



THE TELEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF MEANING

in Catholic Theology



L A I L A R E C K S T A D T

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I. Introduction

WITHIN THE METAPHYSICAL and theological architecture of Catholic doctrine, existence is not presented as a matter of personal interpretation or preference, nor is it fulfilled through worldly success.

The person is *ordinatus ad Deum* (ordered toward God), so fulfilment is fixed in relation to the final end (Aquinas, 1947, *ST* I–II, q.1, a.8). The person is *imago Dei*, made in the image of God, meaning constituted by rational and volitional capacities that are structured for alignment with divine order. This is not merely descriptive but normative: the will is to conform to the end for which it is made.

From this, a clear direction follows. *Caritas* is the will held in stable orientation toward that end. Vocation is the determinate form this orientation takes in a life. *Donum sui* (self-gift), as developed in the personalist theology of Pope John Paul II (John Paul II, 1979–1984), is its execution: the giving of oneself in accordance with that end. These are not separate ideas but a single structure. Meaning is sustained conformity to the end that defines existence, both in what is held to be true and in what is done.

II. Teleology, Final Causality, and the Reconfiguration of Meaning

In Thomistic theology, the will is a faculty that follows the intellect's judgment about what is good. It does not choose its own end independently, but is directed by what the intellect presents as good (Aquinas, 1947, *ST* I–II, q.1, a.6). From this it follows that rightly ordered action requires the will to be governed by judgment rather than inclination alone. Final causality provides the structure for this ordering: every act of willing must be directed toward an end (Aquinas, 1947, *ST* I–II, q.8, a.1).

Within this framework, the end is not the outcome of action but its cause in the sense that it gives the act its direction and intelligibility (*ST* I–II, q.8, a.1).

Thomas Aquinas emphasizes that the human person is ultimately ordered toward a final end that provides coherence to all subordinate choices (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q.8, a.1). This teleological structure means that actions are intelligible only insofar as they are directed toward ends.



III. Christological Paradigm: Dedication as Kenotic Self- Expenditure

Dyothelite Christological doctrine, defined at the Third Council of Constantinople (680–681 CE) (Tanner, 1990) and received within the Catholic doctrinal tradition, locates the structure of the properly ordered will most clearly in Christ. In the doctrine of kenosis (from *kenoō*, ‘to empty’), Christ’s self-emptying is understood as the complete subordination of the individual will to its proper end or set of principles (O’Collins, 2008; Tanner, 1990). This presents the will as subordinated to its proper end without remainder.

His statement, “not my will, but yours be done,” establishes this as principle, while the Cross enacts it under maximum cost (Ratzinger, 2004). The point is not suffering itself, but the absence of deviation. Action remains fixed on its end regardless of condition.

Kenosis therefore defines the structure of meaningful action. It is not occasional sacrifice, but sustained non-deviation: adherence to what is true about the end, and consistency in action in line with it, even where this conflicts with inclination or outcome.

IV. Caritas as Volitional Constancy

Caritas is a theological virtue, meaning a stable disposition of the will rather than an emotion. It is not equivalent to sentiment or affection, but an act of willing the good of another in relation to God (O’Collins, 2008). It therefore remains constant regardless of change in feeling or circumstance.

Following from this, *caritas* is defined by enduring orientation rather than emotional intensity: directed toward moral truth even when difficult.

In this sense, *caritas* expresses a single structure of commitment: sustained adherence to what is true about the good, enacted through consistent willing of that good in practice.

V. Vocation as Particularized Dedication

Within the personalist theology of Pope John Paul II, vocation denotes realization through *donum sui* (gift of self), whether matrimony, consecrated life, or secular work, each constitute a distinct state of life through which dedication is concretized in relation to others and to the normative structure of that vocation (John Paul II, 1981).

Within the Thomistic framework of Thomas Aquinas, vocation is grounded teleologically in humanity’s orientation toward *beatitudo* (ultimate union with God). Distinct states of life possess theological legitimacy insofar as they cultivate virtue (Augustine, 1995, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.3–5).

VI. The Anthropology of Self-Gift

In Augustine’s account of *uti* and *frui*, the will is organised through a hierarchical distinction between what is to be held as ultimate and what is to be engaged with in relation to that ultimate end. *Frui* designates enjoyment of the final end for its own sake, while *uti* designates the proper use of created goods in a manner ordered toward that end (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.3–5). Created goods are therefore not to be treated as ultimate in themselves, but according to their ordered participation within this structure (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.3–5; Kennedy, 2005).



Self-gift, on this view, is not self-expression but right ordering of the will. The will is properly formed when it no longer treats created goods as ultimate, but receives them as participating in a higher good.

From this follows a twofold structure of devotion. Devotion to God corresponds to *frui*, the direct orientation of the will toward the final end. Devotion to others corresponds to *uti*, the ordered engagement with created goods in a way that reflects their dependence on that end.

Meaning, then, is not single or self-contained, but structured: it consists in this dual movement of the will toward God and through rightly ordered participation in creation (Augustine, 1995, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.3–5).

VII. Objections and Theological Clarifications

Four standard objections concern freedom, pluralism, moral demand, and affect. Each rests on a conceptual misidentification and can be resolved within the teleological framework itself.

1. Freedom and Teleological Necessity

The objection that a fixed final end negates freedom conflates freedom with indeterminacy. In Thomistic anthropology, freedom consists in the rational will's capacity to adhere to the good (Aquinas, 1947, *ST* I–II, q.1, a.8). A will without an end would not be free but directionless. The orientation toward God therefore does not constrain freedom but constitutes the condition under which it is intelligible as freedom at all.

2. Pluralism and the Unity of the Final End

The appeal to pluralism assumes that diversity of perceived meanings entails a plurality of ultimate ends. This does not follow. Differences in what individuals take to be meaningful indicate variation in apprehension, not in the structure of the good itself. The claim that God is the final end is metaphysical, not dependent on consensus.

3. Moral Demand and Human Limitation

The claim that the framework imposes an excessive moral burden assumes that the teleological standard must be immediately realizable. This misrepresents its function. The final end defines orientation, not instantaneous completion. Within Catholic theology, the capacity to move toward this end is grounded in grace, which is intrinsic rather than auxiliary (Augustine, 1995, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.3–5).

4. The Status of Affect

The objection that this account suppresses emotion rests on the assumption that affect should determine moral truth. Within the classical framework, the passions are neither rejected nor authoritative but ordered. *Caritas* does not eliminate emotion; it situates it within a hierarchy of goods directed toward the final end (O'Collins, 2008).

VIII. Synthesis: Dedication as the Existential Form of Beatitude

Bringing these strands together, union with God is understood not as the result of isolated acts but as the product of sustained fidelity over time (Aquinas, 1947, *ST* I–II, q.3, a.8). It is defined by persistence: remaining ordered toward the final end even when conditions make this difficult.



From this follows the central structure: fulfilment is not found in possession or shifting states of feeling, but in a stable pattern of self-giving grounded in that end. Meaning is therefore measured by consistency of orientation. It consists in a dual form of dedication: fidelity to transcendent principles concerning the ultimate end, and ordered commitment to others in light of that end.

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