

Human Sexuality in a Fallen World: An Economy of Mercy and Grace¹

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Mercy and truth have met together; justice and peace have kissed each other.

—Psalm 85:10

Although God may be surpassingly merciful, his mercy in no way obviates his justice. For a mercy that removes justice deserves much more to be called stupidity rather than virtue, and this does not befit God.

—Thomas Aquinas, *In III Sent.* d. 1, q. 1, a. 2, ad 4

Introduction: Divine Mercy, Human Sexuality, and the Dominant Self-Images of the Age

THIS IS A THEOLOGICAL ESSAY about divine mercy and human sexuality—much more, though, about the former than the latter—and about the ways in which divine mercy comes to inform human sexuality. The following is, therefore, as much an exercise in dogmatic theology as it is an exercise in moral theology. Incidentally,

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented as a paper—with the precise topic captured in the title assigned to me—at the 16th plenary session of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, “St. Thomas Aquinas, Marriage, and the Family,” June 17–19, 2016 at the Casina Pio IV, Vatican. I am grateful to Romanus Cessario, O.P., Nancy Heitzenrater Hütter, Stephan Kampowski, Julio Raul Mendez, John O’Callaghan, Luca F. Tuninetti, Michael Waldstein, Thomas Joseph White, O.P., and an anonymous peer reviewer for their suggestions and criticisms.

the article will make plain that dogmatic and moral theology cannot be separated meaningfully from each other, for they are two integral parts of one single discipline, or science: sacred theology. And because one of the theologians who exemplified in his theological work the integration of dogmatic and moral theology was Thomas Aquinas, I shall draw upon him in the following as my central resource and interlocutor.

Quite likely, there has been no other age compared to ours—the age of the late-modern consumer capitalist societies of the Western Hemisphere—that has been as obsessed with sex and, at the same time, as confused about it as ours, especially since the invention and widespread use of biochemical means of contraception. It is far from an overstatement to characterize these later modern consumer societies as being in the iron grip of an unrelenting pan-sexism that increasingly subjects all religious, political, social, and cultural discourses to an ever more comprehensive and aggressive policing of all aspects of public and, increasingly, also private life. This state of affairs constitutes a considerable challenge for the Catholic Church, her mission, catechesis, and preaching in these societies, a challenge that remains largely unaddressed because too many Christians are all too deeply affected by the obsession with, as well as the confusion about, human sexuality in the wake of the principled separation of sexuality from procreation.

In order to address this challenge constructively and effectively, it seems to me to be necessary for the Church first to realize why and how human sexuality has become the ideological battleground for the two dominant competing self-images of the age, angelism and animalism, then second, to find a way to reintegrate human sexuality theologically into the encompassing divine scheme of creation and redemption—the divine economy of mercy and grace—and third, to discover a way to think and talk theologically about divine mercy in a societal context that tends immediately to mistake mercy for an all-embracing and principled divine indulgence and permissiveness. Finally, when operating within these Western or thoroughly Westernized societies held in the iron grip of pan-sexism, the Church will have to make a persuasive case for the following: first, that it is false to assume that human sexuality can be sufficiently understood by, on the one hand, taking it to be a matter of sovereign human self-definition or self-construction or, on the other hand, regarding it as a form of behavior analogous to that of advanced primates; and secondly, that to make such an assumption is nothing but to endorse one or the other of the two dominant but erroneous *anthropocentric* self-images of

the age, angelism and animalism. In order to escape the Babylonian captivity to one or the other of these false self-images, the Church will have to begin to think again in an unapologetically theological and *theocentric* way about human sexuality.

This essay is a modest proposal on behalf of this fourfold task. I shall first name the modern problematic that turns human sexuality into the battleground between the two dominant, competing, and equally erroneous anthropocentric self-images of the age, angelism and animalism. I will then adumbrate the encompassing economy of mercy and grace into which human sexuality falls when considered in a proper and unapologetically theological context, a context free from the distortive invasions by the two dominant self-images. I shall subsequently clarify the nature of divine mercy by drawing attention to a crucial distinction that Aquinas draws between two aspects of divine mercy and then put his theological account of divine mercy into sharp contrast with two erroneous forms of a divine necessitism of mercy. In a further step, I will consider Aquinas's analysis of the goods of human nature and subsequently the wounds of human nature consequent upon sin. Finally, I will name the difference the woundedness of human nature and the corresponding divine economy of mercy and grace makes for the theological understanding of human sexuality, for its liberation from the two erroneous self-images of the age, and for the inchoately realized eschatology that is integral to the divine economy of mercy and grace.

Modernity's Anthropocentric Turn and Human Sexuality: The Battleground for the *Agon* between a Gnostic "Angelism" and a Naturalist "Animalism"

In the early decades of the twenty-first century an observant spectator might perceive the striking ambiguity that haunts late modern humanity in the Western Hemisphere. The rapidly accelerating progress of the scientific penetration of the natural world and the ensuing technological domination of the whole planet seem to have advanced humanity into a quasi-divine position, into a collective Demiurge. Sovereignty, once upon a time an exclusive attribute of divinity, seems now to fall to humanity collectively, and in rather far reaching specific ways to each individual human subject.

In the affluent parts of the Western Hemisphere, subjective sovereignty is exercised by way of the unfettered rule of one's will over ideally everything exterior to one's will, from myriads of consumer goods to varyingly branded identities, and last but not least, ideo-

logical and religious affiliations. However, the interpretation of reality that the natural sciences communicate to the public presents a jarringly different picture—a picture that puts into question the very possibility of subjective sovereignty. The human mind is understood as an epiphenomenon of the brain's neurological processes and human choices are predicted with statistical precision and unmasked as ultimately driven by nothing other than the interests of the “selfish gene.”

And so it comes that the late-modern subject vacillates between two competing self-images, between, on the one side, what might be called the gnostic angelism of the sovereign self that may submit to its will an absolutely malleable and fluid exteriority and, on the other side, the materialist animalism of a super-primate allegedly determined by its genetic make-up and its particular ecological niche. The existentialist self-image of the sovereign subject and the competing naturalist self-image of the super-primate constantly destabilize each other precisely because they are nothing but the two contradictory effects brought about by the modern anthropocentric turn.² This turn, prepared in the Italian Renaissance, ushered in by Cartesian rationalism and Humean empiricism, and solidified by Kant's critical idealism, raised the specter of the irreconcilable bifurcation between a gnostic angelism and a materialist animalism. Both self-images of the age are false and, hence, ultimately uninhabitable by human beings.

With the rapid increase of biotechnological means of turning the human body into a malleable medium of self-design, human sexuality has become a primary, if not the central domain for affirming and exercising subjective sovereignty. Under these conditions, the creaturely gift and givenness of one's sexual constitution and gender specification is seen as inherently incompatible with the self-image of subjective sovereignty. For the sovereign self, this creaturely gift and given is nothing but a random constraint of one's sovereign self-constitution, a constraint to be cast off with the help of biotech-

² In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant advances a profound analysis of this distinctly modern problematic and, tacitly presupposing the ontological and epistemological entailments of the anthropocentric turn, elevates the problematic to the dignity of one of the four antinomies of pure reason, the antinomy between causality according the laws of nature and spontaneity—in short, the antinomy between determination and freedom; see “Die Antinomie der reinen Vernunft,” under “Transzendente Elementarlehre,” in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Philosophische Bibliothek 37a (Hamburg: Meiner, 1956), 462–66 (A 444/B472–A 452/B 480).

nological interventions. Indeed, subjective sovereignty requires all constraints that might arise from the antecedent givenness of one's embodied existence ideally to be reduced to the bare minimum, the mere existence of the sovereign subject, the subject that sovereignly determines its essence, which comes to include, among many other properties, the sovereign subject's sexual specification, gender, and gender expression. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, his creative misunderstanding of Heidegger's *Being and Time* in his own programmatic *Being and Nothingness*, has thus found a late and not altogether surprising renaissance in the deeply utopian angelism characteristic of current trans-humanism: thrown into an existence bereft of antecedent meaning—that is, God—we are doomed to create our essence freely and, thus, create meaning. In an age in which the human imagination is dominated by the utopian promises of bioengineering and, at the same time, in the grip of pan-sexism, such Sartrean self-creation focuses all too predictably on the free specification of one's sexuality and construction of one's gender.

