



Imago Dei in People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities*

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ABSTRACT: The bulk of the Church's teaching and theological tradition concerning *Imago Dei* appears to interpret the concept in a way that is hardly compatible with the reality of people with intellectual disabilities at best. This particularly concerns the themes in theological tradition defining God's image as special intellectual faculties common to human beings and/or their capacity for exercising dominance over the rest of creation. This article offers an interpretation of *Imago Dei* that is in no way oppressive for people with profound intellectual disabilities. It is inspired by the relational interpretation of God's image, whilst being also firmly rooted in the tradition linking it to aspects such as freedom and dominance over the rest of creation. It shows individuals with profound intellectual disability as subjects actively exercising freedom and partaking in dominance over the rest of creation, yet in a way unique to them and their condition.

KEY WORDS: *Imago Dei*; Image of God; Intellectual disabilities; Theological anthropology; Theology of disability.

Imago Dei en personas con discapacidad intelectual grave

RESUMEN: La mayor parte de la enseñanza eclesial y de la tradición teológica referente a la categoría de *Imago Dei* es entendida de forma que no se ajusta a la realidad de las personas con discapacidad intelectual. Se trata, por lo general, de los argumentos que confinan el ser imagen de Dios a una serie de capacidades especiales del intelecto del humano, o a la capacidad de dominar sobre el resto de la creación. El objetivo de este artículo es proponer una interpretación alternativa de *Imago Dei* que de ninguna forma sea excluyente respecto de las personas con discapacidad intelectual severa. El texto se basa en la interpretación de la relación de la imagen de Dios, manteniendo la tradición que la une con la libertad y el dominio sobre la creación. Se muestra a las personas con discapacidad intelectual severa como sujetos que activamente hacen uso de la libertad y del dominio del mundo, pero de manera única, de acuerdo con su condición.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Imago Dei*; imagen de Dios; discapacidad intelectual; antropología teológica; teología de la discapacidad.

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Introduction

Discussing the doctrine of *imago Dei* in the context of intellectual disability, particularly profound intellectual disability, may seem like a daunting endeavor. The bulk of the Church's teaching and theological tradition concerning *imago Dei* appears to interpret the concept in a way that is hardly compatible with the reality of people with intellectual disabilities at best. This particularly concerns the themes in theological tradition defining God's image as special intellectual faculties common to human beings and/or their capacity for exercising dominance over the rest of creation.¹

Some theologians of disability—having identified the traditional interpretations regarding the concept of God's image in the human being that are oppressive towards people with disabilities (not exclusively intellectual)—have called for the doctrine of God's image to be replaced with e.g. the category of Christ's body as the cornerstone of theological anthropology.² Others—faced with so many *imago Dei* interpretations seemingly oppressive for people with disabilities—have settled for the mere claim that God's image escapes definition, and since those with disabilities are human, they have God's image in them, in no way affected by their disability. Still others, pursuing this line of reasoning, have offered very vague interpretations of the concept.³

All these strategies, however, raise inevitable doubts. First, it seems both impossible and undesirable for theological anthropology to no longer be concerned with the idea of God's image in the human person. *Imago Dei* is a biblical notion, later developed in the tradition of the Church. Even though over the centuries it has had interpretations that are poorly aligned with the core of the Christian faith, whilst

¹ See Glyn, "*Pied Beauty: The Theological Anthropology of Impairment and Disability in Recent Catholic Theology in the Light of Vatican II.*" As multiple studies trace the history of how the concept of *imago Dei* has been interpreted throughout the theological tradition and teaching of the Church, it is not the aim of this paper.

² Hull, "The Broken Body in a Broken World: A Contribution to a Christian Doctrine of Person from a Disabled Point of View," 5-23.

³ Hedges-Goettl, "Thinking Theologically About Inclusion," 16. As Hedges-Goettl puts it, "if persons with disabilities are human, therefore, they are (as are we all) undepriably and inescapably in God's image." The author goes on to state that the mere fact of having been created amounts to being an image of God (ibid., 21), a fairly controversial claim considering that not only humans are "created", but so is the entire visible world, which, nonetheless, is not in its entirety referred to as *imago Dei*. Further on, Hedges-Goettl refines her interpretation of *imago Dei*, describing it as the ability to enter into relations (with others and with God), and having a unique relationship with God that other creatures do not have (ibid., 21). A vague understanding of God's image is also offered by Reynolds, who construes *imago Dei* as a unique relationship human beings have with God, the world, and with one another. The human person is a unique creature, but what does that precisely mean? According to Reynolds, Genesis does not clarify (Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, 177).

being more philosophical in nature, it is impossible, in my view, to simply abandon it and “move on”.

The concept clearly warrants an in-depth analysis instead of merely being disposed of, since (as I venture to demonstrate in this text), it does not need to be considered oppressive towards either people with disabilities, or any other human person whatsoever. Abandoning it, on the other hand, would amount neglecting one of the most crucial biblical traditions concerning the human being, one which, in my view, deserves to continue to be perceived as central to any theological anthropology.

Second, it is worth appreciating the fact stressed by some theologians that the idea of *imago Dei* is impossible to accurately and clearly define. God is a mystery, hence the same applies to the human being as his/her image.⁴ It must be remembered, nonetheless, that God is not solely mysterious, someone transcending the human mind and experience, and thus beyond human’s grasp, someone entirely different from the created world. For at the same time, God is someone who allows him/herself to be known (by revealing him/herself to us), someone we can venture certain statements about. Thus, also the human being, as his/her image, may be to a certain extent described, defined, and each human person, being *imago Dei* that they are, reveals something about God.

This article, therefore, is aimed at offering an interpretation of *imago Dei* that is in no way oppressive for people with profound intellectual disabilities, nor for any other human person. I will also seek to answer whether people with intellectual disabilities reflect God’s image in any way unique to them. Thus, I will attempt to point out such qualities present in people with profound intellectual disabilities that render them a very unique image of God.⁵

⁴ Swinton, “Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities,” 303.

