



On Loving Strangers: Encountering the Mystery of God in the Face of Migrants

MIGUEL H. DÍAZ

Among my favorite stories in the Old Testament is the account of the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18:1–15). The story takes place within the ordinary setting of Abraham and Sarah’s home in Mamre, a plain considered sacred, near Hebron. Abraham and Sarah had come to this place after departing from the familiarity of their homeland. Their migration was undertaken in response to God’s initiative and a promise of divine blessing (Gen 12:1–4). In the ordinary setting of their home, Abraham and Sarah “hasten” to share life-sustaining resources with three strangers. The story takes an unexpected twist when Abraham and Sarah discover that these migrating strangers are God’s messengers. They have come into their home to announce that, in spite of Sarah’s old age, she will give birth to a son. The pregnancy of Sarah signals the survival of familial ties and the ongoing fulfillment of God’s promise of blessing. In a reversal of host-guest relations, Abraham and Sarah find themselves as guests at God’s table.

The story of the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah reflects a central biblical

Reaching out to the immigrant is, for Christians, more than an ethical duty; it partakes of the mystery of our encounter with God. To love the neighbor is to love God. To recognize God in the face of the other is to meet God sub contrario (in the opposite). To reflect on the risk-taking border crossings of human migrants offers a way to reconceive the mystery of the Trinity, of how God crosses over and welcomes us in Christ and the Spirit.

motif, namely, faith and trust in God's unexpected life-giving presence. Faith and trust in God motivate many migrants to risk undertaking perilous journeys, walking across the heat of deserts or floating across shark-infested ocean waters. The stories that migrants share exemplify the fact that beyond material motivations (for example, financial support for families, food, safe shelter, education, and work), deeply held religious convictions regarding divine care and protection of human life also inspire and guide their journeys.¹

The present essay turns to strangers and, more specifically, to migrants and their experience of migration as a source for reconceiving the mystery of God. While a number of sociopolitical and theological studies on migration have emerged in recent years, little has been done to relate migration to the mystery of God.² This essay is divided into three parts. First, I begin by discussing the theological significance of the love of God and neighbor, mainly relying on the contributions of the late Karl Rahner. Second, I critique and contextualize these preliminary reflections from the perspective of the unity of the love of God, strangers, and migrants. Finally, I offer some possibilities for re-visioning the Trinitarian mystery of God from the perspective of migrants and their experiences of migration. In so doing, I explore some contemporary Trinitarian implications of the love of God and migrants and reconceive God as the crucified God of life-giving migrations.

ON THE LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR

Human persons live on the lookout for a human word in which God's word can be heard.³ This insight provides the central building block of Karl Rahner's theological anthropology. In response to secularizing forces that sought to exile the triune mystery of God from everyday experiences, and theological efforts that would conceive the life of God as anything but an afterthought—grace conceived as a divine presence extrinsic to human nature—Rahner's theology underscores the always and everywhere offer of grace. For Rahner, human persons have been created in fundamental and radical openness to encounter God's presence. But God can only reveal what humans can perceive. The transcendental orientation that human persons have toward God can only be mediated through sensorial experiences. As spirits-in-the-world, human persons turn to history and ordinary experiences to encounter the mystery of God. Programmed to receive and encounter the life of God, they are restless until they rest in God.

The interpersonal implications of Rahner's theocentric anthropology are

¹For instance, see Jacqueline Hagan, "Faith for the Journey: Religion as a Resource for Migrants," in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) 62–75.

²See Miguel H. Diaz, "Life-Giving Migrations: Re-Visioning the Mystery of God through U.S. Hispanic Eyes," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology*. Available online at: <http://www.latinotheology.org/node?page=2> (accessed 12 May 2009).

³Stephen J. Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993) 268–269.

clearly spelled out in his theology concerning the unity of the love of God and the love of neighbor. Rahner's groundbreaking essay with that title turns to one's neighbor as the human word where God's word can be heard.⁴ Rahner argues that the authentic love of neighbor does not provide a step in the direction of the love of God but is "itself an act of this love itself."⁵ In other words, loving God means loving our neighbor (and vice versa).

