

Incarnation, Redemption, and the Character of God

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IF ONE FOLLOWS the standard accounts of the matter, the kind that appear in theological textbooks, there are in Catholic theology two positions regarding the answer to the question “Whether, if human beings had not sinned, God would have become incarnate?” Thomas and Thomists answer in the negative, Scotus and Scotists answer in the positive. Thomas sees the Incarnation as a remedy for sin, and therefore Christ’s predestination was conditional: no sin, no Incarnation. Scotus, on the other hand, sees the Incarnation as the perfection of creation, something that would have occurred even if sin had never entered the world, and therefore Christ’s predestination was absolute or unconditional.¹ Further, in the last century theology seems to be tilting in Scotus’s direction; there seems to be a growing agreement that one ought to think of the Incarnation first in terms of perfecting creation for the glory of God rather than repairing it. Perhaps the most prominent proponent of this view among twentieth-century Catholic theologians was Karl Rahner, who identified his own

¹ This account can be found especially in any number of theological handbooks or textbooks in the last century. See, for example, Adolphe Tanqueray, *A Manual of Dogmatic Theology*, trans. John J. Byrnes, (New York: Desclee, 1959), vol 2, 92–93; Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. James Canon Bastible, trans. Patrick Lynch (Cork: The Mercier Press, Ltd., 1958), 175–76; Albert Schlitzer, CSC, *Redemptive Incarnation: Sources and Their Theological Development in the Study of Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 317–29; John P. Galvin “Jesus Christ,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), vol. 1, 280; Gerhard Ludwig Müller, “Incarnation,” in *Handbook of Catholic Theology*, ed. Wolfgang Beinert and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 378.

view with that of “the ‘Scotist’ school” that “the first and most basic motive for the Incarnation was not the blotting out of sin but . . . [rather] the Incarnation was already the goal of divine freedom even apart from any divine foreknowledge of freely incurred guilt.”²

I think that this turn to the purportedly “Scotist” view on the Incarnation is related to a more general shift in Catholic theology toward a closer integration between the order of nature and the order of grace. Just as grace is no longer seen as an extrinsic and theoretically optional addition to human nature, so too the Incarnation of the Word is no longer seen as an extrinsic and theoretically optional addition to God’s work in creation. Just as grace perfects nature, so too Incarnation perfects creation. The fundamental purpose of the Incarnation, therefore, is not to repair and, perhaps, “add-on” to human nature, but to elevate human nature to participation in the divine nature, something that would have occurred even if Adam and Eve had managed to resist the allurements of the serpent. In this view, were the Word never to become incarnate, creation would be incomplete, human nature would be frustrated, and God would be deprived of his proper glory.

We find this view not only in the writings of theologians like Rahner, but also in Church documents, most notably in *Gaudium et Spes*. As *Gaudium et Spes* §22 puts it: “[I]t is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of humankind. For Adam, the first human being, was a representation of the future, namely, of Christ the lord. It is Christ, the last Adam, who fully discloses humankind to itself and unfolds its noble calling by revealing the mystery of the Father and the Father’s love.”³ Here we see the view that it is only in the light cast by the Word-made-flesh that the human person becomes intelligible; therefore, unless we would be willing to embrace the possibility that God could create the universe without willing its completion and perfection, we seem to find endorsed here the view of Scotus that God wills the Incarnation primarily and absolutely for the crowning of creation, and only secondarily and contingently as a remedy for sin.

The text just quoted, *Gaudium et Spes* §22, runs like a red thread through the writings of John Paul II. Indeed, beginning with his first, programmatic encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul returned again and again to what he called “this stupendous text from the Council’s teaching” (§9) in order to underline his conviction that “through the Incarnation God gave human life the dimension that he intended man to have from his first

² *Theological Investigations Vol. V: Later Writings*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 184–85.

³ In *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), vol. 2, 1081.

beginning" (§1). So, it would seem, on the question of the motive of the Incarnation, the Holy Father too was a Scotist in that he believed that the fundamental purpose of the Incarnation is the completion and crowning of God's creative work.

But things are not always as they would seem. In what follows, I propose that the question of what God would have done had humanity not sinned is not really of interest to either Aquinas or John Paul II. Rather, their shared concern is to stress the redemptive nature of the Incarnation, without ignoring its other purposes, in order to render for us the character of God as rich in mercy. Further, John Paul enriches Thomas's account of the redemptive purpose of the Incarnation by seeing it not only as a revelation of the divine nature, but also of human nature.