⁵ *Imago Dei* is perceived here as the essence of humanity, common to all people without exceptions, as the very thing that sets them radically apart from the rest of the material world. God’s image is also understood as that, which by being particular to a given person (or group of people) reveals God’s mystery in its own, conspicuous way. These characteristic qualities may also, nonetheless, be found in other visible creatures. In the case of other beings, theology most commonly refers to the qualities in which God is naturally manifested as “traces of God” (in Latin, *vestigia Dei, vestigia trinitatis*), whilst applying the term *imago Dei* exclusively to the human person. Furthermore, this text adopts, in a sense, the traditional distinction originally made by Irenaeus of Lyons between two biblical notions, the “image” and the “likeness” of God. Irenaeus understood God’s image as something indelible/immutable, whereas the likeness as something that can be dimmed (and which has, in fact, been dimmed as a result of sin), but also regained through the salvation Christ offered to us, and even advanced in the process of becoming more like God. Even though this distinction will not be literally followed in this article, since there are no exegetical grounds for it (see Bayer, “Being in the Image of God,” 79.), I would like to account for both these aspects in the understanding of *imago Dei*, interpreting God’s image both as growing in likeness to God, a person’s voluntary pursuit of becoming more like God (Irenaeus’ “likeness”—the dynamic

Imago Dei—Significance for Theological Anthropology

As I have pointed out, theological anthropology should not part with the concept of *imago Dei* as key for the understanding of the human being in the light of Christian faith. First and foremost, the idea is profoundly a biblical one, and as such deserves special attention and consideration. Second, even though previously hardly attributed with greater significance in the theological tradition,⁶ the Second Vatican Council in its pastoral constitution on the Church in the World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965, hereinafter referred to as *GS*) recognized the concept of God's image and likeness as central for anthropology (*GS* 12), thus opening new avenues for the reflection on this biblical notion.⁷

In the light of theological argument, it must be pointed out that the significance of the concept of *imago Dei* lies in the fact that the reflection on the human being starts with “above”, with our likeness to God. Thus, it operates on an opposite principle than numerous philosophical reflections on the human being, where we are seen from the perspective of “the earth”, our likeness to the material world, where we are special, yet most essentially of a part of it. The famous definition by Aristotle comes to mind, referring to the human person as a social animal (Gr. *zoon politikon*).⁸

However, it must be realized that every attempt at describing the human being in such a fashion is, in fact, depreciative, for two reasons. First, the human being is likened to something “inferior”, less worthy, at least according to Catholic view. Second, from this perspective, the difference between the human being and the rest of creation is merely relative. Using the above-cited Aristotle's definition as the example, it could be argued that also animals, at least some animals, are social beings, even though not as much as people.⁹

aspect), and as being someone irrevocably and inalienably endowed with unique dignity and potential (Irenaeus' “image”—the static aspect). It is my intention, therefore, to account for the distinction between “being human” and “becoming human”.

⁶ Ladaria, *Introducción a la antropología teológica*, 68. According to Ladaria, the notion of God's image in the tradition did not play a greater role, and it was simply associated with the fact of the human being having a soul.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Aristotle develops the notion of the human being as a social or political being in *The Politics*, where he argues for example that “one who is incapable of sharing or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of city, and so is either a beast or a god (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 5).

⁹ Damian, “The Divine Trinity as Paradigm for Ideal Human Relationships: An Orthodox Perspective”, 63. Aristotle himself suggests the distinction between the human being and the rest of animals is matter of a certain convention, with humans in fact being simply *more* social or political than animals:

It seems, on the other hand, that the Bible's intention in referring solely to the human being as God's image¹⁰ is to highlight the ineradicable difference between the human kind and the rest of visible creation. *Imago Dei* should, therefore, be understood as the "essence of humanity", that which is the crucial aspect of the human being, and thus the very thing that radically sets the human being apart from other creatures.¹¹

Hence, there is no nobler definition of the human being than "the image of God." The human person is someone bearing likeness to God, and this is where our essential distinction from the rest of creation rests. Naturally, it must be emphasized that likeness to the Creator is by no means limited to the human being. God's traces or vestiges are seen in the entire work of creation. Yet, even though the Bible teaches that "from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (Wis.13:5), it is the human being alone that is referred to as the image and likeness of God.¹² The human being is, therefore, inextricably bound with God, as someone sharing an affinity with him/her that the rest of creation does not and cannot share.

God's Image in Every Human Person

The next step is to consider whether any interpretation of *imago Dei* is inclusive enough as not to leave any human person out. Some scholars, in an attempt to systematize the theological thought concerning the image of God in the human being, classify all the existing interpretations into two types, namely: (1) Essentialist concepts, arguing that the human being has certain properties or traits common with God (spiritual qualities); and (2) relational concepts, according to which the human likeness to God is manifested through our social orientation, i.e., by our being oriented towards "the other".¹³

"That man is *much more* a political animal than any kind of bee or any herd animal is clear" (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 4; my emphasis).

¹⁰ See Basiuk, "Człowiek—obraz Boga. Rdz 1,26-27 w kontekście Starego i Nowego Testamentu", 52.

¹¹ This text assumes the uniqueness of the human person compared with the rest of creation (Catholic Church, "Catechism of the Catholic Church" 342, 343, 356), hence the lack of consent to various anthropologies that hold human beings and other creatures absolutely equal or dilute the difference between them. This does not by any account mean that it is negating the solidarity existing between all creation (ibid., 344). This text, however, focus on the search for differences, not emphasizing similarities between creatures, hence it may seem to negate the community with other creatures.

¹² Catholic Church, "Catechism of the Catholic Church" 41.

¹³ Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability. Human Being as Mutuality and Response*, 93. Haslam uses a distinction originally made by Paul Ramsey.

Most theologians of disability are highly critical of all essentialist tendencies in anthropology¹⁴ and thereby also of all attempts at identifying *imago Dei*, i.e., the essence of humanity as any particular faculty or capacity,¹⁵ such as the capacity for knowing and loving God, or the capacity for exercising authority over the rest of creation. This results from the fact that people with profound intellectual disabilities are commonly perceived as incapable of the above.¹⁶

Is this stance, however, valid? Perhaps it is worth changing the perspective and considering whether people with profound intellectual disabilities might not, in fact, be equipped with these capacities, as this text will shortly attempt to do.

Hence, it is the relational aspects that theologians of disability tend to focus on, yet this approach is bound to become problematic too, unless it assumes the human ability to enter a relation, and thus as long as it entirely forgoes the essentialist aspect. Molly Haslam's proposition may be cited here as an example of an unsuccessful attempt at constructing an anthropology exclusively based on relationality. Towards the end of her book, she admits an essentialist element proved impossible to entirely avoid, as in her theory she had to assume that even though the human being has a relational constitution, this entails having an intrinsic ability for communication (hence an essentialist element is present).¹⁷

As I have indicated above, this text attempts to adopt a different method than those adopted by the majority of theologians of disability, who, perceiving the theological tradition (and frequently also the Church's teaching) concerned with *imago Dei* as oppressive for people with intellectual disabilities, reject it and advocate a different anthropology, purportedly accommodating the reality of the people in question.