In a world in which its status as primordial gift, as creation *ex nihilo*, ordered by divine providence, is denied, forgotten, or occluded, any primordial givenness becomes an alienating and humiliating *fatum* threatening to thwart the pretensions of subjective sovereignty. All forms of givenness must therefore be repudiated in order to affirm this much desired self-image.

"Human sexuality," being itself a distinctly modern term and concept, thus dramatically reflects the *aporia* at the heart of the modern anthropocentric turn.³ The late-modern understanding of

³ See the instructive entry "Sexualität" (esp. "II. Sexualität im Denken der Moderne") by M. Schetsche and R. Lautmann in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, vol. 9 (Basel, CH: Schwabe & Co., 1995), 725–42. For the crucial stages in the development of the genuinely modern conceptuality of human sexuality, see Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), trans. James Strachey (London: Imago Publications, 1949); Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: Perennial, 1935); Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* (New York: William Morrow, 1949); Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-governing Character Structure* (1936), trans. Theodore P. Wolfe (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1945); Alfred C. Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1948); Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1953); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston:

human sexuality is caught in the *agon* between (on the one side) the gnostic angelism, its artificial, biotechnologically imposed separation of sex, procreation, and gender and its insistence upon sovereign gender expression and (on the other side) the naturalist animalism conceiving of sexuality as genetically determined and as, in turn, determining human beings in a significant if not comprehensive way. Angelism and animalism, arguably the characteristic consequences of the modern anthropocentric turn, constitute the opposite poles of the arena in which the contemporary, essentially *aporetic agon* over human sexuality unfolds. This peculiar situation accounts for the mutually exclusive views, often simultaneously held by one and the same person, of (on the one hand) “heterosexuality,” “homosexuality,” and other assumed “sexualities” as genetic givens that shape the identity, desires, and agency of every person in profound and presumably irreversible ways versus (on the other hand) “sexuality” as the fluid material base to be freely claimed, determined, and employed as an instrument for sovereign gender expression. In short, at stake is the qualifier “human” in “human sexuality.” Predominantly, this qualifier is interpreted either in an “angelist” way—and thereby inflated—or in an “animalist” way—and thereby abolished.

Because the late modern syntax and grammar of “human sexuality” is fraught with this central *aporia*, contemporary Catholic theological reflection about “human sexuality” would be ill advised to read this precarious predicament as one of the “signs of the times” that might offer guidance or illumination for theological reflection.⁴

Beacon Press, 1955); Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (New York: Science House, 1968); John Money and Anke Ehrhardt, *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl: The Differentiation and Dimorphism of Gender Identity from Conception to Maturity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1976–1984), 3 vols., trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978–1988); and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁴ By mistaking the deliveries of the dominant spirit of the age for signs of the times, one might, for instance, be tempted, but still ill-advised, to substitute the objective realism of a theology of the body with a theology of “love,” thereby embracing not only all the implications of the anthropocentric turn but also, with it, the central tenets of the characteristically modern moral theory of emotivism. For two profound and still pertinent critiques of emotivism, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981), 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), esp. 6–35, and (for a wider audience in a less technical form) C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (1944) (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

Rather, Catholic theological reflection about human sexuality in a fallen world and in light of an overarching economy of mercy and grace will have to position itself in a fundamentally critical relationship to this contemporary discussion precisely because the normative principles that inform the two presently dominant interpretations are philosophically dubious and theologically false.⁵ Nothing less than a thorough *ressourcement* is called for that reaches back behind the modern anthropocentric turn. I submit that Aquinas's integration of an account of human sexuality in a theocentric economy of mercy, grace, and deification is of an ongoing fundamental relevance for the contemporary consideration of these difficult questions.

The Economy of Mercy and Grace according to Thomas Aquinas

Stated up front, Aquinas's fundamental theological axiom is that, in principle and considered *comprehensively* and in respect to humans, the extant order of divine providence is identical with the economy of mercy and grace.⁶ The economy of mercy and grace begins with creation, has its center in the death and Resurrection of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, and comes to its completion in the new creation and in the deification of the elect.⁷

⁵ For noteworthy efforts of philosophical clarification that are as instructive as they are constructive, see (from an approach characteristic of contemporary natural science) Nicanor Austriaco, O.P., "The Specification of Sex/Gender in the Human Species: A Thomistic Analysis," *New Blackfriars* 94 (2013): 701–15. For a metaphysical approach, see John Finley, "The Metaphysics of Gender: A Thomistic Approach," *The Thomist* 79.4 (2015): 585–614; and for a social philosophical approach utilizing metaphysical concepts, see Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ In his consideration of divine providence in *Summa theologiae* (ST) I, q. 22, a. 3, Aquinas distinguishes between, on the one hand, the type of things ordered to their respective ends (*providentia* in the strict sense) and, on the other hand, the execution of this order, *gubernatio* (providence in the wider sense, encompassing its very execution). In the following, "the extant order of divine providence" refers to the latter, the order of execution, or *gubernatio*, government.

⁷ Aquinas was, of course, first and foremost a *magister in sacra pagina*. Unsurprisingly, his biblical commentaries offer a rich resource for a deeper, nuanced, and scripturally informed understanding of divine mercy. Yet, tracing Aquinas's interpretations of divine *misericordia* in his biblical commentaries far exceeds the scope of this essay. For an instructive first step in this direction and in conversation with modern biblical exegesis, see Yves Congar, O.P., "La miséricorde, attribut souverain de Dieu," *La vie spirituelle* 482 (1962): 380–95.

In one important respect, however, the economy of mercy and grace differs from the extant order of divine providence. When considered *specifically*, the economy of mercy and grace and the extant order of divine providence are not simply identical. Rather, there obtains a causal relationship between the two, for the root and origin of God's providential government is indeed nothing but God's mercy. The title of Pope Francis's recent book-length conversation, *The Name of God Is Mercy*,⁸ echoes Thomas Aquinas, who already states, "Misericordia est Deo maxime attribuenda."⁹ Mercy is most especially attributed to God, not, of course, in the sense of an emotion that God undergoes, but rather in the sense of an effect of God's agency.

This effect of divine mercy is of such an all-encompassing nature that, for the sake of clarity, it is advisable to distinguish between two aspects of divine mercy: primordial ontological mercy₁, and redemptive and perfective mercy₂. The latter, mercy₂, is what we usually understand by mercy. But it is crucial to realize that mercy₂ arises from and completely depends upon the primordial ontological mercy₁. Why does this distinction matter and to what exactly do these two aspects of mercy refer?

Mercy₂ denotes the dynamic of gratuitous perfections being given by God in order to redeem and deify the human being; in short, mercy₂ encompasses the economy of salvation, the whole *ordo salutis* centering in the death, Resurrection, and Ascension of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.¹⁰ To bestow perfections pertains primarily to God's goodness, but also to God's justice (insofar as perfections are given to things in proportion), to God's liberality (insofar as God does not bestow these perfections for God's own use), and finally, to God's mercy (insofar as they are given in order to expel defects). Aquinas states, "It does most properly [*maxime*] belong to Him to dispel that misery, whatever be the defect we call by that name."¹¹

⁸ Pope Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli*, trans. Oonagh Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016).

⁹ *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3, corp. Latin citations from *ST* are taken from <http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html>.

¹⁰ For the best recent Thomist treatise on Christology that articulates with great lucidity the very heart and center of the *ordo salutis*, see Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomist Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

¹¹ *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3 corp.: "Repellere miseriam alterius, hoc maxime ei competit, ut per miseriam quemcumque defectum intelligamus." All English citations

This is redemptive and perfective mercy₂. Crucially, mercy₂ does not contradict, annul, or replace divine justice, but rather perfects it. As Aquinas observes, “God acts mercifully, not indeed by going against His justice, but by doing something more than justice. Mercy does not destroy justice, but in a sense is the fullness thereof. And thus it is said, ‘Mercy exalteth itself above judgment’” (Jas 2:13).¹²

It might be worth considering what it would entail if redemptive and perfective mercy₂ were not the perfection of divine justice but rather its contradiction, annulment, or replacement. It seems, for instance, that, under this supposition, the ecclesial practice of granting indulgences to the faithful would become, at best, an empty gesture, or worse, a strategy of simulation. Yet the practice of granting indulgences has been consistently affirmed by the universal magisterium and is universally accepted in the Catholic Church.¹³ But indulgences only make theological sense on the very presupposition that redemptive and perfective mercy₂ is not a replacement or annulment of divine justice, but rather its very perfection.