Cur Deus Homo?

It is remarkable how long it took Christian theologians to get around to asking explicitly the question of whether Christ would have become incarnate apart from human sin. Despite the reputation that the Greek Fathers have of holding a view of Christ that is more "cosmic" than later western theologians,⁴ they do not really raise the question.⁵ Anselm, of course, raises the famous question *Cur Deus homo?* though he does not consider the counter-factual situation of an unfallen world.

It is only when we get to Rupert of Deutz in the early twelfth century that we find an explicit formulation of the question, to which he answers that the Incarnation was part of God's original intention for creation and thus would have occurred even if humanity had not sinned. Rupert's contemporary, Honorius of Autun, raised the speculative stakes somewhat, arguing that God would have become incarnate in an impassible form had there been no sin for which to atone.⁶ In the thirteenth century similar views were put forward by Robert Grosseteste, Alexander of Hales, and

⁴ See, for example, George A. Moloney, SJ, *The Cosmic Christ: From Paul to Teilhard* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) and, recently, Ilia Delio, OSF, "Revisiting the Franciscan Doctrine of Christ," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003).

⁵ In fact, they presume a close link between the Incarnation and human redemption, and indeed make arguments for the divine identity of the incarnate one on the basis of his role as redeemer. See Georges Florovsky, "Cur Deus Homo? The Motive of the Incarnation" in *Creation and Redemption* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1976), 163–70. Florovsky's essay provides a succinct summary of the history of the question.

⁶ On Rupert and Honorius, see Florovsky, "Cur Deus Homo?," 165, as well as J. McEvoy, "The Absolute Predestination of Christ in the Theology of Robert Grosseteste," *Sapientia Doctrina*, ed. H. Bascour et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 1980), 212–30, at 220–21.

Albert the Great. The great champion of this view, as already noted, was John Duns Scotus, after whom the position becomes associated with the Franciscan order, though it is also held by such non-Franciscans as Denis the Carthusian, Gabriel Biel, as well as Francis de Sales and Malebranche.⁷

The first to pose the question and give a negative answer was the early Dominican Master at Paris, Gueric of St. Quentin in the thirteenth century.⁸ Bonaventure and Aquinas also answer in the negative and subsequent Dominican theologians tended to side with Aquinas, as well as such non-Dominicans as Bellarmine. Suarez attempted to reconcile the two approaches, arguing for a twofold, coordinated purpose for the Incarnation. From the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, interest in the issue revived, with theologians tending to identify themselves as “Thomist” or “Scotist” in inclination.⁹

Yet before we happily line up these figures on opposing sides (with Suarez, perhaps, in the middle) we ought to actually attempt to gain a bit more clarity regarding the theological point at issue. It is not immediately clear that there is a single point at issue in the question *cur Deus homo*? An indication of this is the variety of labels that are used to describe what is being argued about. Is it a question about the motive of the Incarnation or are we considering an alternative, hypothetical universe without sin? Are we discussing the predestination of Christ or his primacy? We are confronted here with a tangle of issues, and it is not at all clear how they are related. What is clear is that the theological world does not clearly divide into Thomists and Scotists.

For example, the hypothetical question “What if humanity had not sinned?” is certainly one way of approaching the question of the motive of the Incarnation, if we presume that the Incarnation would have the same motive no matter what the contingencies were—indeed, presuming that speaking of “motivations” in regard to divine actions makes any sense at all. But if we do not make such presumptions, then the question looks like idle speculation. Likewise, we might be concerned with understanding the relationships among God’s various “decrees” (i.e., the election of Christ, the election of individual human beings, etc.) without having any particular concern to see Christ as the “crown” of creation, and vice versa. Disputants

⁷ See Florovsky, “*Cur Deus Homo?*,” 166–67, for citations and illustrative texts.

⁸ Quodlibet 7.1 (*Utrum Filius fuisset incarnatus si homo non peccasset*) in Gueric of Saint-Quentin, *Quaestiones de quolibet*, ed. Walter H. Principe, rev. Jonathan Black (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002).