¹⁴ Hans Reinders, for example, claims that God's image—according to Genesis—means the uniqueness of the human being, but if we try to attribute it to certain faculties, we are bound to fail, as all faculties we possess as the human kind may—to a greater or smaller extent—also be found in animals.

¹⁵ Berinyuu, "Healing and Disability", 203; Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability. Human Being as Mutuality and Response*, 95-99; Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*, 228-231.

¹⁶ For instance, Haslam states directly that people with intellectual disabilities are not able to know and love God (Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability. Human Being as Mutuality and Response*, 99). Yong, in turn, states that understanding *imago Dei* as human dominion over the rest of creation is oppressive for people with intellectual disabilities as they are incapable of having dominion over the world. Hence, he proposes to replace the idea of having dominion over creation with the idea of exercising dominion with others: people with intellectual disabilities manifest God's image through their solidarity with others who directly exercise dominion over creation (Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity*, 173).

¹⁷ Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability. Human Being as Mutuality and Response*, 110-111.

Whilst holding on to the traditional understanding of *imago Dei*, this article will attempt to change our perception of people with profound intellectual disabilities. The claims outlined below should thus remain relevant to people with intellectual disabilities, as well as for any other person (irrespective of their stage of life or condition), no matter how much this transcends our imagination. Let me, therefore, now address the following question: How can God's image residing in every single person be defined, as not to exclude any member of the human family?

Human Freedom As the Image of God

It is my position that the very thing that sets the human being apart from the rest of the visible creation, and which is thus the essence of God's image in the human person, is our capacity for either choosing or rejecting God. This, in turn, entails the capacity for knowing God, as it is only possible to make a choice if we know what we are choosing.¹⁸

The very capacity for making a choice (freedom)¹⁹ is not a goal in itself—as it only facilitates the achievement of the ultimate goal that God intended for the human being. It allows the human person to freely choose a *relationship* with our Creator, turn to God and reciprocate the love God offers;²⁰ and by drawing closer to God,

¹⁸ The entire theological tradition and teaching of the Roman Catholic Church resonates with themes associating *imago Dei* with human cognitive faculties and freedom (e.g., John Paul II, “Mentally Ill Are Also Made in God's Image” 3). It is a line of thinking about the image of God common to the most eminent Christian theologians, especially St. Augustine (Berinyuu, “Healing and Disability”, 203) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability. Human Being as Mutuality and Response*, 96).

¹⁹ Freedom as the freedom to choose is described in the “Catechism of the Catholic Church”: “As long as freedom has not bound itself definitively to its ultimate good which is God, there is the possibility of choosing between good and evil, and thus of growing in perfection or of failing and sinning. This freedom characterizes properly human acts” (Catholic Church, “Catechism of the Catholic Church” 1732). This, however, is not the sole meaning that the word “freedom” is ascribed in the theological tradition or the Church's teaching. Impossible as it is to discuss this issue in detail here, the word “freedom” most commonly denotes “not being enslaved by sin”, thus a situation where we do not make choices because we persevere in good. Thus, understood freedom amounts to achieving the ultimate goal that the human being is called to (John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*” 13,17; Kempa, *Konieczność zbawienia. Antropologiczne założenia soteriologii Anzelma z Canterbury*, 168, 170).

²⁰ The line of thought is similar to Karl Barth's, as invoked in Reinder's book. Barth, drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reasoning, states that God created the human being in his/her image in freedom; therefore, the human being, as *imago Dei*, is free. This human freedom is understood by Barth as freedom “for someone”, the freedom to be in a relation (Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*, 238). It is possible to similarly interpret Saint Thomas Aquinas' thought, attaching such a great importance to the intellectual nature of the human being, as it is this nature that allows the human beings to imitate their Creator in that which is essential: in knowing and

it allows the human person to resemble God. The human being is, in a way, like a mirror—the more he/she turns towards God and the closer he/she is to him/her, the better he/she reflects God's image.²¹

The gift of human freedom received from the Creator is something that radically distinguishes us from the rest of visible creation, as opposed to e.g. intellect, understood as an intelligence quotient, which is not a privilege exclusive to humanity. After all, people with profound intellectual disabilities frequently have an intelligence quotient similar to, or even lower than animals. Similarly, the capacity for communication, even though it is sometimes perceived as specifically human, is also found in the animal world, which has its own ways of communicating, even if not as complex or sublime as the human language.²²

However, what radically distinguishes the human being from the rest of visible creation is the fact that the rest of the universe was, like the human being, created without its will, but, as opposed to the human kind, it will also be saved without its will.²³ As St. Augustine put it, “God created us without us, but he did not will

loving. According to Saint Thomas, the image of God in the human being is primarily our natural pursuit of knowing and loving God. Hence, in his view, the image of God in the human being is associated with the ability to enter a relation (Romero, “Aquinas on the *corporis infirmitas*: Broken Flesh and the Grammar of Grace”, 103; Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability. Human Being as Mutuality and Response*, 99-100). In my reasoning, I also follow the line of thinking pursued in the Pastoral Constitution of the Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, which interprets *imago Dei* primarily as the capacity for knowing and loving God and growing in a relationship with him/her. Apart from these characteristics, the document lists also dominion exercised over the world (an issue that I will later discuss in more detail), and the social orientation of the human being, which can be understood as the result of our original calling to being in a relationship with the Creator (Second Vatican Council, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*” 12; Ladaria, *Introducción a la antropología teológica*, 68).

²¹ The metaphor of a mirror was used by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote that whilst the human being ought to reflect God, it reflects matter instead (Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 132). The metaphor is also found in John Calvin's thought when he talks about the image and likeness of God in the human being (Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability. Human Being as Mutuality and Response*, 101).

²² Theologians of disability point out that people have a lot in common with primates. The common traits include e.g. empathy, altruism or social hierarchy (Yong, “The Virtues and Intellectual Disability Explorations in the [Cognitive] Sciences of Moral Formation”, 193).