Hence it is crucial to understand that redemptive and perfective mercy₂ presupposes divine justice. Yet it is equally important to grasp that divine justice, in turn, presupposes primordial ontological mercy₁. If mercy is the removal of any kind of defect, then mercy, Aquinas argues, must be found in all of God’s works, including creation. But creation seems to presuppose nothing and, hence, as the objection states, “in creation neither mercy nor justice is found.”¹⁴ In response, Aquinas argues that, “although creation presupposes nothing in the universe; yet it does presuppose something in the knowledge of God. In this way too the idea of justice is preserved in creation; by the production of beings in a manner that accords with the divine wisdom and goodness. And the idea of

from *ST* are taken from the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948; repr. 1981 by Christian Classics), and alterations are indicated by English in square brackets.

¹² *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3, ad 2: “Deus misericorditer agit, non quidem contra iustitiam suam faciendo, sed aliquid supra iustitiam operando. . . . Ex quo patet quod misericordia non tollit iustitiam, sed est quaedam iustitiae plenitudo. Unde dicitur Iac. II, quod *misericordia superexaltat iudicium*.”

¹³ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§1471–79.

¹⁴ *ST* I, q. 21, a. 4, obj. 4: “Praeterea, iustitiae est reddere debitum, misericordiae autem sublevare miseriam, et sic tam iustitia quam misericordia aliquid praesupponit in suo opere. Sed creatio nihil praesupponit. Ergo in creatione neque misericordia est, neque iustitia.”

mercy, also, is preserved in the change of creatures from non-existence to existence.”¹⁵

This understanding of the primordial ontological mercy₁ is echoed when Aquinas discusses the virtue of mercy in question 30 of the *Summa theologiae* (ST) II-II. In article 4, he considers whether mercy is the greatest of virtues. He states, “In itself, mercy takes precedence of other virtues, for it belongs to mercy to be bountiful to others, and, what is more, to succor others in their wants, which pertains chiefly to one who stands above. Hence mercy is accounted as being proper to God: and therein His omnipotence is declared to be chiefly manifested.”¹⁶

This surpassing manifestation of divine omnipotence is nothing but the primordial ontological mercy₁. For, the effect of the primordial ontological mercy₁ is the *dare esse*, the granting of gratuitous participation in the act of being and, thereby, the removal, so to speak, of the deficiency of the non-existence of creatures. Consequently, mercy₁ is the ontological origin of all effects of mercy₂. Aquinas concludes, “So in every work of God, viewed at its primary source, there appears mercy. In all that follows, the power of mercy remains, and works indeed with ever greater force; as the influence of the first cause is more intense than that of second causes.”¹⁷

Hence, even grace comes by way of being, as the eminent German Thomist philosopher Ferdinand Ulrich¹⁸ used to say, the first effect of primordial ontological mercy₁. And consequently, the concrete economy of mercy and grace presupposes not only divine justice but also the reality of creation, the effect of the primordial ontological mercy₁.

¹⁵ ST I, q. 21, a. 4, ad 4: “Licet creationi non praesupponatur aliquid in rerum natura, praesupponitur tamen aliquid in Dei cognitione. Et secundum hoc etiam salvatur ibi ratio iustitiae, inquantum res in esse producit, secundum quod convenit divinae sapientiae et bonitati. Et salvatur quodammodo ratio misericordiae, inquantum res de non esse in esse mutatur.”

¹⁶ ST II-II, q. 30, a. 4, corp.: “Secundum se quidem misericordia maxima est. Pertinet enim ad misericordiam quod alii effundat; et, quod plus est, quod defectus aliorum sublevet; et hoc est maxime superioris. Unde et misereri ponitur proprium Deo, et in hoc maxime dicitur eius omnipotentia manifestari.”

¹⁷ ST I, q. 21, a. 4, corp.: “Et sic in quolibet opere Dei apparet misericordia, quantum ad primam radicem eius. Cuius virtus salvatur in omnibus consequentibus; et etiam vehementius in eis operatur, sicut causa primaria vehementius influit quam causa secunda.”

¹⁸ Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage*, introd. by Martin Bieler, 2nd ed. (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1998), 111.

Yet it is important to realize that the primordial ontological mercy₁ is, in turn, not without its own proper presupposition. For, the *dare esse*, the granting of the gratuitous participation in the act of being that is the first effect of primordial ontological mercy₁, is posterior to God's ideas (*rationes*).¹⁹ Since the divine ideas are only notionally different from the divine essence, they antecede the *dare esse* logically as well as ontologically.²⁰ Yet, because God does have providence over all things immediately in the ideas of the divine mind, including natural causes and the operations of animals, the first aspect of divine providence, *providentia* in the strict sense, is eternal and, therefore, not the subject of primordial ontological mercy₁, but rather an entailment of divine knowledge. Hence, while *providentia* in the strict sense pertains to God's *essence*, primordial ontological mercy₁ and the extant order of divine providence or governance, in contrast, pertain to God's *works*.

In summary, in the logical order of the divine names as they pertain to God's works, primordial ontological mercy₁ antecedes divine justice,²¹ and redemptive and perfective mercy₂ follows upon divine justice.²² Divine mercy thus does not abolish but rather envelopes and perfects divine justice. There is no redemptive and perfective mercy₂ without the antecedent divine justice, and there is no divine justice without the antecedent ontological mercy₁. Divine justice, the execution of divine wisdom, qualifies mercy₁, the effect of divine goodness and liberality, and thereby provides the basis for mercy₂.

Mercy₂ is a quite unique perfection of mercy₁ insofar as it does not—like the ontological mercy₁—pertain to all creatures, but rather specifically to rational creatures, angels and humans, and their ordination to beatitude. Aquinas states that “not every defect can properly be called a misery; but only a defect in a rational nature whose lot is to be happy; for misery is opposed to happiness [*felicitas*].”²³ The

¹⁹ For an excellent discussion of this important but complex topic in Aquinas's theology, see Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplary Causes* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

²⁰ *ST I*, q. 15, a. 1, ad 3.

²¹ *ST I*, q. 21, a. 4, corp.: “The work of divine justice always presupposes the work of mercy; and is founded thereupon.” (“Opus autem divinae iustitiae semper praesupponit opus misericordiae, et in eo fundatur.”)

²² See the citation of *ST I*, q. 21, a. 3, ad 2, in note 12 above.

²³ *ST I*, q. 21, a. 4, corp.: “Quamvis non omnis defectus proprie possit dici miseria, sed solum defectus rationalis naturae, quam contingit esse felicem; nam miseria felicitati opponitur.”

effect of the primordial ontological mercy₁ is creaturely existence as specified by divine wisdom in the extant order of divine providence; the effect of redemptive and perfective mercy₂ is the special help that humans—finite, fallible, and wounded by original and actual sin—receive in order to attain beatitude. Both mercy₁ and mercy₂ are ultimately effects of divine omnipotence and informed by divine wisdom, and therefore, one can rightly say that the surpassing manifestation of divine omnipotence is mercy. The double gratuity of the effects of mercy₁ and mercy₂—creaturely existence and the salvation and deification of the rational creature—presuppose a horizon of needfulness, first, of absolute ontological “poverty” (as per Ferdinand Ulrich), the utter inability of every creature to establish and sustain its existence on its own, and second, of the woundedness of human nature due to original and actual sin and the consequent estrangement from God. Without a keen and explicit awareness in the life of faith, as well as in theology, of the absolute ontological needfulness from which primordial mercy₁ lifts all creatures by way of the *dare esse* and the ongoing sustaining of their existence, thus putting every creature into a real relation with God, and the woundedness of human nature and consequent estrangement from God by sin, from which mercy₂ saves sinners and restores them to friendship with God—in short, without a keen and explicit awareness of the infinite gratuitous condescension of God to the creature and to the sinner—the very notion of divine mercy stands in grave danger of corruption into some form of divine necessitism. Such an erroneous necessitism of divine mercy usually takes either a theocentric and ontological or an anthropocentric and pseudo-ethical form.