⁹ For a brief overview of some of these figures, see Jean-François Bonnefoy, OFM, *Christ and the Cosmos*, ed. and trans. Michael D. Meilach, OFM (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965), 3–6.

on all sides seem to quote the *Exultet*: “*O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem*” with the view that it supports their own view.¹⁰

Thomas on Fittingness

We cannot sort this tangle out here. But we should at least be led to wonder if Thomas himself held a “Thomist” position. Gilbert Narcisse has recently written that on the question of the motive of the Incarnation we can discern three positions: that of Scotus and his followers, that of the Thomists, and that of Thomas himself.¹¹ I am inclined to think that Narcisse oversimplifies here and that there are actually more than three positions in play; in particular, I am not convinced that Scotus’s position is “Scotist.”¹² Yet Narcisse’s basic point is an extremely important one: In answer to the question of whether Christ would have become incarnate if human beings had never sinned, Thomas’s answer is not the flatfooted “no” that some have identified as the “Thomist” position.

In looking at what Thomas has to say on this question, it is striking how little he in fact says. The texts that deal with the question constitute but a handful. It is only in his *Sentences Commentary* (lib. 3, d. 1, q. 1, a. 3) and in the *Summa theologiae* (3.1.3) that we find anything approaching a systematic treatment of the hypothetical question of whether or not Christ would have become incarnate apart from sin, and in both these cases Thomas devotes only a single article to the question. He also mentions it very much in passing in *De veritate* (29.4) and discusses it briefly in his commentary on 1 Timothy (1.4), where he says “this question is not of great importance, because God ordained things to be done in the way that they were to be done, and we are ignorant of what would have been ordained if he had not foreseen sin.”¹³

¹⁰ Thomas quotes this in support of his position in *Summa theologiae* III, q. 1, a. 3, as does Robert Jenson, who apparently believes himself to be in disagreement with Thomas. See Robert Jenson, “For Us . . . He Was Made Man,” in *Nicene Christianity*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 76.

¹¹ Gilbert Narcisse, *Les raisons de Dieu: Arguments de convenance et Esthétique théologique selon saint Thomas d'Aquin et Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1997), xxii.

¹² It is noteworthy that in outlining Scotus’s position on the question, Richard Cross comments that “the whole argument has to be gleaned from several passages” (*Duns Scotus* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 128); in other words, the “Scotist” argument is not something that is actually found in Scotus. Of course Cross and others are fully justified in connecting the dots that they find in Scotus, but it is possible that those same dots might be connected in a way somewhat different from traditional Scotism.

¹³ [H]aec quaestio non est magnae auctoritatis, quia Deus ordinavit fienda secundum quod res fiendae erant. Et nescimus quid ordinasset, si non praescivisset peccatum.

Thomas's essential argument in both the *Sentences* Commentary and in the *Summa theologiae* is that the hypothetical question is really a question about the divine will, and as such is beyond our capacity to answer. This approach should come as no surprise to any careful reader of Aquinas. Despite the image that some have of him as one who believes that human reason can prove quite a number of things about God, Thomas in fact thinks that unaided reason not only cannot grasp what God is, neither can it deduce a priori what God wills to do. These two things are related, since in God being and doing are the same thing. Thus God's acting is always in conformity with God's nature, but since we cannot grasp God's nature, our thinking about God's actions must always be, as it were, after the fact. To put it in modern terms, there can be no deduction of salvation history. Though each and every event of that history is enfolded within the divine decree, we have no access to that decree except as it unfolds before us in time. So hypothetical questions about what *would* have happened if history had unfolded in some other way are for Thomas simply veiled attempts to grasp what is ungraspable: the divine essence. At the same time, to say that events *had* to unfold in precisely the way that they did is equally a reduction of God's essence to the graspable, as if the infinite mystery of God were exhausted in those events.

While Thomas always seeks to affirm God's freedom, at the same time he is careful not to make that freedom arbitrary. Though God's nature is not graspable by created intellect, God's actions are still an expression of that nature, and through those actions we can gain some inkling of the character of God. God's freedom is not contentlessness willing, and in God's actions the human reason is able to discern patterns that shape our understanding of who God is.