What all of this means is that the encounter with one's neighbor serves as the most ordinary "word" that awakens our appetite for and enables ongoing *personal* and *human* encounters with God. The neighbor exists within God's embrace of grace; the neighbor becomes a visible sacramental sign that mediates God's invisible presence. Thus, just as Jesus reveals the Father to us, it is in the love of one's neighbor that Jesus continues to be revealed to us. Rahner writes:

If in "recent times" (and only then) one has learnt to see and love the Father whom one does not see in the man Jesus whom one does see, then the unity of the love of God and of neighbor on which we have been reflecting becomes even more radical from a Christological and eschatological point of view and thus reaches its climax; thus the man Jesus takes on and continues to have an eternal significance for our relationship to God right into the "direct" vision of God.⁶

Rahner has been rightly characterized as a mystic of everyday life.⁷ But Rahner's desire to awaken the thirst for God in ordinary human encounters welcomes new ways of understanding the love of neighbor. Rahner's own acknowledgement of the "genuine historicity of the Christian love of neighbor,"⁸ suggests the necessary contextualization that must occur if we are to make this teaching relevant in our lives today. One possible ancient and contemporary context to consider is that of migration. As I will show, Scripture contains the seeds of a more prophetic tradition that sees in the face of migrating strangers (and not simply in one's neighbors) the presence of God.

ON THE LOVE OF GOD, MIGRANTS, AND STRANGERS

According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, love offers no shortcuts; "we learn to love humanity by loving specific human beings."⁹ Sacks argues that nowhere is this love for particular human beings tested more in the Hebrew Scriptures than in the problem that arises when it comes to loving strangers. Sacks argues that what makes the Mosaic books unusual is the fact that, in spite of fears and prejudices as-

⁴Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," in *Theological Investigations*, VI, trans. Karl H. and Boniface Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 231–249.

⁵Ibid., 236.

⁶Ibid., 247.

⁷Harvey Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

⁸Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1982) 73.

⁹Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2002) 58.

sociated with strangers, the Hebrew Bible “in no fewer than thirty-six times commands the love of strangers.”¹⁰ Sacks underscores that the frequency of this command stands in stark contrast to the single time that the Hebrew Bible commands the love of neighbor (Lev 19:18). Sacks points out that in spite of the ethical difficulty that this command presents, Israel’s history of exile, characterized by an experience of slavery, otherness, and rejection, is the primary reason why Israel must respond in kindness to strangers. Sacks writes:

It [the Bible] does not assume that this is easy or instinctive. It does not derive it from reason or emotion alone, knowing that under stress, these have rarely been sufficient to counter the human tendency to *dislike the unlike* and exclude people not like us from our radius of moral concern. Instead it speaks of history: “You know what it is like to be different, because there was a time when you, too, were persecuted for being different.”¹¹

what makes the Mosaic books unusual is the fact that, in spite of fears and prejudices associated with strangers, the Hebrew Bible “in no fewer than thirty-six times commands the love of strangers”

The teaching on hospitality to strangers in the Hebrew Scriptures is closely associated with migrating peoples. For instance, Lev 19:9 specifically prescribes that when reaping the harvest of the land, the reaper should not reap to the edges of the field, nor should all of the field’s gleanings be gathered. The fields may not be left barren because the laws in Leviticus prescribe that the poor and sojourners should find in these fields life-sustaining food. The New Testament will reflect this concern for the poor and sojourners when Jesus’ disciples “pluck heads of grain” on the Sabbath. Confronted by the Pharisees with respect to the unlawfulness of the disciples’ actions on the Sabbath, Jesus answers: “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions” (Mark 2:23–26).

The special relationship that exists between strangers and migrating persons in biblical traditions provides an opportunity to revisit our Rahnerian affirmation of the unity of the love of God and neighbor. The difficulty associated with the biblical teaching that calls for the love of God in the stranger is no less real today, when we consider applying this command to migrating strangers. Yet, just as Israel was challenged to remember its historical experience of migration, it might be the case today that many in this country and throughout the world may find the ability to

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 59. Note, too, how Sacks underscores the importance of the meaning of the name of Moses’ first son, Gershom, a name that means: “there I was a stranger.”

be *com-passionate* (suffer-with) toward migrants by remembering their own family's history of migration.

It is by no means a stretch of the imagination to establish a parallel between migrants and the life of Christ. Several contemporary theologians have portrayed Jesus Christ as the migrant who engages in border-crossing activity in order to bridge human and divine life.¹² Moreover, Jesus' dangerous border crossings were a sign of his compassion with sinners, the sick, those considered unclean, and the marginalized. His various migrations calling forth laborers to work the "fields" of God's reign (Matt 9:37–38) also carry some parallels in the experience of modern-day migrants.

While simplistic and anachronistic comparisons between Jesus and contemporary migrants should be avoided, there is something about the dangerous, risk-taking, and life-giving border crossings of ancient and contemporary migrants that parallels Jesus' own human journey. If we embrace the notion that migrants are Christlike figures, human words in which God's Word can be perceived, it is possible to turn to their experience of migration as a way of reconceiving the ongoing manifestation in history of the mystery of God. A migrant's journey—a journey characterized by the communal sharing of resources, dangerous border crossings, experiences of rejection as a result of their otherness, and sometimes even death—offers an opportunity to face not only Christ among us, but as we face Christ anew, we also have the possibility of reconceiving the mystery of the triune God.