Two Forms of an Erroneous Necessitism of Divine Mercy

Theocentric ontological necessitism of divine mercy characteristically conceives of creation as the dynamic excess of a divine life of love that is irrepressibly diffusive of itself and of salvation as the irresistible return of the excess to its source and, thus, culminates in a comprehensive universalism, the *apokatastasis tōn pantōn*, that, in virtue of the logical necessity of the system, also includes the salvation of Satan. The most brilliant twentieth-century articulation of such a necessitism of divine mercy can be found in Sergius Bulgakov’s grandiose speculative synthesis of creation and salvation articulated most extensively in *The Bride*

of the Lamb.²⁴ Bulgakov's subtle, sublime, and nevertheless profoundly problematic account of a thoroughgoing theocentric necessitism turns on the *exitus* and *reditus* of the created *sophia* from and into the Divine *Sophia*, an account that makes the primordial ontological mercy₁ identical with the divine essence such that the Triune God is *essentially* Creator, and the divine *Sophia*, the life of the Triune God, diffuses itself, therefore, unavoidably and folds mercy₂ completely into mercy₁ as its soteriological recapitulation and return. Divine mercy is not a matter of an infinite and infinitely free and gratuitous divine condescension, but rather a matter of the dynamic excess of divine being, love, and life, an essential property issuing in a necessary modality of the divine life, *Sophia*, uncreated as well as created.

A much more problematic and theologically far less benign and infinitely less beautiful, indeed outright appalling, form of the necessitism of divine mercy is its modern anthropocentric and quasi-ethical instantiation. It is a quite amorphous and widespread phenomenon that John Henry Newman encountered already in the Church of England in the earlier parts of the nineteenth century, a phenomenon he characterized as "the religion natural to a civilized age." In his sermon "The Religion of the Day," he asks, "What is the world's religion now? It has taken the brighter side of the Gospel,—its tidings of comfort, its precepts of love; all darker, deeper views of man's condition and prospects being comparatively forgotten. This is the religion *natural* to a civilized age, and well has Satan dressed and completed it into an idol of the Truth."²⁵

In an increasingly anthropocentric rendition of the Christian faith—one increasingly deformed by the late-modern self-image of subjective sovereignty, the granting of divine mercy turns into a human entitlement. The anthropocentric reconstitution of the Christian faith in its rationalistic strand (to be contrasted with its pietistic strand) includes God as just another moral agent into an encompassing, univocal ethical framework, a framework that, by the sheer necessity of its conceptual constitution, puts God in the dock. God is on trial, and at stake is God's acquittal in light of his alleged causation, or at least permission, of evil, especially horrendous evil. This is the project of modern rationalistic theodicy, the seemingly benign cousin of atheism. Let me

²⁴ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

²⁵ John Henry Newman, *Plain and Parochial Sermons I* (London: Longmans, Green 1907), 311–12.

explain: on the supposition that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and good, so the reasoning goes, God must be ultimately responsible for natural and moral evil and, therefore, also for human failure and sin and all the suffering that comes along with it.²⁶ One could, of course, remove the divine attributes of omnipotence and omniscience, but such a severely amputated deity is hardly worth putting into the dock in the first place, for it appears all too human. Hence—on the supposition of divine omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness—there remains only one possibility for an acquittal, for a successful theodicy: the commitment of the deity to the moral obligation of a complete and even surpassing restitution, if not in this life then in the life to come, that means comprehensive divine indulgence in this life and universal salvation in the life to come, with all of this understood as the just restitution of the claimant and the necessary condition for the acquittal of the accused. Lest the deity in the dock be faced with the death sentence (the declaration of the non-existence of the accused), the reception of unqualified divine mercy in the form of universal divine indulgence and salvation can be nothing but a just entitlement of the sovereign subject. In short, universal indulgence and salvation is the only way that the deity in the dock may acquit himself—in light of the reality of evil, sin, and suffering—from the charge of neglect of due diligence as creator and governor of the universe. As an exemplary rendition of this quasi-ethical necessitism of divine mercy that the sovereign subject claims as an entitlement may serve the well-known death-bed remark by the nineteenth-century German writer and poet Heinrich Heine, who actually quotes Voltaire: “Of course God will forgive me; that’s his job.” Most often, this quasi-ethical necessitism of divine mercy is not formulated quite as stridently, but in more subtle, subdued, and only partially conscious ways in much of contemporary anthropocentric faith and piety, be it Catholic or Protestant. When claimed as an entitlement to universal divine indulgence, divine mercy ceases to be mercy, and the sin of presumption is mistaken for the sovereign subject’s just moral claim upon the Creator.

²⁶ For a remarkably thorough and profound theological investigation from a theocentric Thomist perspective that treats the problem of evil, the fall, and human existence under sin in the context of a thorough Augustinian-Thomist defense of divine mercy as the first cause of all of God’s works, see the treatise of Aloysius M. Ciappi, O.P., who later became a cardinal and was a distinguished theologian of the pontifical household from 1955 to 1989: *De divina misericordia ut prima causa operum Dei* (Rome: Scuola Tipographica Missionaria Domenicana, Convento di S. Sisto Vecchio, 1935).

In his homily from March 3, 2016 in the chapel of the Vatican's Santa Marta guest house, Pope Francis addressed this self-deceptive attitude of entitlement by emphasizing that only when we recognize ourselves as sinners can we receive God's mercy. Recognizing ourselves as sinners presupposes a keen awareness not first and foremost of God's mercy, but rather of God's surpassing holiness, majesty, and justice and of humanity's—that is, our own—profound woundedness by sin, original and actual—what Newman calls “all darker, deeper views of man's condition and prospects,”—an awareness that the anthropocentric religion of subjective sovereignty, “the religion natural to a civilized age,” systemically suppresses. Yet, without such a keen awareness, rooted in divine revelation and received in divine faith, we humans are unable to understand and appreciate the utter astonishment and wonder of the Psalmist, who asks in Psalm 8, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” (Ps 8:4, NRSV), and we are consequently unable to conceive of divine mercy as something extraordinary. Why should I long for, hope for, and rejoice in God's infinite mercy when I am actually entitled to the everlasting indulgence of the deity in the dock? Primordial ontological mercy₁ is only mercy when seen as the utterly free and sovereign effect of the divine will as informed by divine wisdom, and redemptive and perfective mercy₂ is only mercy when it is understood as the utterly free gratuity of an eternal divine decree that does not abolish, but rather perfects, divine justice. When hardened into the attitude of putative sovereignty and assumed self-righteousness, modern subjects are constitutively incapable of recognizing in surpassing gratitude the primordial ontological mercy₁ to which they owe their very lives and of receiving in utter humility and joy the redemptive and perfective mercy₂ that restores them to their eternal destiny of surpassing happiness. Mistaken for a morally-necessary universal divine indulgence due to humanity for acquitting the deity in the dock from the charge of culpable negligence, mercy becomes an entitlement in service of the subject's putative sovereignty, a widespread form of *de facto* practical atheism in many corners of late-modern, putatively-enlightened Catholic and Protestant Christianity “come of age” in the Western Hemisphere, where the self-image of the subjective sovereignty is taking an ever stronger, albeit contested, hold of the collective imagination.

Avoiding such a false necessitism of divine mercy is greatly assisted by recovering the ontological foundation of divine mercy in the metaphysics of creation. It is to this topic that we must turn now.

Mercy₁ and Mercy₂: Ontological and Soteriological Participation

Aquinas's metaphysics of creation rests on the fundamental principle "creare est dare esse," that to create is to grant each creature a participation in its respective *actus essendi*. This principle marks the primordial onto-theological difference between the source of all being, the transcendent, infinite, and perfect self-subsistent Being, *ipsum esse subsistens*, and each respective participating *actus essendi*, terminating in the participating *datum*, the gift of the contingent existence of discrete creatures. It signifies in metaphysical terms both the source and the effect of the primordial ontological mercy₁.

The ontological reality of the natural participation of all finite beings in their respective *actus essendi* allows Aquinas to consider analogically the surpassing supernatural participation of the rational creature in the divine nature.²⁷ This supernatural participation rests on sanctifying grace as its quasi-ontological foundation and is realized in the acts of the supernatural *habitus* of charity, the most eminent of the three infused theological virtues, issuing in an inchoative union with God. This is the effect of the redemptive and perfective mercy₂. The whole economy of mercy and grace, considered comprehensively (comprising mercy₁ and mercy₂), thus encompasses the orders of natural participation of all creatures in their respective *actus essendi* and of supernatural inchoative participation of rational creatures in the life of the Triune God.