²³ Thus, it should be stated that the divine image, understood as the freedom of choice is also attributable to angels, as beings who are free and capable of sin. According to Catholic Church, “Catechism of the Catholic Church” 311, “Angels and men, as intelligent and free creatures, have to journey toward their ultimate destinies by their free choice and preferential love”. St. Thomas Aquinas even claimed that since angels are equipped with intellect faculties superior to humans, they are a more perfect image of God than human beings (Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability. Human Being as Mutuality and Response*, 98).

to save us without us.”²⁴ The human being is thus called to freely choose being in a relationship with God or not.

“Relationality” As the Image of God: Human Relational Constitution and Calling

Not only is the human being called to be in a relationship, but also we are constituted by it, having been created for a relationship.²⁵ God’s image, understood as the relationality of the human being, has been present in us since our very beginning, or, in fact, it is the very thing that allows us to exist at all. God calls the human being into existence, thus establishing a relationship which—due to God’s faithfulness—is eternal and unaltered, yet owing to human freedom may be broken by sin (understood in the most primordial way as the rejection of God), whereupon it remains a unilateral relationship—the relation of God to the human person.

The human being may enter this relationship of his/her free will, just like God enters the relationship with the human being (creates him/her) of his/her free will. This is where the analogy (the likeness of the image) between God and the human being is rooted in. The human being is thus unlike the rest of the visible world, which also remains in a relation to its Creator, or rather it is God-the-Creator who remains in a relation to the rest of the visible world, as he/she permanently sustains the entire

²⁴ As cited in Catholic Church, “Catechism of the Catholic Church” 1847.

²⁵ See Reinders *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*, 252. It is Hans Reinders approach to present us as relational beings not only through our very origin—having originated from someone, but also through the aim of our existence, which is communion, relating to others, being in relationships, not mere individualism. Bayer also develops a relational theology, presenting us as beings called to communication with our Creator, but also as beings completely dependent on God (on the relationship with God) (Bayer, “Being in the Image of God”, 77). Yong develops as well the interpretation of God’s image as constituted by relationship and opts for the relational understanding of the human being as invariably existing in relation to him/herself, others and God (Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity*, 180-181). Even though Amos Yong introduces many interesting themes to the debate on God’s image in people with intellectual disabilities, he does not entirely support the thesis of this text, namely that (all) individuals with profound intellectual disabilities actively exercise freedom allowing them to voluntarily enter a relationship with God. Amos Yong seems to favor the position that every human being—including those with intellectual disabilities—is free and capable of responding to God. At the same time, however, he stresses the enormous diversity of people with intellectual disabilities, and the entailing varying degree of their individual responsibility in choosing God and salvation, to the point of suggesting that some such people lack such responsibility entirely (*ibid.*, 236-239). Hence, this article does not directly draw from Yong’s opinions, even though many of them were the original inspiration for the author’s further development of this topic.

world in its existence (*creatio continua*). The human being, on the other hand, freely enters the relationship with and orients him/herself towards God.²⁶

How can we, however, be assured that a given individual is in fact a human being, i.e., someone capable of accepting or rejecting God? If we cannot see any signs of his/her capacity to be in a relationship with anyone (as might be the case of people with profound disabilities, demented or comatose people, or fetuses²⁷), can we still claim that they do, indeed, have that capacity? Can we hold on to the view that they are “still” or “already” (fully) human?

First and foremost, it must be pointed out that visible, noticeable abilities or traits should never be considered the criterion of humanity, as we are simultaneously spiritual and physical beings, which means that we transcend the scientifically measurable or verifiable. The empirical sciences may never become the sole key to understanding and defining the human being, as the spiritual dimension is beyond their reach. It is not, however, to say that certain human activities (e.g., freedom) belong solely to the spiritual dimension, as just the opposite is the case—each human activity involves or affects the entire human being. The same applies the other way round, since “purely bodily/physical” activities, such as eating, are permeated or affected by the spiritual element. A purely naturalist paradigm is not sufficient to “examine” the human person as a whole.

The sole empirical criterion of humanity is being of human parentage, i.e., being related from humans. Being human, in turn, entails (according to the Church’s faith) being free to accept or reject God, and hence choose Good or evil. Thus, it is not that anybody becomes human with time (acquiring faculties or traits constituting

²⁶ The term “relation”/“relationship” means here “turning towards the other”, “intimacy”, “orientation towards”, “entering a communion”. In this sense, “relation” has positive connotations, as opposed to its use in psychology or colloquial language, where “toxic relationships” are often brought up. Moreover, it should be noted that in western Trinitarian theology “relationship” means also that which *distinguishes* the persons of the Holy Trinity from one another. The Council of Florence used this notion in its *Bull of union with the Copts* (1442): “These three persons are one God not three gods, because there is one substance of the three, one essence, one nature, one Godhead, one immensity, one eternity, and everything is one where the difference of a relation does not prevent this.”

²⁷ The commonly made assumption that these categories of people are not capable of communication/relationship with others calls for a thorough reconsideration. For instance, prenatal psychology has been able to demonstrate that a fetus/prenate/unborn baby is a human person from the first moments of its existence, not only capable of receiving and remembering various stimuli, but also of producing, sending them, i.e., of communication (see Chamberlain, “Babies Are Not What We Thought: Call for a New Paradigm”, 161-177. In regards to people with profound intellectual disabilities, their caregivers are known to claim that they are able to communicate with them, even though they also share their doubts whether perhaps this might only be their own interpretation or wishful thinking.

their humanity), since from the very moment of our origin (i.e., conception) we are human, i.e., beings of human parentage.

This is consistent with what the Book of Genesis teaches—the human being is human, i.e., the image of God from the very first moments of our existence, i.e., the moment of our creation.²⁸ It must also be stressed that once human, a person can never cease being human—coming from human parents, a person retains their humanity eternally. According to the Church's faith, God's image may never be completely deleted or erased, i.e., the essence of humanity may not be taken away from anyone, as God does not take back either his/her promises or gifts.

The human being is therefore human due to being descended from human parents. This is a line of reasoning famously coined by one of antiquity's most eminent philosophers, Aristotle,²⁹ yet it can also be traced in the Bible. When the New Testament ascertains the true humanity of Christ, it emphasizes his descent from a human mother. Also, Gal 4:4 refers to Christ as “born of a woman”, i.e., truly human. According to some scholars, this verse nears a Christological definition.³⁰ Also, at

²⁸ “It would never be made human if it were not human already” (John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*,” 60). John Paul II quotes at this point an excerpt from a document by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation Replies to Certain Questions of the Day *Donum vitae*”.