Thomas's chief tool for inquiring into God's character while still respecting divine freedom and incomprehensibility is the category of *convenientia* or "the fitting." Gilbert Narcisse writes that, "fittingness is a realized possibility."¹⁴ To inquire into the fittingness of something is first of all to acknowledge that it is contingent and not a matter of strict necessity: We wouldn't say that it is "fitting" for a circle to be round or for 2 plus 2 to equal 5, since these are matters of logical necessity. However, fittingness carries with it its own kind of necessity—one that is a matter of the relationship of means to ends.¹⁵ Thus we might say that it is "necessary" for parents to feed their child or for citizens to pay taxes, not in the sense of a logical necessity (as if "child feeder" were part of the definition

¹⁴ *Le raisons de Dieu*, 109.

¹⁵ See *ST* III, q. 1, a. 1.

of “parent” or “taxpayer” were part of the definition of “citizen”), but rather in the sense that these are the most fitting means of achieving certain ends. While the result could be achieved in a number of possible ways (the child could be hooked up to an IV in order to nourish it; the government could employ privateers in order to raise revenue), a certain path toward that result is the most fitting one.

However, reasoning about fittingness is a matter of *realized* possibility, which is why it is largely a retrospective activity. It is only when presented with a certain way of proceeding that we can discern the way in which various factors come together (*con-venire*) to make that way the most fitting one. At the same time that judgments of fittingness are largely retrospective, there *is* a certain prospective element to them, which is related to the notion of “character.” When we say that it is characteristic of a parent to feed their child or of a citizen to pay taxes, we are not saying that these sorts of things are definitive of parenthood or citizenship, but rather that these are the sorts of things that we could expect a good parent or citizen to do. We are making a claim not so much about the definition or nature of a parent or citizen, as we are about the “second-nature” that is character. Our discernment of the fittingness of a certain type of action is a discernment of the character of the agent. And while discernments of character, as a “second-nature,” do not bring the kind of knowledge that accompanies discernments of essence or “first-nature,” they can give us a reasonable hope that someone will act in a certain way in the future.

Of course in speaking of God’s “character” we are speaking analogously. As a “habit,” a human being’s character is an accident, and the radical simplicity of God allows for no accidental properties. But my fundamental point is that the category of *convenientia* or “fittingness” provides Aquinas—and us—a way of “reasoning from revelation” in order to discern the character of the God whose nature reason cannot comprehend. In thinking about how the divine acts converge so as to fit into a decorous pattern, we do not grasp God’s essence, but we receive the revelation of God’s character in a way appropriate to intellectual creatures, in a way that allows our hope not to be irrational.

Thomas on Incarnation

In the specific case of the Incarnation, we can see how Thomas is clear that there is nothing external or internal that necessitates the Incarnation in the strict sense of logical necessity.¹⁶ Nothing in the divine nature, or in the nature of creation, compels God to enter into personal union with

¹⁶ See *ST* III, q. 1, a. 2.

creatures. As an uncompelled act of divine love toward humanity and all creation, the Incarnation cannot be deduced *a priori*, but can only be revealed to us. As Aquinas writes in his *Sentences* commentary, “Only he who was born and was offered up can know the truth concerning this question, because he willed it.”¹⁷ However, once we accept that God *did* will to become flesh, we can reason from this revealed truth in order to gain insight into God’s character, in order to deepen our grasp of how the truth that God took flesh fits with other things we believe about God, and what this tells us about God’s character.¹⁸ In other words, the hypothetical question of whether Christ would have become incarnate apart from sin is located within a larger context of seeking to discern the fittingness of the Incarnation in order to hope appropriately in God. It is not an inquiry into possible worlds, but a jumping-off place for a deeper understanding of what God’s taking flesh says about who God is for humanity and the cosmos.

Thomas thinks that, on the whole, the witness of revelation is that, as 1 Timothy 1:15 says, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” At the same time, he is somewhat tentative in his voicing of this view: In the *Sentences* commentary he notes that this is “said probably” (*probabiliter dicunt*), and in his commentary on 1 Timothy he says that the view that God would not have become incarnate apart from sin is “the view to which I am more inclined” (*in quam partem ego magis declino*). In the *Summa*, having said that, in light of Scripture, it was “more fitting to say” (*convenientius dicitur*) that the Incarnation was ordained by God as a remedy for sin, he then adds, “And yet the power of God is not limited to this;—even if sin had not existed, God could have become incarnate.”