How does this dynamic participation (the economy of mercy and grace) unfold, and what are its characteristic features? According to the ontological constitution and the teleological dynamism of finite being, each creature is first and foremost directed to its own perfection, to the full actualization of its specific nature. Simultaneously, by way of the self-same actualization of its specific nature, every

²⁷ On the topic of deification in the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, see the two important recent studies: Bernhard Blankenhorn, O.P., *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015); and Daria Spezzano, *The Glory of God's Grace: Deification According to St. Thomas Aquinas* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2015). See also the magisterial account offered by Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, *La gracia como participación de la naturaleza divina según Santo Tomás de Aquino* (Salamanca, ES: Universidad Pontificia, 1979), and Sorondo, "La grazia come partecipazione della natura divina: Implicazioni antropologiche dei misteri della fede Cristiana," *Doctor Communis: Review of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas* (2014): 83–93.

creature is directed to the twofold good of the universe: the order among the parts and the ordering of the whole universe to God.²⁸ Nothing short of the universe's perfection is the fitting manifestation of God's wisdom and goodness. Toward that end, Aquinas argues, God created an abundance of diverse beings with a plethora of different perfections in order that the universe as a whole may more perfectly manifest and participate God's goodness. Creatures do precisely that, not simply by participating their respective *actus essendi*, but to a much greater degree by imitating God through their characteristic operations, thereby causing—proportionate to their specific natures—distinct states of being. For this very reason, Aquinas argues, God created all things in a state of potency to their specific type of operation, which is the full realization of their specific nature. By realizing their specific nature through these acts, all creatures contribute to the perfection of the universe. These secondary perfections are the way each creature participates the eternal law, the *ratio* by way of which God governs the universe—that is, establishes and executes the extant order of providence.²⁹ God's *ratio*, the eternal law, has imprinted upon all creatures natural inclinations to their proper natural ends. Precisely by following their natural inclinations, all creatures pursue their own perfection and contribute to the perfection of the whole universe.³⁰

Yet, God's wisdom ordains that the perfection of the universe transcends the finality proportionate to finite created natures, that it transcends the perfection that arises from the participation of all beings in their respective *actus essendi*. The only possible participation that transcends the participation of finite beings in their *actus essendi* must be an utterly unique and surpassingly mysterious participation in the transcendent infinite and perfect self-subsisting Being, the *ipsum esse subsistens*—in short, nothing but a kind of participation in the divine nature itself. For this surpassing end, God has created rational creatures (angels and humans) as dynamic images of the

²⁸ See esp. *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 29; III, chs. 23–32. On this topic, now available in English, see the important essay by Charles de Koninck, “The Primacy of the Common Good against the Personalists,” in *The Writings of Charles de Koninck*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Ralph McInerny (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 63–108.

²⁹ For a lucid discussion of this complex topic, see John Rziha, *Perfecting Human Actions: St. Thomas Aquinas on Human Participation in Eternal Law* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

³⁰ See *ST* I-II, q. 91, a. 2; q. 94, a. 2.

divine Triune exemplar.³¹ Their perfect realization as images consists in their union with the divine exemplar, a participation in the divine nature that surpasses infinitely the participation in their respective *actus essendi*. Because God is a trinity of subsistent relations, persons in the fullest ontological sense,³² participation of the created image in the divine exemplar occurs by way of a conformation to the image of the Trinity. This conformation, flowing from the divine nature, is realized by way of the operations characteristic of the specific faculties rational creatures are endowed with, intellect and will. Aquinas states:

God is in all things by His essence, power, and presence, according to His one common mode, as the cause existing in the effects which participate in His goodness. Above and beyond this common mode, however, there is one special mode belonging to the rational nature wherein God is said to be present as the object known is in the knower, and the beloved in the lover. And since the rational creature by its operation of knowledge and love attains to God Himself, according to this special mode God is said not only to exist in the rational creature, but also to dwell therein as in His own temple.³³

Elected by God to this surpassing final end, the blessed *qua* creatures participate not only in their respective *actus essendi*, but rather, *qua* deified persons, also in the divine life and beatitude of the Triune God. Aquinas posits this divine *ordinatio* of humanity's final supernatural end in the very first article of the *ST*: "[The human being] is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason." Then he quotes the *Vulgate* rendition of a crucial passage he returns to frequently when considering the supernatural final end to which humanity is ordained. It is Isaiah 64:4, a passage that the Apostle Paul

³¹ *ST* I, q. 93, aa. 1 and 3.

³² *ST* I, q. 29, a. 4.

³³ *ST* I, q. 43, a. 3: "Est enim unus communis modus quo Deus est in omnibus rebus per essentiam, potentiam et praesentiam, sicut causa in effectibus participantibus bonitatem ipsius. Super istum modum autem communem, est unus specialis, qui convenit creaturae rationali, in qua Deus dicitur esse sicut cognitum in cognoscente et amatum in amante. Et quia, cognoscendo et amando, creatura rationalis sua operatione attingit ad ipsum Deum, secundum istum specialem modum Deus non solum dicitur esse in creatura rationali, sed etiam habitare in ea sicut in templo suo."

quotes in 1 Corinthians 2:9: “The eye has not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee.”³⁴

In order to carry out this *ordinatio* of his wisdom, God, “who moves all things to their due ends”³⁵ and thereby orders all things sweetly, adds supernatural forms to the natural powers of the rational creatures. The first of these supernatural forms, sanctifying grace, poured into the very essence of the soul, is the ontological principle and root of all the other supernatural forms or *habitus*, the theological virtues, the infused moral virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.³⁶ Thus, their intellect being informed by the theological virtue of faith and their will by the theological virtue of charity, the elect become, through faith and charity, inchoatively participators “of the divine Word and of the Love proceeding, so as freely to know God truly and to love God rightly.”³⁷

Among these supernaturally infused theological virtues, charity is of surpassing eminence, first because charity is a certain participation of the Holy Spirit in which all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are rooted. Secondly and even more importantly, charity is of surpassing eminence because, already in this life of the *viator*, charity affords an inchoative union with God. It is for this very reason Aquinas maintains that God is present in the souls of the just not only as the transcendent First Efficient Cause by his essence, power, and presence, but also as an object of the love of charity and of the connatural knowledge concomitant with charity and, hence, as a guest and friend. The formal cause of the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity is this quasi-experiential knowledge rooted in sanctifying grace and afforded by the love of charity and its connatural knowledge of the beloved.³⁸

³⁴ ST I, q. 1, a. 1: “Homo ordinatur ad Deum sicut ad quendam finem qui comprehensionem rationis excedit, secundum illud Isaiae LXIV, *oculus non vidit Deus absque te, quae praeparasti diligentibus te.*”

³⁵ ST II-II, q. 23, a. 2: “Unde Deus, qui omnia movet ad debitos fines, singulis rebus indidit formas per quas inclinantur ad fines sibi praestitutos a Deo, et secundum hoc disponit omnia suaviter, ut dicitur Sap. VIII.”

³⁶ ST I, q. 43, a. 3, ad 2: “Sanctifying grace disposes the soul to possess the divine person [Gratia gratum faciens disponit animam ad habendam divinam personam].”

³⁷ ST I, q. 38, a. 1.

³⁸ The infused *habitus* of sanctifying grace and the quasi-experiential knowledge of charity are conjoined formal causes of the indwelling of the Trinity. See Barthélemy Froget, O.P., *The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Souls of the Just According to the Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Sydney A. Raemers (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1952), and for a more comprehensive

This is, according to Aquinas, in a nutshell, the encompassing economy of mercy and grace that has as its end the deification and eternal beatitude of the rational creature. The whole sacramental order is one distinct expression of redemptive and perfective mercy₂, including especially the sacrament of marriage.³⁹ After having considered the overarching dynamic of this participation and its central features, we must turn to one central underlying structure characteristic of the rational creature—the order of reason.

The Order of Reason (*ordo rationis*) in the Extant Supernatural Order of Mercy and Grace

When considering the order of reason, it is of the utmost importance to remember that, according to Aquinas, the extant order of providence is a supernatural order, one in which, from the first moment of human creation, humanity was ordained for and called to communion in the life of the Blessed Trinity, an order of providence in which the divine life of charity was shared with humanity, was lost with the fall, and was regained—merited, to be precise—by Christ in his Passion on the Cross.⁴⁰ It is important to keep this in mind because, whenever Aquinas invokes the order of reason to which the virtues conform, he understands it to be in accordance with the truth of real things as they pertain to the extant order of providence. It is a theonomic order of a fundamentally supernatural orientation that participates variously in the eternal law and encompasses both nature and grace.