²⁹ See Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*, 90. This standpoint was adopted after Aristotle by St. Thomas Aquinas (Saint Thomas Aquinas, “Summa Theologiae” I, q. 29, a.1.). Robert Speamann also cites a “genealogical connection with ‘the human family’” and states that “belonging to the human family cannot depend on empirically demonstrated properties” (Speamann, *Persons: The Difference Between “someone” and “something”*, 240). In his view, however, contrary to my line of argumentation, people with disabilities are in a sense ill or fall outside the norm, and he perceives their nature as defective. Still, he argues that they are persons (with a defective nature) and must be perceived as human beings. Moreover, Spearman hypothesizes that it is possible for a non-human to be born of a human being, and proposing certain “qualitative” criteria of being a person, he concludes that perhaps some animals (dolphins in particular) could be considered as persons too (Speamann, *Persons: The Difference Between “someone” and “something”*, 240-248). According to Aristotle and his followers (primarily Saint Thomas), people with intellectual disabilities are also perceived as “marginal cases” of humanity. They belong to the human kind, as human beings are defined in terms of their procreation, yet certain natural capacities may be manifested to a different degree in given individuals, and some capacities are not manifested at all in disabled people. Thus, differences between given individuals are differences in degree, not differences in kind. They all belong to the same human kind, as, according to this line of thinking: “You don’t need to be a perfect apple to be counted as an apple in the first place” (Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*, 102-103). Also, the theologians of disability sometimes use the argument that to be a human being means to belong to the human family (human kind/species—being born of human parents). See, e.g., Swinton, “What’s in a Name? Why People with Dementia Might Be Better Off Without the Language of Personhood”, 245; Hedges-Goertl, “Thinking Theologically About Inclusion”, 16.

³⁰ Occhipinti Gozzini, “Partorito da donna”, 147.

the time of debates with Gnostics, Mary's motherhood was used to validate the true human nature of Christ.³¹ Tertulian wrote:

Else why is Christ called Man, and Son of Man, if he has nothing that is man's, and nothing derived from man?—unless perchance either man is something other than flesh, or man's flesh is derived from somewhere else than from man, or Mary is something other than human, or Marcion's god is a man (*De Carne Christi* 5,6).³²

It must be noted, therefore, that the humanity of Jesus is not defined through the prism of his faculties or traits characteristic for our species (such as the fact that he communicates, cries, feels pain, etc.), but solely through the prism of being the son of Mary—since he was born of a human being, he is human. The Nicene Creed says: “He was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.”

The assertion that a human being is human by simply having been born of human parents, prevents the exclusion from the human family of even those with the most severe disabilities, as, for instance, partially anencephalic neonates or fetuses with chromosomal aberrations. Hence, it is the most inclusive “definition” of humanity.

It can be concluded that the human being is constituted by a twofold relation—to God and to other human beings.³³ Or, more accurately, that the human being is constituted by the special relationships held with each of the divine persons. As Grzegorz Strzelczyk, a Polish theologian, points out:

Each given person is who he/she is by being in a unique relation (primarily) to the Triune God—the Father (being a child of God), the Son (being the image, a relation of brotherhood) and the Spirit (being the “dwelling place”)—and (secondarily) to other created persons.³⁴

An analogy could thus be pointed out between the relational constitution of human beings and the persons of the holy Trinity. Just like the Father is the Father because he has the Son, so is every person him/herself, in every meaning of this word, because he/she is descended from God and another human being.

³¹ Cantalamessa, “La Theotokos segno della retta fede cristologica, alla luce dei Concili di Efeso e di Calcedonia”, 387.

³² Also paraphrased in: Cantalamessa, “La Theotokos segno della retta fede cristologica, alla luce dei Concili di Efeso e di Calcedonia”, 391.

³³ Perhaps the Catholic teaching concerning human souls as immediately created by God at the moment of conception may be interpreted as a confirmation of a twofold human origin—from another human being and (immediately!) from God. See Pius XII, “Encyclical *Humani Generis*” 36.

³⁴ Strzelczyk, “*Istotą, a nie tylko stopniem (LG 10). Hipoteza wyjaśnienia*”, 131; Swinton, “Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities”, 304

Hence, the image of God is anchored in human freedom. This freedom, nonetheless, is not a goal in itself—as its purpose is to allow the human being to enter a loving relationship with God—in the likeness of the second person of the holy Trinity, i.e., the Son; or to put it more clearly, to allow them to enter the relationship in the Son’s “place”. The human person finds its model in the Son,³⁵ as our vocation is to become “sons in the Son.”³⁶ The image of God—the image of the Trinity of persons loving each other—is present, therefore, where the human person enters a communion with God and other people (or in a wider perspective: with the entire creation).³⁷ Thus, it is not merely a single person, but the entire human community that is *imago Dei*.³⁸

Hence, I am strongly in favor of the relational interpretation, in which God’s image is seen in the human being’s orientation towards another human being, their relationship of love with the other human being. This is grounded in the belief that the deepest essence of God is abiding in love—God is a Trinity of persons loving each other, who decides to share him/herself with the world. The human being is to become like God in precisely this. The human being, created in God’s image, is thus perfect only when he/she abides in love.³⁹

Human perfection or excellence does not result from is not conditioned by our faculties or skills, but by entering voluntarily the relationship of love.⁴⁰ By loving, the human being becomes like God, who calls the human being to a communion with him/herself and other human beings, because he/she is him/herself a communion.⁴¹

³⁵ Hence, I side with the Christological interpretation of *imago Dei*, which identifies being in the image of God with being in the image of Christ. This does not mean that human beings are the image of the Son alone, as the New Testament points out that the Son is the image of the Father.

³⁶ John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*” 18. Also see Ladaria, *Introducción a la antropología teológica*, 11. Ladaria says that the human being’s vocation is being the son of God, i.e., being in a relation to God that is Christ’s alone, and that this vocation entails human existence as a free being. See Catholic Church, “Catechism of the Catholic Church” 381.

³⁷ Tim Basselin also interprets the image of God as relationality modelled on the Holy Trinity, in his “Why theology needs disability”, 56.

³⁸ The likeness between the union of the divine persons, and the unity of human beings is also stated in Second Vatican Council, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*” 24.

³⁹ Cooper, “The Disabled God”, 176; World Council of Churches, “Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology” 44.

⁴⁰ World Council of Churches, “Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology” 44.

⁴¹ Tataryn and Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference*, 51. It must be pointed out that the entire creation is called to a communion with God, yet the human being’s circumstances are radically different by the fact that we enter this communion solely by free will, similarly to angels, who are also free beings (Catholic Church, “Catechism of the Catholic Church” 311).