CONTEMPORARY TRINITARIAN IMPLICATIONS OF THE LOVE OF GOD AND MIGRANTS: THE CRUCIFIED GOD OF LIFE-GIVING MIGRATIONS

At the heart of the doctrine of Trinity is the notion that God shares God's own self in history for our sake and our salvation. God's self-communion in Christ and the Spirit enables human participation in and reflection of God's life. As I have argued above, migrants can be conceived as persons in whom we encounter the presence of God. Read from a Trinitarian theological perspective, the communal sharing of resources that leads to and sustains a migrant's journey, the risk-taking border crossings undertaken for the sake of life, and the life-threatening experiences (rejection as a result of their distinct otherness and, in some cases, even death) have much in common with what Christian theologians have argued relative to the mystery of God.

Trinitarian theology can be conceived as the story of God's dangerous migration through Christ and in the Spirit for the sake of sharing life-giving resources. In Christ, God engages in dangerous border crossings for the sake of bringing forth

¹²Hugo López, "El Divino Migrante," *Apuntes: Reflexiones Teológicas desde el Margen Hispano* 4/1 (1984) 14–19; Virgilio Elizondo, "Transformation of Borders: Border Separation or New Identity," in *Theology: Expanding the Borders*, ed. Maria Pilar Aquino and Roberto S. Goizueta (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998) 29–30; Peter Phan, "Migration in the Patristic Era," in Groody and Campese, *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, 58.

new life. During his earthly journey, Jesus works on behalf of the reign of God. Like migrants that often come in and out of our communities, Jesus comes into the world and returns to the Father once his life comes to an end. The death that migrants often experience, at sea and on land, and the rejection and injustices that migrants often face as a result of their status as “aliens” in new lands offer a powerful reminder of God’s own death and rejected status (Acts 4:11). We encounter God, as Martin Luther reminds us, in the cross.¹³ In the death and rejection of migrants, we continue to encounter the hidden face of God. An encounter with the hiddenness of God today comes about in the suffering and trials of life-seeking migrants. In the experience of migrants perishing at sea or migrants dying in the desert, we face the crucified God of life-giving migrations.

Trinitarian theology can be conceived as the story of God’s dangerous migration through Christ and in the Spirit for the sake of sharing life-giving resources

The story of the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah underscores God’s life-giving presence in strangers and, more specifically, in migrating strangers. On one level, the sharing of human resources that takes place at the home of Abraham and Sarah suggests the material goods and ethical actions that humans must embrace to sustain life. On another level, this sharing of life-sustaining resources (for example, a home, food, hospitality, and so on) highlights how the central theme of the Christian doctrine of God is God revealed in relationship with us. In this sense, the unexpected turn of events that leads Abraham and Sarah to recognize God in the presence of migrants points to the hidden way that God often offers God’s life-giving presence. Walter Kasper writes:

In God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ God is therefore—as Martin Luther puts it in his *theologia crucis*—hidden *sub contrario*, “under his opposite.” This hidden presence of God in Jesus Christ is in a manner continued in his presence in the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, especially the poor, the lowly, the sick, the persecuted, and the dying (Matt 25.31–46). Theologically, therefore, the hiddenness of God does not refer to a *Deus absolutus* who is otherworldly and distant, but to the *Deus revelatus* who is present amid the alienations of the world. In the death and resurrection of Jesus the reign of God is present under the conditions of the present aeon: God ruling in human weakness, wealth in poverty, love in abandonment, fullness in emptiness, life in death.¹⁴

God both conceals and reveals God’s own self in distinct others. Today, however, social and cultural forces stand in the way of recognizing and naming this

¹³Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation” (1518), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 52.

¹⁴Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 125.

hidden presence of God. We often marginalize strangers from our churches and communities precisely because of their distinct ways of being human (for example, Latin American, African, Hmong) or their status in society (for example, documented or undocumented). Paradoxically, whereas human differences separate us from one another and often cause communal divisions, difference constitutes the oneness of God's very life. Whereas we often "melt away" human differences and hide from one another, God welcomes difference and expresses God's own self through life-giving and distinct personal migrations.

