S. Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender*, Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, Ch. 1, “Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing:” 3-39, for a useful typology of various “kenoticisms” in ancient and modern theology. Coakley’s own use of contemplation and vulnerability as interpretive keys to *kenosis* seems to me right and very much in keeping with Angela’s own conclusions.

²² Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*, 195.

discover one's own poverty and how truly one is poor in being." Poverty, then, is the figure for one's sheer and utter created contingency – poor in being, with no proper possessions. Simultaneously, Angela tells us, one comes to recognize the goodness of God. "Then all doubt concerning God is immediately taken away, and one loves God totally."²³ Faced with the plain fact of one's own poverty of being, one's near-non-existence, one cannot help but believe in and love the God who sustains that nearly nonexistent one in being.

Thus far, so good. We have a rather predictable, although perhaps existentially vivid, account of "the distinction" between Creator and creature, and there seems nothing particularly mystical or apophatic about this insight. In other words, we see thus far the figure of poverty as a form of negation, but not yet a "self-subverting" or dialectical metaphor, in Turner's terms. But then Angela's fifth supplementary step is followed by a sixth and seventh. In the sixth step, Angela experiences the undoing of all her "experiences of God," what we might call an "inexperience of God," in Michael Purcell's term²⁴. This deep poverty is such that "I am completely closed off from God in such a way that I cannot recall God's presence, have any memory of him, or even be aware that he is the one who allowed this to happen."²⁵ This great "unsaying" of her experience of God in early stages, the end of her locutions and visions, is, I would suggest, a deepening dialectical awareness of God as the Creator, the one who is no actor upon the stage of creation but instead its hidden source and wellspring. Coincident with this deepening insight is a still-deeper awareness of her own soul as an "unfathomable abyss, which no saint, angel or creature has anywhere near the capacity to understand."²⁶ The soul, stripped bare of any pretense of autonomy or ownership or independence, stripped out of all other modes of dependence (social, cultural, mortal), stripped down to near-nonexistence, is thereby paradoxically opened up, or opened out, onto its own infinite abyss. "My soul could not comprehend itself." Instead, she finds herself "in the midst of the Trinity," where no words can be spoken.²⁷

So the shifting semiotics of poverty in Angela may allow us to see more clearly the paradox of creation: We are created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, presumably into something. That human something, broken by sin, begins to believe that it owns something of its own, perhaps first of all owns itself. Sin is rooted in the illusion of self-possession or self-ownership, and so it is betrayal, the misperception, of the doctrine of creation. Creatures claim wealth or authority or even 'being' as their own and thus fall into sin. The disciplines of poverty are first introduced as the remedial stripping-away of sin. This moral *aphareisis* or "stripping away" is then allied to a deeper identification with the Crucified. However, as this perception of and identification with the Crucified deepens, the figure of poverty is transposed, first into an image of the self-emptying of the Word into flesh, and then into a figure of the soul's own radical contingency. The recognition of this radical contingency, then, summons an echoing human self-emptying or self-

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ M. Purcell, "When God Hides His Face: On the Inexperience of God," in *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response*, New York NY: Fordham University Press, 2005: 113-130.

²⁵ Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*, 200.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 211.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 204, 211.

donation, which paradoxically deepens rather than diminishes the soul. So, for Angela, it is in the deep embrace of our radical contingency and metaphysical poverty as creatures that we find ourselves in the midst of the Trinity, the divine mystery of complete but undiminished self-gift, and are thereby opened up into our own unfathomable abyss. Angela's richly Franciscan theology of mystical union thus discloses the paradox of creation in a striking way – that our poverty as creatures “lacking in being” is itself the locus of discovery of our own apophatic depths in divine union.

3. *Meister Eckhart and Poverty of Spirit*

My exposition of Angela of Foligno strikes some chords of resonance with another great mendicant mystic, from that other community of friars, the Dominican Meister Eckhart. Eckhart is likely more familiar to most of us than Angela, so in the interests of time, I won't bother to introduce him to us, and my treatment of Eckhart will be somewhat briefer. Suffice to say, although Eckhart and Angela are roughly contemporaries, they are not usually considered in the same frame of reference, since Angela's exuberant and somewhat chaotic self-referential and self-negating piety seems so alien to Eckhart's own personal reserve. Nonetheless, Eckhart's famous treatment of “poverty of spirit” in German sermon 52 hits many of the themes hinted at by Bonaventure and addressed by Angela, and so puts them in some relief²⁸.