Nonetheless, it is not the intention of this text to place in opposition the essentialist and the relational aspects of human existence: God, by calling the human being to communion with him/herself, endows us with certain “properties” enabling us to enter the relationship with him/her. It is not that God first creates the human being endowed with certain capacities, and then calls us to a communion with him/herself (or the other way round), but both these acts happen at the same time.⁴²

Dominion over Creation As the Image of God

It is also worth examining whether the idea of the image of God, as authority or dominion over creation, so strongly present in the tradition and teaching of the Church⁴³ does necessarily have to be seen as oppressive towards people with intellectual disabilities as some theologians of disability claim.⁴⁴

If we acknowledge the perspective proposed in this paper, and thus we ascertain the capacity of people with intellectual disabilities for either accepting or rejecting God, and thus for sin,⁴⁵ it is also possible to acknowledge that they have authority over creation. The first interpretation is that since they have the capacity for rejecting God, they have certain authority over him/her (with which they are, naturally, endowed by God him/herself), and, since they have authority over the Creator, indirectly they also have authority over everything that is subjected to his/her authority.

Second, and this appears to be more consistent with the message of the Bible, which suggests direct human domination/authority over the world, we can interpret “dominion over creation” in the light of St. Paul’s theology. According to St. Paul (Rom 8:20), and to the ensuing Christian tradition,⁴⁶ human sin has affected the entire universe/creation. The human beings through their sin (but also through their holiness) have a very real, tangible influence on the course of the universe, and thus exercise domination over it.

⁴² Ladaría, *Introducción a la antropología teológica*, 87.

⁴³ This understanding of *imago Dei*, substantiated by the Bible, especially Gen 1:28 and Sir 17:1-4, was consistently developed in the tradition, and due to Gerhard von Rad’s work possibly can be considered one of the most influential opinions of the recent times concerning God’s image in the human being (Ladaría, *Introducción a la antropología teológica*, 61; also Second Vatican Council, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*” 12).

⁴⁴ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity*, 173. Yong proposes to replace it by the idea of “solidarity with others who are more actively engaged in exercising domination in the world”, or “the power to rule *with* others” (italics mine), since people with intellectual disabilities are incapable of exercising domination independently, on their own (ibid.)

⁴⁵ Sin is primarily an offense against God (Catholic Church, “Catechism of the Catholic Church” 1849).

⁴⁶ Ibid. 400.

Regardless of how hidden or obscure any given person's sin or holiness are, these have an effect on creation. The paradigm is not exclusively moral, as human beings do not only have an impact on the rest of the world through their actions, their good or evil deeds. As we know, there is an ongoing process of matter exchange in the natural world, known as the cycling of the organic matter, and the human body is a part of this cycle. The human body receives matter, which becomes a part of its structure for a limited time, and is then released back into the environment.

The human person is not, nevertheless, only body, but—using the language of classical theology—he/she is body and soul, perfectly united. The human body is, therefore, permanently pervaded with the spiritual element, and so is the matter that any given human being is constituted by at any given point in time. This is why some theologians bring up the notion of the spiritualization of matter, which occurs when matter enters the human body, e.g., when it is consumed.⁴⁷ It would seem, therefore, that the spiritual condition of the person consuming the matter, which is then incorporated into his/her structure, is not insignificant. It could be argued that when returning matter to the world, a given human person in a way shares his/her own sinfulness, corruptness, or, conversely, his/her holiness with the surrounding world.

Similar themes regarding the effect of a given person's holiness on the surrounding material world may be traced throughout the Christian tradition, the veneration of relics being perhaps the most prominent example. As it seems, the practice is inspired by the assumption that the remains of canonized saints, objects used by them, or even pieces of textile that have been in contact with the body of the deceased saint are in some special way conveyors of the person's holiness, as if sanctified.⁴⁸ Hence, even after body and soul are separated by death, the bodily remains of a holy person are still perceived as imbued with their holiness.

The use of the term of “Holy Land” to denote the geographical area where Jesus Christ lived is another relevant example. Perhaps, this also reflects the assumption that even the land touched by the feet of the world's Savior was sanctified. The faith of the woman mentioned in the Gospel (Mtt 9:21), who only sought to touch the fringe of His coat in order to be cured, was driven by the same intuition that everything that surrounded Christ was imbued, filled with his sanctity and power.

⁴⁷ O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer. A Christian Approach to Salvation*, 255.

⁴⁸ Dziewulski, “Teologiczne podstawy kultu relikwii”, 177-178; 181. The Orthodox requirement that iconographers should be “spiritual people” may be considered as yet another relevant notion, perhaps also driven by the intuition that human spirituality has a very tangible impact on the material world (Klejnowski-Różycki, “Mistyka chrześcijańskiego Wechodu. Ikony”, 106, 109).

Certainly, Jesus is a unique case of God entering, physically becoming a part of the material world, so that—beyond any doubt—the sanctification and redemption of matter is here powerful and absolute, like in no other circumstances. Nonetheless, it also seems certain that through every person matter may be sanctified or redeemed.

Arguments Supporting the Thesis of Freedom of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities

As pointed out before, this text assumes that people with intellectual disabilities are capable of a free relationship with God, which entails previous knowledge of God (thus use of reason). This is certainly a controversial thesis and as such it warrants a more thorough discussion and argument, which can hardly be accommodated here at length. I will attempt, nonetheless, to outline the key logical and theological arguments supporting this claim.

First, it should be realized that since, according to what is known from the revelation and the teaching of the Catholic Church, human beings are considered free, and people with intellectual disabilities are considered human; by the way of a simple syllogism it may be concluded that those people are free beings just like all other people. Otherwise, a double anthropology would be established (whereupon just some people are free whilst some are not), entailing essential inequality among human beings.

This tension between the claims of human freedom and the humanity of people with intellectual disabilities is sometimes resolved by applying classical metaphysics which distinguishes between actuality (that which in fact occurs in a given being) and potentiality (that which is possible for a given being). It is postulated, therefore, that people with intellectual disabilities have a *potential* capacity for knowledge and freedom, i.e., the capacity has not developed in them, so they cannot use it, yet it is embedded in them as a certain potentiality.⁴⁹

However, it must be noted that according to classical metaphysics, from which this line of reasoning is derived, actuality is always something more perfect than potentiality, a fact that is very clearly demonstrated by referring to God as pure act. Even though people with intellectual disabilities may be, according to this reasoning, considered human, they remain on the margins of humanity, hence my rejection of

⁴⁹ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*, 94; Dettlaff, “O godności ludzi z upośledzeniem umysłowym w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II”, 303. See John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*” 60. In the encyclical, this line of reasoning is applied to fetuses.

this solution as inadequate, considering people with profound intellectual disabilities as individuals actively exercising use of reason and freedom.