*a human community that does not welcome others and
their otherness does not image the mystery of God*

The encounter with a distinct other lies at the heart of the mystery of God. To be sure, how we encounter otherness and distinction in God is unlike our human encounters with difference. In God, we encounter difference in absolute, relational, and hypostatic ways (Father, Son, Spirit).¹⁵ In human beings, we encounter manifold and relative expressions of difference, including our cultural ways and socialized patterns of behavior. Still, there is something about crossing over and welcoming others (especially marginalized others) that mirrors how God crosses over and welcomes us in Jesus Christ. A human community that does not welcome others and their otherness—a human community that rejects and shuns identifying with the suffering of migrating strangers—does not image the mystery of God.

The divine migration in history that occurs through Jesus Christ and the Spirit manifests God's mystery. Through God's life-giving migrations (missions), God's diverse life is present to us in a new way. Christian theologians have for long held that the sending of Christ and the Spirit into history represents a new way, a "change" with respect to God's triune life.¹⁶ Like migrants among us who are sent through the generosity of family members and live among us in distinct but inter-related human experiences (social, ecclesial, cultural), the sending of Christ and the Spirit offers new possibilities to conceive God's life: In Christ and the Spirit, God exists on the border of human and divine life. In these historical and life-giving migrations, God reveals God's own self in a new way, most notably as the crucified God of life-giving migrations.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit, who will remain with the disciples forever (John 14:16–17). It is this "immigrant" presence of God that enables us to love and know God in migrating strangers. The sending of the Spirit at Pentecost offers further evidence of God's life-giving migrations. The Spirit migrates toward creation to welcome otherness and to affirm strangers as in-

¹⁵For a provocative theological study on unity and diversity see John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

¹⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 43,1 (found, for example, in vol. 7 of the Blackfriars edition [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975] 209–211).

dispensable to communal unity: “They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, ‘Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language?’” (Acts 2:7–8 NAB). Pentecost serves as a signpost of God’s life-giving presence beyond all borders.

QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

This essay has explored the unity of the love of God and the love of one’s neighbor, specifically turning to migrating strangers as persons in whom we can face the mystery of God. This attempt to moor Trinitarian faith in the experience of migrating strangers raises some questions that deserve further attention: Can we affirm that God is present among us as a migrant while simultaneously acknowledging that this *human* and *personal* encounter with God can never exhaust the ineffable mystery of God? Is it possible to affirm this presence, even while holding on to the notion that God exceeds and outstrips the capacity to receive or explain any particular human mediation of God’s self-communication in history?¹⁷ A full response to these questions lies beyond the scope of this essay. The reflections offered in this essay, however, provide starting points to approach these questions in the affirmative. As I have argued, God reveals and conceals God’s mystery in migrating others. Just as in the cross of Jesus, God was revealed *sub contrario*—that is, in an unexpected and hidden way—God continues to surprise us in the migrating strangers who enter our homes and lives.

The biblical story of the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah inspired one of the most popular icons of the Trinity. Rublev’s fifteenth-century icon depicts three heavenly angels, reclining around a common table. The angels face one another in an open circle, their heads slightly tilted toward each other. Although specific colors have been chosen to represent each of the angels, various colors are shared in common so as to bind the angels together. Their bodily posture and the space left open at the table suggest the kind of openness to others that should characterize Christian communities. Embracing such openness is not merely a matter of ethical responsibility but is a practice that carries profound theological significance. As Rabbi Sacks points out, “It is in ‘the one-who-is-different’ that we meet God.”¹⁸

At a personal level, the story of Abraham and Sarah reminds me of my own story of exile and journey unto foreign lands. I still remember the day my family left Havana and the prayers I offered for safe journey before boarding the plane bound to Madrid. In the months and years that followed our departure from Cuba and in the midst of sadness over relatives and the familiar land that we had left behind, my family was fortunate to count on a number of “Abrahams” and “Sarahs,” who, through their generous sharing of material and spiritual resources, were mediators of the com-passion of God.

¹⁷See Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 217.

¹⁸Sacks, *Dignity of Difference*, 59.

The twenty-first century has been described as the age of migration. It is estimated that one out of every thirty-five persons who live on earth is a migrant.¹⁹ As new migrants enter our midst, perhaps we might be graced with the courage to receive these new neighbors as if they were Christ come among us. The commandment that we hear proclaimed in the Letter to the Hebrews is no less relevant today than it was with respect to our ancestors in the faith: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb 13:2). ⊕

MIGUEL H. DÍAZ is professor of systematic theology at the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University in Minnesota. As this issue went to press, President Barack Obama announced his nomination of Miguel Díaz to be United States Ambassador to the Vatican.

¹⁹See Robert Schreier, “Migrants and the Ministry of Reconciliation,” in Groody and Campese, *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey*, 107.