It is precisely this order that is implicitly or explicitly rejected by the two dominant self-images of the age. For gnostic angelism, even the suggestion of an order of reason is already offensive, for subjective sovereignty suffers only order that arises from the subject's sovereign will—if not *de facto*, so at least according to the self-image's projected ideal state of affairs. For materialist animalism, an order of reason is simply unintelligible, at best a useful figment of the human imagination. As an epiphenomenon of the brain's biochemical processes, the mind and its operation (reasoning) can, at its very best, be taken as a very unique, evolutionary-advanced tool of the super-primate

and conceptually more penetrating study that compares and contrasts Aquinas's account with those of St. Albert the Great, St. Bonaventure, and other interlocutors, see Francis L. B. Cunningham, O.P., *The Indwelling of the Trinity: A Historico-Doctrinal Study of the Theory of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Dubuque, IA: Priory Press, 1955).

³⁹ See *ST* III, q. 65, a. 1.

⁴⁰ See *ST* III, q. 48, esp. a. 1, but also aa. 2–6.

that the human is, a tool serving the purpose of fulfilling basic and advanced desires and, ultimately, of securing, if not ongoing, at least frequently recurring states of sensual pleasure. At this point at the latest it becomes obvious that, in the dispute with the two dominant self-images of the age, the order of reason in Aquinas's discourse takes on the function of a first principle. When I use the term "first principle" here, I do not use it in the sense of a first principle or cause in the metaphysical order, as Aquinas himself would have understood the term, for the order of reason is not a first principle in this sense. Rather, I use it in the sense of a first principle in the order of controversy and disputation as, significantly, John Henry Newman understands it. At the end of the tenth of his famous *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford*, he states the following: "Half the controversies in the world are verbal ones; and could they be brought to a plain issue, they would be brought to a prompt termination. Parties engaged in them would then perceive, either that in substance they agreed together, or that their difference was one of first principles. . . . When men understand what each other mean, they see, for the most part, that controversy is either superfluous or hopeless."⁴¹ I take the order of reason to be a first principle in precisely this sense, and it is for this very reason that, in the following, I shall not attempt to argue for the truth of the order of reason, but rather, supposing its truth, I shall simply describe how Aquinas understands it. For Catholics who have not forgotten the twofold order of knowledge (*duplex ordo cognitionis*) to which the First Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*, refers, this should be a matter of course, and no *prima facie* argument will convince those beholden by one or the other of the two dominant self-images of the age that the order of reason indeed obtains. To become convinced of this requires long and complex processes of deliberation at the end of which some might change their mind and come to acknowledge and participate in the order of reason. Such participation will eventually begin to immunize such a participant in the order of reason against the errors of angelism and animalism.

The fact that, contrary to our age, Aquinas could simply suppose the order of reason and appeal to it does not display his intellectual naiveté, as some might be all too eager to assume, but rather the depth

⁴¹ John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843*, introd. by Mary Katherine Tillman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 200–01.

to which our age is intellectually intoxicated with one or the other of the dominant self-images. Unaffected by such intoxication but under the influence of the divine illumination of the human mind by the virtue of faith, Aquinas perceives three essential entailments in the order of reason as it pertains to human sexuality. The first entailment is that the rational creature not obstruct the procreative purpose that is immanent to the sexual power,⁴² but rather fulfill it in marriage with its threefold good of *fides* (spousal faithfulness and friendship), *proles* (children), and *sacramentum* (instrumentality of salvation).⁴³ The order of reason implies, second, that the moral integrity of the human person remains intact and, third, that justice (what is due to the other person) be maintained among all persons (especially spouses, parents, and children preconceived, preborn, and born).⁴⁴ Contrary to the overwhelming modern secular departure from this understanding (and thereby from an accurate perception of the natural law), it is the case, according to Aquinas, that procuring venereal pleasure and engaging in sexual acts outside of marriage contradicts the order of reason (which, for the rational creature, *is* the order of nature) and consists in an act against the virtue of justice.

The order of reason in sexual matters is realized by the virtue of chastity.⁴⁵ Josef Pieper aptly states what is at stake in the virtue of chastity:

What we are concerned with here is that the purpose of sex as it was intended originally in the first creation, and ennobled by Christ in the New Creation, . . . the existential structure of the moral person, as established in nature and in grace; . . . [and]

⁴² For a compelling personalist development of Aquinas's principles, see Chad Engelland, "The Personal Significance of Sexual Reproduction," *The Thomist* 79.4 (2015): 615–39.

⁴³ See Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, §§72, 80–81.

⁴⁴ See Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §172. Admittedly, Aquinas holds that the relations between family members are too close for justice to work there properly. These relations must therefore operate on the basis of charity. But it would be wrong to understand charity as the poor substitute and stop-gap for justice. Rather, because justice does not work well in these relations, it is the surpassing perfection of justice—charity—that has to intervene in order to perfect what justice lacks. However, charity can only do so, of course, where it obtains. Absent charity, justice—supported by natural predilection of one's own children—will have to suffice.

⁴⁵ See Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §206.

the order among [humans] as guaranteed not merely by natural justice, but also by the higher justice of *caritas*, that is, supernatural love of God and man. Chastity realizes in the province of sex the order which corresponds to the truth of the world and of [humans] both as experienced and as revealed, and which accords with the twofold form of this truth—not that of unveiled evidence alone, but that of veiled evidence also—that is, of mystery.⁴⁶

The infused virtue of chastity is one instantiation of the redemptive and perfective mercy₂ in the healing and full restoration of the order of reason. The widespread late modern intellectual and volitional departure from the order of reason in sexual matters and the simultaneous widespread contempt for the virtue of chastity might arguably be directly proportional to the extent to which and to the intensity with which one or the other of the two dominant self-images of the age are embraced.

Yet, when considered theologically, the problem goes, of course, quite a bit deeper than the embrace of angelism and animalism. In order to understand the full scope of what is entailed in the restoration of the order of reason, especially as it pertains to human sexuality, we must consider Aquinas's analysis of the woundedness of human nature brought about by human sin, original and actual.

The Wounds of Human Nature Consequent Upon Original and Actual Sin

As is well known, Aquinas affirms Augustine's theology of evil and sin but undergirds it with a more robust metaphysics of participation. Evil (*malum*) is a partial privation of good and, more specifically, the absence of a specific good that is due. Sin (*peccatum*) is the absence of a due act, interior or exterior, in reference to God. Sin cannot undo the primary perfection, the subsistent terminus of the act of being, which is the essence of the rational creature. Sin does, however, have a profoundly negative impact on the secondary perfections, the realization of the good of a rational creature by way of that creature's actions or omission of actions. Because this is a matter of considerable importance for the overall topic, I shall attend at this point more closely to Aquinas's analysis.

⁴⁶ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 158.

In the first article within question 85 of *ST* I-II, Aquinas asks whether and, if so, how precisely sin diminishes the good of human nature. In his answer, he distinguishes between three distinct but correlated goods of human nature. The first good of human nature is its primary perfection—the essential principles that constitute human nature and the properties that belong to it, such as the faculties or powers of the rational soul (the intellect, the will, and the sense appetites). The second good of human nature is the natural inclination to virtue.⁴⁷ Every form causes a corresponding inclination. Hence, the inclination that results from the substantial form of the body—the rational soul—is ordered toward and actualizes itself, first in actions in accord with reason and subsequently respective to acquired *habitus*, the virtues. The third good of human nature pertains to humanity's state of integral nature. In order to indicate the distinct difference of this third good from the other two, Aquinas sends a subtle linguistic signal. The gift of original righteousness, conferred on the whole human nature in the person of the first human being, *may be called* (*potest dici*) a good of nature. It is, quite obviously, a good of human nature for its properties to be rightly ordered and, hence, to be rightly ordered internally in regard to the order of reason (reason ruling the sense appetites), as well as externally in regard to the source of all being (reason being perfected by God and subject to God in all things). Because this good of human nature orders humans rightly to what infinitely transcends the created nature as such, it is a good that is not proportionate to the powers of human nature and, hence, a good uniquely distinct from the first and the second goods of nature. It therefore was later called “preternatural,” in contradistinction from “supernatural,” the latter being the principle of the divine life itself.