At this point, however, it must be clearly defined in what way human use of reason and freedom are understood in this text, complying with the Church's teachings. The use of reason—as it was in fact understood in the entire theological tradition⁵⁰ and the Church's teaching—has always been a term used to distinguish us, human beings, from the rest of visible creation.

Thus, it can be instantly clarified what the use of reason is not. It cannot be understood in cognitive terms, identified with the reason of the Enlightenment period, or intelligence, as animals also learn about the world and have considerable intelligence of their own, with their IQ in some cases being even higher than that of given human beings. Thus, use of reason perceived in this particular way would be nothing unique to human beings, nothing that would set us apart from the rest of visible creation. Therefore, how may the human use of reason be defined?

The use of reason, according to the tradition and the teachings of the magisterium may be primarily described as the capacity for knowing God⁵¹, but also—secondarily—as knowing the world and other human beings. Such use of reason is impossible to verify empirically, and even though it is possible at times to see its biological substrates (e.g., in the form of given biochemical changes in our brains), ultimately, it is impossible to prove its absence. The fact of its existence in every human being must be recognized *a priori*, without material evidence. The fact that use of reason thus defined may not be empirically verified becomes obvious when it is considered that the “object” of knowing is primarily God himself/herself.

However, also knowing the world and other human beings, which is also exercised through human use of reason, would then consist more in knowing the innate truth, the essence of existence, “the mystery of the world”, thus areas of reality that are not simply verifiable or (all the more!) simply expressed. These “hidden mysteries” become known more in a certain flash of enlightenment, revelation, inner realization, intuition or even vague premonition.

Our conviction of the truth of knowledge acquired in such a way is equally powerful as that based on axioms and as a result of applying rigorously designed empirical methods. This is what uniquely human knowledge, i.e., human use of

⁵⁰ Saint Thomas Aquinas may serve as a representative example here. Use of reason, in Miquel Romero's opinion, is for Thomas a broad term used to distinguish human beings from animals, hence it may not be identified as merely intelligence or the ability of knowing (Romero, “Aquinas on the *corporis infirmitas*: Broken Flesh and the Grammar of Grace”, 105).

⁵¹ Catholic Church, “Catechism of the Catholic Church” 356.

reason consists in. Such knowledge is, in fact, recognized in all the human sciences (as opposed to natural sciences), thus in all “sciences” which examine what is human in an ultimately human way.⁵²

The recognition of use of reason in people with intellectual disabilities leads us to the recognition of their freedom, to the recognition of them as individuals actively exercising their freedom. Use of reason is a prerequisite for the existence of freedom, as it is only prior knowledge that facilitates choice. Freedom, according to the theological tradition and the magisterium, primarily means the freedom to choose God and hence the freedom to choose Good or evil, God or not God.

This means that, in the human being, there exists a free will not determined by anything that may either accept or reject God’s offer of love. Freedom thus enables us to exercise our primary calling, i.e., the calling to love and to be loved. Without freedom genuine love may never exist. Freedom of the human person is exercised primarily in relation to God,⁵³ in the fact that the person may come to love their Creator.

In the context of the above thesis, is it possible that the almighty God did endow certain people with the gift of freedom? If we understand freedom as the most precious and crucial of all gifts, as it allows the human being to love, we should not have any doubts in this respect.

Also, by keeping in mind the truth about the impossibility of knowing God fully, i.e., the assumption that there is an infinite difference between God and the human being, so we can never fully come to know and comprehend God,⁵⁴ it could be asked whether it matters if that difference concerns an intellectually able person or one with an intellectual disability.

In both cases, the difference is so infinite, that surely our degree of intellectual ability is of no relevance. However, by claiming that the infinite God may communicate with intellectually able people, and they have the capacity for responding to him/her, whilst also assuming the same to be out of question for people with intellectual disabilities, do we not, in fact, assume the difference between individual people to be far greater than that between God and the human being in general?

Erin Staley, a theologian of disability, suggests that we find it easy to draw a distinction between those who are fully intellectually able and those with intellectual disabilities, losing the sense of the actual infinite distinction, the difference between

⁵² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 17-31.

⁵³ Ladaria, *Introducción a la antropología teológica*, 92.

⁵⁴ The Catechism informs us that “our knowledge of God is limited” (Catholic Church, “Catechism of the Catholic Church” 40).

God and the human being.⁵⁵ She reminds us that “the smartest human being is far more like a person with an intellectual disability than he or she is like God.”⁵⁶

Even though theology—according to its classical definition—is “faith seeking understanding”, yet it is imagination that frequently is more important when practicing it than reason. Something may seem beyond our grasp simply because we fail to engage our imagination. In the case of people with profound intellectual disabilities, we find it extremely difficult to imagine what their relationship with God may be like, or the way they might possibly heed God’s calling.

It is just as likely and possible for God to reveal him/herself, draw close to a person with intellectual disabilities as to any other person in the world, even though it may transpire in a completely different way.⁵⁷ We know that people experience God in various ways. Spiritual theology provides us with ample material for analysis and consideration in this respect. Moreover, a given person’s experience of God may be invisible to others and does not require outward, empirical evidence,⁵⁸ and the same applies to this person’s free response to God. The fact that we do not see something does not necessarily entail that it does not exist or transpire.

It is the very essence of faith that we believe in something that we cannot see (yet). Since there are so many claims that we embrace by faith alone, why should we not also believe that people with profound intellectual disabilities have a capacity for a personal relationship with God?

The Traits of God’s Image Unique to People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities

When discussing God’s image in the human being, we cannot stop at traits that are shared by, common to all people. It seems that every person individually reflects some particular properties of God, or reflects them in an especially conspicuous way. For instance, it is assumed that the image of God is revealed in human sexual diversity (male/female), in the sense that femininity (or rather women) and masculinity (or men to be more precise); both tell us something different about God, with women reflecting certain God’s traits more clearly than men, and vice versa. Hence, let us

⁵⁵ Staley, “Intellectual Disability and Mystical Unknowing: Contemporary Insights From Medieval Sources”, 398.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Harshaw, *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities*, 117.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

consider the divine properties that are in a special way reflected by people with intellectual disabilities.