¹⁷ *Super Sententia* lib. 3, d. 1, q. 1, a. 3, corpus.

¹⁸ Note that seeing the fittingness is not the same thing as seeing the “necessary reasons” for the Incarnation. Thomas’s view can be distinguished from two other possible views of how reason might be used in relation to the Incarnation. One view would be to say that unaided human reason can arrive at the truth that God must become incarnate apart from divine revelation. I cannot think of any medieval who held such a view, but this might well describe the view of Hegel. Another view, which is found in medieval writers such as Anselm, would be to say that unaided human reason cannot arrive at the Incarnation, but once one holds the truth of the Incarnation on the basis of faith, one can use reason to grasp the “necessary reason” for the Incarnation. Thomas’s view can also be distinguished from the fideistic view that reason is of no use whatsoever in grasping the truth of the Incarnation. For this delineation of possible positions I am indebted to the discussion (with reference to the Trinity, not the Incarnation) of Gilles Emery, “The Threeness and Oneness of God in Twelfth- to Fourteenth-Century Scholasticism,” *Trinity in Aquinas*, trans. Matthew Levering et al. (Ypsilanti, MI: Sapientia Press, 2003), 1–32.

Thomas's seeming hesitation, and even equivocation, is not a matter of him being unable to make up his mind; rather, it is the precisely appropriate rhetorical stance to take when speaking of the fittingness of realized divine possibilities. Thomas is unwilling to adopt the apodictic tone that one finds in some later Thomists when they speak on this issue because, as noted earlier, he wishes to guard the incomprehensibility of God from those who are sure they can deduce what God's nature must entail in a given possible order of things. Of course God could become incarnate even if sin had not existed; there is no logical contradiction involved in the idea. But we have no way of knowing if God *would* have become incarnate, and equally we have no way of knowing that God *would not* have become incarnate.

In the *Sentences* commentary, Thomas goes so far as to say that "others say truly" that, in addition to freeing humanity from sin, the Incarnation of the Son of God exalts human nature and consummates the whole universe, and that it is possible to sustain this as a probable cause of the Incarnation.¹⁹ Such a comment might at first surprise us, since Thomas seems to take his firm stand on the biblical datum that "Christ Jesus came into the world"—this actually existing order of things—"to save sinners." But Thomas in no way restricts the purpose of the Incarnation to the remedying of original sin. It is a serious distortion of his view to say, as one recent author does, that Aquinas—and "Western Christology" in general—"maintains a strict correlation between the Incarnation, sin, and redemption"²⁰ or to accuse him of "hamartiocentrism." Thomas repeatedly makes the point that the Incarnation, and the sacramental economy flowing from it, has the twofold purpose of freeing us from sin and advancing us in goodness,²¹ and in his discussions he seems sometimes to highlight the first purpose and sometimes the second.

If we look at the brief discussion in the *Compendium Theologiae* we get some sense of the richness of Thomas's understanding of the purpose of the Incarnation. He first sketches the way in which the Incarnation liberates us from sin by making satisfaction to God, recalling us to the spiritual life, and freeing us from the power of demons by showing us the dignity of our human nature. He then goes on to speak, in Abelardian fashion, of

¹⁹ *Alii vero dicunt, quod cum per Incarnationem filii Dei non solum liberatio a peccato, sed etiam humanae naturae exaltatio, et totius universi consummatio facta sit; etiam peccato non existente, propter has causas incarnatio fuisset: et hoc etiam probabiliter sustineri potest.*

²⁰ Delio, "Revisiting the Franciscan Doctrine of Christ," 23.

²¹ For example, *Summa contra Gentiles* III, ch. 54; *ST* III, q. 1, aa. 2, 5; III, q. 53, a. 1; III, q. 63, a. 1; III, q. 65, a. 1; *De rationibus fidei* ch. 5; *Compendium theologiae* §199–201.

how the Incarnation displays the greatness of God's love for humanity, inciting a mirroring love in us. In addition, in the union of humanity and divinity in the person of Christ we catch a glimpse of our union with God in glory, a glimpse that helps us to have faith. Finally, sounding what some might think a "Scotist" note, Thomas says that God's whole work in creation is "perfected" (*perficitur*) or brought to fulfillment by the Incarnation, which brings human beings—the last of God's creatures to be made—back into union with the creator from whom they came forth.