Aquinas's characterization of the three goods of human nature reflects his consistent integration of a metaphysical analysis (the first and the second good of human nature corresponding to the primary and the secondary perfections of each creature) within the dominant framework of the economy of salvation (the third good of human nature, the state of integral nature). The first and the second good pertain to human nature considered ontologically. The third good of human nature pertains to the proper internal ordering of the faculties of this created nature in its historical existence as personally related to an essentially transcendent reality. This concrete and gratuitously

⁴⁷ See *ST* I-II, q. 60, a. 1; q. 63, a. 1.

granted internal ordering of all faculties and their ordering in a real relation to God entails an accidental perfection of human nature that surpasses its ontological constitution. Aquinas's careful way of indicating that this integral nature may be called (*postest dici*) a good of nature signals a subtle analogical shift in the meaning of nature, a shift from nature identifying the essence or the quiddity of the species—that is, what constitutes human nature quasi *de iure*—to nature signifying now the inclusion of a perfection that human nature *de facto* received when first created. The three goods of human nature together constitute the *state* of integral nature. According to Aquinas, the *state of original righteousness*—which, in the extant order of divine providence, from the first instance of the creation of the human being onward, is identical with the state of integral nature—includes from the first moment of the creation of human nature also the gratuitous gift of sanctifying grace, the principle of the divine life infused in the human soul. From its very inception, humanity not only was ordered toward becoming partakers in the life of the Triune God but also received all the special divine help that allowed it to exist instantaneously in the state of inchoative friendship with God, the beginning of the journey of deification. This and nothing less is the original paradigmatic context of virtuous, uncorrupt human sexuality and, simultaneously, the horizon in which redeemed sexuality, marital or virginal, comes to stand.

From the consideration of human nature in its integrity, Aquinas turns to the consideration of human nature as wounded by original and actual sin. The first mentioned good of human nature, the essential principles of human nature and their properties, are neither destroyed nor diminished by sin. The third good of human nature, human nature rightly ordered to God—original righteousness—is entirely destroyed by original sin. The second good of human nature, the natural inclination to virtue, however, is not destroyed by sin, but it is diminished. Human nature, Aquinas observes, has received four wounds consequent upon original and actual sin: weakness, ignorance, malice, and concupiscence. Unsurprisingly, Aquinas considers wounded nature in reference to integral human nature. Integral human nature, as mentioned above, includes the third good of human nature, in virtue of which reason had a perfect hold over the lower parts of the soul (the sense appetites), while reason itself was perfected by God and subject to God. Consequent upon original sin, all powers of the soul are left destitute of their *proper order*, whereby they are *natu-*

rally directed to virtue. It is this *destitution of proper order* that Aquinas has in mind when he discusses the four wounds of human nature consequent upon sin.

The essential powers or faculties of the soul that can be the subject of virtue are the reason, the will, the irascible sense appetite, and the concupiscible sense appetite, and each of these powers has been wounded by sin. The wound of *ignorance* pertains to reason, in which prudence resides. Reason is weakened in its perception of the order to the true, especially in regard to moral matters—that is, the unambiguous perception of the precepts of the natural law and the proper specification of actions according to them. The wound of *malice* pertains to the will, in which justice resides: the will is weakened in its orientation to the true good. The wound of *weakness* pertains to the irascible sense appetite, in which fortitude resides and which is weakened in its orientation to overcoming what is arduous. The wound of *concupiscence* pertains to the concupiscible sense-appetite, in which temperance resides. The concupiscible sense appetite is weakened in its proper orientation to the delectable moderated by reason.

These four wounds of human nature are the consequence of original and actual sin. All human beings, with the exception of the Blessed Virgin and those who live in the extant order of divine providence without ever committing a mortal sin, still live under a condition in which the four essential powers of their souls that can be subject to virtue are severely diminished in relationship to the proper order whereby they are naturally directed to virtue.⁴⁸ The historical condition of fallen human nature is such that the proper orderedness characteristic of the natural directedness of all powers toward virtue is profoundly disturbed and that some divine *auxilium* seems to be required in order to account for the proper operation even of the acquired virtues.⁴⁹ Through actual sin, reason is made dull (first and foremost, in moral matters) and the will, absorbed by counterfeit goods, is hardened against the good to be pursued according to right reason. Hence, theologically considered, the embrace of the two dominant self-images of the age is, in a complex and non-linear way, related to the wounds of the intellect, the will, and the irascible and the concupiscible sense appetites consequent upon sin. Granted, the distinct reasons that make a particular person *hic et nunc* embrace the one or the other of the dominant self-images or move back from

⁴⁸ See *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 8.

⁴⁹ See *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 6, corp. and ad 2; q. 109, a. 7.

one to the other remain most often implicit and even upon reflection the reasons a person might give *hic et nunc* for moving back and forth are not necessarily identical with the full range of the de facto reasons involved. The explicit reasons a person gives will much more likely reflect the ideological program promoted by one or the other of the two respective self-images. While the individual reasons for embracing the one or the other of these self-images remain largely untraceable, when considered as collective constructs, the self-images lend themselves, nevertheless, to a theological analysis of their attractiveness, as well as their deficiency, in relation to the order of reason and the economy of mercy and grace.

Given Aquinas's analysis of human nature wounded by sin, the question must finally be posed of what difference this analysis makes when applied to the theological consideration of human sexuality.

Human Sexuality in a Fallen World: An Economy of Mercy and Grace

Human sexuality is obviously part of the human condition in a fallen world, and Augustine offered a profound and deeply influential theological phenomenology of "fallen sexuality" as it takes shape in the context of the disordered human desires authoritatively named by the Apostle John as "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16). Augustine holds that, in the world of destitution and due to original sin, it is only in an insuperably problematic way that humans experience sexual desire and are able to consummate sexual activity.⁵⁰ As is well known, Aquinas did not adopt Augustine's view without what he regarded to be friendly amendments and respectful correctives. Sanctifying grace (the sacramental order), together with the theological and infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, can have, according to Aquinas, such a healing and sanctifying impact on human nature wounded by original and actual sin as to make virtuous sexuality possible. Aquinas's overall governing theological principle is that grace heals and perfects nature. Hence, pace Augustine's take on concupiscence as strictly expressive of fallen human nature, Aquinas understands concupiscence to be first and foremost a property of integral human nature. Conceived this way, concupiscence is not in principle contradictory to virtue, as Augustine

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 11, but also *De bono coniugali*, *De coniugiis alduterinis*, *De continentia*, *De sancta virginitate*, and *Opus imperfectum contra Iulianum*.

thought it to be. Rather, the concupiscence of the state of fallen human nature can be healed, restored, and even elevated by grace such that it becomes an integral component of redeemed human sexuality. Yet, absent original righteousness, bereft of the proper order to the delectable moderated by reason, and resistant to the effects of redemptive and perfective mercy₂, concupiscence unavoidably inflames and fosters the vice of intemperance.⁵¹ Moreover, after the anthropocentric turn and the embrace of the self-images of angelism and animalism, the intellect is dulled in rather far-reaching ways in matters that pertain to objective metaphysical and moral truth, such that, in consequence, the natural law becomes considerably blunted, if not occluded.⁵² These false self-images foster self-indulgence that eventually will deprive the sense appetites of their orientation to what is delectable as moderated by reason and will inflame concupiscence. Thus entrapped by the whims of the sense-appetites and the ever varying desires of a will unmoored from right reason, the human being still remains irreducibly an embodied rational being but is now thoroughly estranged from the gift and given of embodiment and its sexual specification. Since neither one of the two dominant self-images is true and, therefore, authentically livable, people flee from the one self-image to take refuge with the other only to return eventually to the first. Hence, the inter-

⁵¹ Unchecked concupiscence lived out is nothing but the sin of intemperance, the willful abandoning of the virtue of temperance, which is self-less self-discipline and proper measure (*ST* II-II, q. 142, a. 2). The particular species of intemperance pertaining to sexual matters is the vice of lust. Lust, *luxuria*, is a capital or principal vice, Aquinas argues, and “one that has a very desirable end, so that through desire for that end, [one] proceeds to commit many sins. . . . The end of lust is venereal pleasure, which is very great. Wherefore this pleasure is very desirable as regards the sensitive appetite, both on account of the intensity of the pleasure, and because such like concupiscence is connatural to [the human being] [“Vitium capitale est quod habet finem multum appetibilem, ita quod ex eius appetitu homo procedit ad multa peccata perpetranda, quae omnia ex illo vitio tanquam ex principali oriri dicuntur. Finis autem luxuriae est delectatio venereorum, quae est maxima. Unde huiusmodi delectatio est maxime appetibilis secundum appetitum sensitivum, tum propter vehementiam delectationis; tum etiam propter connaturalitatem huius concupiscentiae]” (*ST* II-II, q. 153, a. 4, corp.). For Aquinas’s detailed discussion of the sins of intemperance pertaining to sexual pleasure, see *ST* II-II, q. 154, aa. 1–12.