Theologians of disability focus on the perception of disability as an expression of human diversity, or in a broader perspective, diversity present in all creation. Its origin is in Triune God—the Trinity of equal yet distinct persons. Regardless of what we perceive in regards to the differences between the persons of the Trinity (according to Western or Eastern theology), the presence of diversity within the Trinity is undisputable. The Christian God is a God of diversity, and unity does not entail it being erased.⁵⁹

Even though human diversity is noticeable in many levels, including sexual and ethnic diversity, diversity of talents, interests, etc., the “otherness” of those with all kinds of disabilities is especially discernible within the human community. It is as if people with profound intellectual disabilities were especially conspicuous signs of human diversity. Their bodies and minds differ from other people’s. Their behavior does not conform to what is perceived as conventional.

From the perspective of those intellectually able, they do not have certain fairly common skills or abilities, yet they are often equipped with other gifts, e.g., the ability to sense and interpret other people’s emotions. Their needs are different to other people’s, and they enjoy different things. They communicate their emotions and needs differently. Thus, they are a special sign of the diversity of God’s creation, rooted in the diversity within the Holy Trinity.

Another characteristic that sets apart people with disabilities, especially those with profound intellectual disabilities, is their complete dependence on others. Independent existence is out of their reach, sometimes the simplest activities of daily living are impossible for them to manage. Frequently, they are unable to eat, move, or care for personal hygiene on their own. Theologians of disability underscore that by all this they reflect the truth about the human person as a codependent, nonautonomous, relational being, one with an innate need of relationships with others.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ George, “Voices and Visions from the Margins on Mission and Unity: A Disability- informed Reading of the Pauline Metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ”, 97.

⁶⁰ Theologians highlight both the complete dependence of all human beings on their Creator and the mutual dependence, while pointing out that this perspective, universal to all people, is made especially clear by the existence of those with disabilities (Swinton, “Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities”, 292; 295; 296; Reynolds, “Theology and Disability: Changing the Conversation”, 39; 42; Swinton, Mowat and Baines, “Whose Story Am I? Redescribing Profound Intellectual Disability in the Kingdom of God”, 10-11; Tataryn and Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference*, 15; Cross, “Disability, Impairment, and Some Medieval Accounts of the Incarnation: Suggestions for a Theology of Personhood”, 648.

Their complete dependence from others may, in fact, reflect also some truth about God himself/herself, and in a twofold way. First and foremost, this quality may be ascribed to Triune God. It can be argued that the divine persons are interdependent. The Father would not be the Father if it were not for the Son; the Son would not be the Son, if it were not for the Father. The divine persons need one another for each of them to be who they are—they need the other. Therefore, the divine persons necessarily remain in a relation with one another.⁶¹

Second, and this is a much more tentative statement, it could be argued that in a very special sense God made himself/herself dependent on the human being. This dependence, however, is not inherent, as it is within the Holy Trinity, but it was established by the almighty God. God did not *need* creation, it was not in any way necessary, and yet by deciding to bring free beings into existence, and voluntarily limited his/her power—God cannot (does not want to) save human beings without their consent, forcing them love him/her. In this sense, God needs human beings, needs their freely given consent, even though without it he/she remains God.

When discussing the aspects of divine image unique to people with profound intellectual disabilities, another trait that stands out is their mysteriousness. God is mystery, and people with disabilities are a powerful reminder of this fact. As Jennie Weiss Block—one of female theologians of disability—puts it, “disability is a dramatic reminder that God’s ways are not our ways. God is not what we expect.”⁶²

Although this author seems to be emphasizing more on the aspect of God’s mysterious ways in respect of disability (why does God allow disability to exist in the first place? Why does he/she not wish to remove, do away with disabilities?), her statement may also be interpreted from the paradigm of the mystery of the divine being. God ways are mysterious because he/she is mystery.

People with profound intellectual disabilities are a mystery to us, too. We find it difficult or even impossible to adequately communicate with them, and frequently guess rather than know for a fact how and what they feel, need or require. Even though an experienced caregiver is able to communicate with a person with intellectual disabilities, a certain level of assurance is missing.

Obviously, also intellectually able people may have difficulties expressing their needs, and communication sometimes fails, but communicating with people with intellectual disabilities poses the biggest challenges. All human persons are a mystery

⁶¹ Swinton, “Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities”, 297.

⁶² Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*, 91.

in their own right, yet this truth is especially evident in the case of people with profound intellectual disabilities.

Human mystery is rooted in divine mystery, as the human being is a mystery because the source of our existence, God him/herself is mystery. The human mystery thus reflects the mystery of God. This aspect of divine nature, the divine mysteriousness or incomprehensibility⁶³ is highlighted by apophatic theology stressing the fact that God is in fact different than anything that we may think of him/her. God is the other, the different. This considered, are there human beings who are more “other/different” than people with intellectual disabilities?

From this point of view, people with intellectual disabilities may be considered to particularly reflect the image of the first person of the Holy Trinity. It is the Father, who is the ultimate mystery, the obscure, transcendent source of everything that exists, the hidden pre-origin.⁶⁴ This truth about the first person of the Holy Trinity is rendered by the imagery of an empty throne or by referring to God as “silence”. It is only through the Son in the Holy Spirit that we may come to know God.

People with intellectual disabilities are thus an image of God not despite their disabilities but because of them,⁶⁵ as their unique, yet fully human condition distinctly reflects the truth of God as the communion of interdependent and diverse persons, who in his/her relation to the world always remains “the other”, remains the ultimate mystery.

Viewing the concept of God’s image through the lens of disability has yet another significant advantage, according to the World Council of Churches: “Among other things it exposes the unconscious assumption, which pervades many of our cultures, that only a ‘perfect’ person can reflect fully the image of God—where ‘perfect’ means to be successful, attractive, young and not disabled.”⁶⁶

The divine image, however, is hardly to be found in the image of “perfection” propagated by the mass media. *Imago Dei* is present in every human being regardless of the disabilities and limitations of their mind or body,⁶⁷ and sometimes, indeed, revealed through those very limitations or disabilities.

⁶³ Obviously, it is not about denying any possibility of knowing God but about emphasizing the inadequacy of our knowledge that is at stake here.

⁶⁴ Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 170; 185-186.

⁶⁵ Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, 100.

⁶⁶ World Council of Churches, “Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology” 44

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 45.

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