Even in this brief treatment, Thomas offers us an example of how reflection on the realized possibility that is God's free action in our history yields a rich picture of God's character, a picture that grounds Christian hope. Thomas is in fact little concerned with how God's character might have been manifested in a hypothetical world without sin. Instead, he wishes to direct our eyes to God's character as both just and merciful, a God who invites his creatures into communion with himself, and who never ceases to work to bring creation to perfection. This character of God cannot be deduced by human reason, but can only be shown to us in the event of Incarnation itself. Yet our reason *can* see how the character of this incarnate God, who loves us freely in drawing us to himself, is not incompatible with the God who creates the world. The dim knowledge that we have from creation of God as self-diffusive goodness itself is entirely consonant with the God who shares himself with us by becoming incarnate. Thus revealed knowledge of God perfects and does not destroy natural knowledge of God.

John Paul II and Human Redemption

Though John Paul II spoke warmly of Duns Scotus, "with his splendid doctrine on the primacy of Christ,"²² I know of no text where he weighs in on the hypothetical question of whether Christ would have become incarnate if humanity had never sinned. One can certainly find statements by John Paul that present the Incarnation of Christ as the completion and crowning of God's creative activity. "Paul pointed out that the goal of history lies in the Father's plan to 'unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph 1:10). Christ is the centre of the universe, who draws all people to himself to grant them an abundance of grace and eternal life."²³ In particular, John Paul presents the

²² Meeting with the Duns Scotus Commission of the Order of Friars Minor, February 16, 2002. Text at: www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2002/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020216_fрати-minori_en.html.

²³ General Audience, April 22, 1998, §4. Text at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_22041998_en.html

Incarnation as a uniting of time and eternity: “By becoming man, the Son of God embraced human time with his humanity, to guide man through all the measures of this time towards eternity and to lead him to participation in the divine life, the true inheritance of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”²⁴ In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, he writes, “Through the Incarnation God gave human life the dimension that he intended man to have from his first beginning” (§1).

Such purposes seem to have no necessary connection to liberation from sin, and thus such texts can give the impression that John Paul would answer our hypothetical question with a clear “yes”—the Incarnation serves the eternal intention of God to unite creation with himself, and would have occurred even if we had not fallen into sin. But if we continue reading *Redemptor Hominis*, we find John Paul saying that God fulfilled his eternal intention for humanity,

in the way that is peculiar to him alone, in keeping with his eternal love and mercy, with the full freedom of God—and he has granted it also with the bounty that enables us, in considering the original sin and the whole history of the sins of humanity, and in considering the errors of the human intellect, will and heart, to repeat with amazement the words of the Sacred Liturgy: ‘O happy fault . . . which gained us so great a Redeemer!’ ” (§1)

Here the picture gets a bit more complex. John Paul shares some of the same concerns as Aquinas in trying to hold together God’s freedom with God’s nature. God’s freedom is of a sort that is “peculiar to him alone” because it is not constrained by contingencies, nor is it contentless willing, but is entirely oriented toward love and mercy. Also, like Aquinas, John Paul is not speaking of some hypothetical world order, but of the concrete order in which we find ourselves, the order marred by human sin.

For John Paul, no less than Thomas, the Incarnation is a redemptive Incarnation.²⁵ Yes, Christ is the new Adam, but he is the one who comes to “cancel the work of devastation, the horrible idolatries, violence and every sin that rebellious Adam sowed in the age-old history of humanity and in the created realm.”²⁶ The approach John Paul employs is not

²⁴ Homily, November 30, 1996. Text at: www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP961130.HTM. See also John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §12.

²⁵ See John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, trans. Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 68: “Christianity is a religion of salvation.”