⁵² For an astute analysis of this matter, see Peter B. Wells, “Religion and Society in a Secularized Age: How Do We Sharpen the ‘Bluntness’ of the Natural Law?” *Doctor Communis: Review of the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas* (2011): 148–66.

minable *agon* many people in the so-called advanced societies of the Western Hemisphere experience between the gnostic angelism of an instrumentalized embodiment and a sexuality construed according to the sovereign decree of one's will, on the one hand, and the materialist animalism of departing from one's rational nature into the free-flowing ocean of the ever varying instincts and desires of the human super-primate, on the other. The collective sin characteristic of the age of anthropocentrism is the rejection of the creaturely gift and given of the *animal rationale*—angelism's rejection of the gift and given of one's embodiment with its sexual determination and gender specification and animalism's rejection of the rational soul by way of which human beings are embedded in the order of reason. The *agon* between angelism and animalism is the immediate and interminable consequence of this fundamental rejection of the creaturely gift and given.

Hence, virtuous sexuality not only presupposes the embrace of the creaturely gift and given of the full entailment of being *animal rationale*, an embodied rational soul with a distinct sexual determination and gender specification, but also requires the effects of mercy₂—healing and sanctifying grace and the grace conveyed in the sacramental order: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, and sacramental reconciliation. For it is by way of these effects that redemptive and perfective mercy₂ heals and restores the human participation in the order of reason, which, as already stated above, for the rational creature, *is* the order of nature. The order of reason, affirmed by the deposit of faith and the Church's consistent universal teaching, specifies that virtuous sexuality occurs in the marriage between one man and one woman and is consummated in a conjugal act that is inherently open to life.⁵³

Furthermore, contra the severe modern prejudices and confusions in this regard, there is no virtuous sexual expression without the virtue of chastity.⁵⁴ Chastity liberates from the misery of intemperance and lust and is therefore an exemplary effect of the redemptive and perfective mercy₂. The primordial ontological mercy₁, as informed by divine wisdom and concretized by divine justice, provides, by way of

⁵³ For a lucid philosophical defense of such an account of virtuous sexuality, see Alexander R. Pruss, *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). For a compatible theological account that draws explicitly upon revelation and magisterial teaching, see John S. Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ See Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §206.

the *dare esse*, the order of nature and the order of reason in the extant order of divine providence. Acts of redemptive and perfective mercy₂ can therefore never contradict the order of nature and the order of reason, nor can they contradict the order of grace and the sacramental order, since these acts themselves are nothing but expressions of the self-same redemptive and perfective mercy₂. These acts are, furthermore, ultimately funded by the primordial ontological mercy₁ as it is informed by divine wisdom and as it, in turn, informs divine justice. Redemptive and perfective mercy₂ perfects divine justice, but perfection is not contradiction, and hence, the semblance of mercy₂ contradicting what mercy₁ has established cannot be its authentic actualization, but only a deceptive counterfeit.

The Church is, as Pope Francis famously stated, a field hospital in which the wounds of sin are treated and healed. This undoubtedly is the work of mercy and grace. But it seems to be that only those instruments of redemptive and perfective mercy₂ can truly heal, convert, and sanctify that are undergirded by the primordial ontological mercy₁ as it is informed by divine wisdom and as it, in turn, informs divine justice. For, the end of healing is conversion and, ultimately, deification and eternal beatitude.⁵⁵ This inchoate eschatological reality—the very effect of the economy of mercy and

⁵⁵ This dynamic of healing and conversion includes, of course, the exercise of the infused virtue of mercy (*ST* II-II, q. 30), which Aquinas understands to be a virtue that influences one's will to have compassion for another's misfortune and, if possible, to alleviate it. For an instructive analysis, see Anthony Keaty, "The Christian Virtue of Mercy: Aquinas' Transformation of Aristotelian Pity," *Heythrop Journal* 46 (2005): 181–98. The virtue of mercy is exercised in what are traditionally considered the seven corporeal and the seven spiritual works of mercy (*ST* II-II, q. 32, a. 2). It might be worthwhile to recall what these works of mercy actually comprise: the seven corporeal works of mercy are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving shelter to the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and burying the dead. The seven spiritual works of mercy are instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, admonishing sinners, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving offenses willingly, comforting the afflicted, and praying for the living and the dead. The works of mercy are crucial for not only the recipient's *conversio ad Deum* and integral healing, for whom they are a tangible encounter with God's redemptive and perfective mercy₂. Rather, these works of mercy are also crucial for the one who extends them. For they—being an actualization of charity—form an integral part of his or her own ongoing *conversio ad Deum*, sanctification, and deification, the *sine qua non* of which is the ongoing reception of God's redemptive and perfective mercy₂ by way of the sacraments and in the growth of faith, hope, and especially charity, the friendship with God.

grace—makes possible not only a discourse on redeemed human sexuality but rather also a life of redeemed human sexuality (on the other side of the modern *agon* between the two dominant but equally false self-images of the age, angelism and animalism), a discourse and a life that are able to recapitulate the order of nature and the order of reason in the light of Christ, who is the revelation and unity of mercy₁ and mercy₂.⁵⁶ “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (*Gaudium et Spes*, §22, the probably most famous programmatic line from the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). The life of redeemed sexuality and its corresponding theological discourse are integral to the holiness to which there is a universal call in the Church, according to the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, §42: “All the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for holiness and perfection of their own proper state. Indeed, they have an obligation so to strive.” Human sexuality is not excluded from this universal call to holiness, but rather emphatically included in it.

Such a life of and discourse on redeemed human sexuality, last but not least, does make it possible to recapture afresh the ancient Christian insight into virginity as a surpassing theocentric and eschatological witness to the supernatural calling of the human being. In §42, *Lumen Gentium* puts the matter as clearly as one can wish:

The holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the counsels proposed in the Gospel by Our Lord to His disciples. An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state. This is a precious gift

⁵⁶ The single best book instantiating such a discourse on redeemed human sexuality remains still Karol Wojtyła’s *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willets (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), and the deepest biblical exegesis to date exemplifying such a discourse remains Pope John Paul II’s series of catechetical talks on man, woman, love, marriage, sexuality, marriage, and virginity during his Wednesday general audience—masterfully edited and introduced by Michael Waldstein: John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). For the best recent work demonstrating how Pope John Paul II’s thought is intimately connected to the discussion of this article, see the excellent book by Thomas Petri, O.P., *Aquinas and the Theology of the Body: The Thomistic Foundations of John Paul II’s Anthropology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016).

of divine grace given by the Father to certain souls, whereby they may devote themselves to God alone the more easily, due to an undivided heart. This perfect continency, out of desire for the kingdom of heaven, has always been held in particular honor in the Church. The reason for this was and is that perfect continency for the love of God is an incentive to charity, and is certainly a particular source of spiritual fecundity in the world.

Human sexuality healed, liberated, and redeemed in the divine economy of mercy and grace is necessarily a stumbling block and folly to those beholden by the dominant self-images of the age. But to those who embrace the gift and given of human creatureliness, an embodied *animal rationale* ordained for eternal life in communion with God, and who embrace the divine economy of mercy and grace and the universal call to holiness, redeemed sexuality becomes the gift and given of divine wisdom and an integral part of the ever deepening friendship with the God of mercy and grace, the Blessed Trinity already indwelling the faithful: “You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within—the Spirit you have received from God. You are not your own. You have been purchased, and at a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19–20).⁵⁷ N·V

⁵⁷ See Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §§159 and 161.