After dismissing what he takes to be somewhat superficial notions of “poverty of spirit,” wherein the soul desires only what God desires, Eckhart advances his own definition. “The poor person is someone who desires nothing, knows nothing, and possesses nothing.” “As long as it is someone's will to carry out the most precious will of God, such a person does not have that poverty of which we speak. For this person still has a will with which they wish to please God, and this is not true poverty.” True poverty, for Eckhart, is the stripping away, not simply of my own objects of my will, but of my entire will itself. Thus far, Eckhart is much in line with Angela. But Eckhart makes explicit that this kind of poverty is a kind of giving up of one's creaturely will itself: “If we have true poverty, then we must be so free of our own created will as we were before we were created. I tell you by the eternal truth that as long as you have the will to perform God's will, and a desire for eternity and for God, you are not yet poor. They alone are poor who will nothing and desire nothing”²⁹. Eckhart thus radicalizes the figure of poverty even further than Angela; poverty here means not the bare creatureliness of the creature, but the loss even of that creatureliness, a kind of unsaying of one's creation itself: “When I flowed forth from God, all things said: God is. But this cannot make me blessed, for I know myself as creature in this. But in the breakthrough, where I am free of my own will and of God's will and of all his works and am free of God himself, there I am above all creatures and am neither ‘God’ nor creature, but I am

²⁸ Meister Eckhart, *Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, ed. B. McGinn, Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1981, German Sermon 52, 199-208.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 204.

rather what I once was and what I shall remain now and for ever more”³⁰. On the face of it, this passage seems to signify the complete erasure of the creature, the return or “breaking-through” from creation into the uncreated. However, Eckhart here is playing, as he so often does, with tropes and words, trying to provoke rather than to explain. And what (I think) he intends to provoke is a sense that *creatureliness* finds its completion in its own emptying, in its own transparency and complete self-donation. The true poverty (of the creature) is to complete one’s creaturely form – having issued forth from God, in the great Dionysian movement of *exitus and reditus*, one gives oneself completely to the return. Again, the orienting structure of creatureliness is toward complete self-gift, complete self-emptying, echoing the rhythm of Trinitarian *perichoresis* and Christological *kenosis*, but also, in that very moment, acknowledging the radical contingency, the from-another-ness of one’s own being, such that it cannot be properly claimed or owned or held. Creatures exist to give themselves completely away, and in this is the ‘breaking through.’”

Having said this, however, I wonder if Angela’s explication of the semiotics of poverty is perhaps more useful in contemplating the apophatic dimensions of creation and its paradoxes. For in Angela, it seems that the almost-non-existence of creatures as such is the very source of their proximity to the generativity of divine life. That is, it is the poverty of their creatureliness, as still creaturely, that draws them into the fullness of divine life. Angela keeps the paradox soundly within the sphere of the doctrine of creation, while Eckhart opens the horizon of thought beyond creation itself into the ‘breaking-through’ into the virtual existence of the soul in the Godhead. Both are provocative formulations of the figure of poverty, to be sure! And, as many have noted, Eckhart is not proposing that one’s creaturely existence is something to be sloughed off, but rather is exploiting his favorite question of proper perspective, and in this homily he explores the human being insofar as it exists virtually in *esse indistinctum*. But it is Angela who, I suggest, allows us to ponder more clearly the hidden depths of the abyss of the soul precisely from within the richness of the creature’s “poverty of being.”

4. “*The Sweetness of Nothingness*”: *Concluding Thoughts*

As I said at the beginning, my intent in this paper has not been to refute the charges made by Boulnois, Milbank, and others about the legal and philosophical ramifications of Franciscan poverty. Instead, it’s been my attempt to explore some of the semiotic and theological richness which Franciscan and other mendicant movements of apostolic poverty introduces to fundamental perspectives on theological anthropology and the doctrine of creation. Clearly I have done so with a particular interest in what is called “mysticism” or, perhaps better, “mystical theology,” but part of my argument, lying just beneath the surface, perhaps, has been to argue that this mystical theology, the account of God and the soul in deepest intimacy, so long treated as an exotic fringe, is the root and source of the Christian life, and so deserves larger hearing in all of our various genealogies of modernity. It may be that the canonical legacy of mendicancy is troubled

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 208.

and fraught as we enter into the later Middle Ages. Or it may not. Whatever the verdict on this account, it needs to be held in the context of a much wider theological legacy, of the generative insight of Francis, of Bonaventure, of Angela, of Eckhart... indeed, of many others... into the devastating poverty of our sin, the saving poverty of Christ, and the paradoxical union of our poor “nothingness” as creatures with the self-emptying nothingness of God.

My title, “The Sweetness of Nothingness,” is taken from Christian Bobin, the contemporary French prose-poet, whose book on Francis, *Tres Bas*, or “The Very Lowly,” explores this very paradox at its heart. It captures, maybe a little indirectly, the insight this essay is trying to highlight: That it is our very poverty, our very creaturely nothingness alone, that is the place of meeting with the God beyond all being. So I yield to let Bobin have the last word:

“God. This poor thing, God, this crackling of light within light, this murmuring of silence to silence. This is what he talks to, Francis of Assisi, when he talks to birds or to Clare, his little sister in carefreeness. He is in love. When you are in love, you talk to your love, and to that one alone. Everywhere, always. And what do you say to your love? You say that you love him, which is saying almost nothing – just the almost nothing of a smile...”³¹

³¹ C. Bobin, *The Very Lowly: A Meditation on Francis of Assisi*, Boston: New Seeds Books, 1997, 91.