²⁶ General Audience, February 14, 2001 §3. Text at: www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010214_en.html

unlike Thomas's way of *convenientia*. It is a reasoning from God's actions in history toward God's character, through the discerning of patterns of fittingness, which takes reason outside of itself so as to see the typological structure of human history. As he puts it in *Fides et Ratio*,

The fundamental conviction of the "philosophy" found in the Bible is that the world and human life do have a meaning and look towards their fulfillment, which comes in Jesus Christ. The mystery of the Incarnation will always remain the central point of reference for an understanding of the enigma of human existence, the created world and God himself. The challenge of this mystery pushes philosophy to its limits, as reason is summoned to make its own a logic which brings down the walls within which it risks being confined.²⁷

For John Paul, the "philosophy" of Scripture is oriented toward the love of Wisdom incarnate, and in the light of that Wisdom, human reason is, as it were, "colonized" by the light of glory. It is not that this light replaces human wisdom, but it elevates it and transforms it so as to allow us to discern the character of the God who is always beyond reason's grasp. Or, as John Paul puts it at the beginning of the encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, "it is 'God who is rich in mercy' whom Jesus Christ has revealed to us as Father."²⁸

This emphasis on divine mercy is fundamental to John Paul's understanding of how the Incarnation leads us to characterize God. Mercy is "love's second name and, at the same time, the specific manner in which love is revealed and effected vis-à-vis the reality of the evil that is in the world."²⁹ In the cross and resurrection we experience the love that is God, pouring itself out without counting the cost, so that we may be freed from evil and share in the goodness of God's own life. An Incarnation in a hypothetical world without sin (perhaps, as Scotus speculates, by a Christ with an impassible body)³⁰ would not offer us the same characterization of God. This is not, of course, to say that sin is necessary; such a claim would require that we somehow could characterize God apart from how God has acted in our present world order. But it is to say that in our actual world we cannot fully understand God's character apart from the cross, and it is the divine character as revealed in the cross that grounds our hope.

So we see a very similar approach in Aquinas and John Paul to Incarnation, redemption, and the discerning of God's character. However, John

²⁷ *Fides et Ratio* §80.

²⁸ *Dives in Misericordia*, §1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, §7.

³⁰ See *Ordinatio* III, d. 7, q. 3.

Paul is distinctively modern in comparison with Thomas in the role that theological anthropology plays in his thought. Like much modern theology, John Paul adopts an anthropological approach—seeing in the mystery of the human person the starting point for theological inquiry—that is quite alien to Aquinas.³¹ Yet John Paul's specific anthropological approach is in some ways equally alien to much modern theology, not least because it remains a thoroughly Christocentric anthropology. Most striking is his emphasis, inspired by *Gaudium et Spes* §22, on people as mysteries to themselves, mysteries that only become clear in the light cast by the Incarnation. In a sense, as fully divine and fully human, Christ accomplishes at the same time the revelation of God and the revelation of true humanity.

Here I think we see an insight that renews and genuinely enriches Thomas's thinking about the Incarnation. Though I think Thomas's account of the human person is theological through and through, and casts light on his Christology, that light is not reflected back so that Christology illumines anthropology. While Thomas discerns in the Incarnation certain truths about human beings, such as their dignity and their destiny, one does not find in him the strong emphasis on the Incarnation as a revelation of the character of humanity as well as of the character of God. At times, one gets the impression that Thomas thinks that it is pretty obvious what a human being is and is supposed to be. Because of this, Thomas seems to have been insufficiently critical in his thinking about what was and was not "natural" for human beings (slavery and the subordination of women come to mind as obvious examples). What John Paul offers is the insight that human nature cannot simply be "read off" of conventional social or cultural patterns, not only because our nature has been distorted by sin, but also because our nature is itself paradoxical: We are the "thinking reed," created in time but destined for eternity. Therefore, our understanding of what authentic human existence is must be clarified and purified by our discernment of the human character of Christ. As John Paul writes in *Redemptor Hominis*:

³¹ It is difficult to imagine Aquinas making a statement like: "Man in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being and also of his community and social being—in the sphere of his own family, in the sphere of society and very diverse contexts, in the sphere of his own nation or people (perhaps still only that of his clan or tribe), and in the sphere of the whole of mankind—this man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption" (*Redemptor Hominis*, §14).

The man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and even illusory standards and measures of his being—he must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter into him with all his own self, he must “appropriate” and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself. (§10)

John Paul indicates that in our thinking about human beings, no less than in our thinking about God, we ought to accept the fragmentariness of our knowledge. In seeking to discern what is “fitting” for human beings, we ought to look to Christ. For if we need Christ to know what we should hope for from God, no less do we need Christ to know what we should hope for as human beings. For only Christ can give us the “realism of hope,” the realism that, as John Paul put it, “knows that the world, in spite of everything, is instilled with that paschal grace which sustains and redeems it.”³² 

³² General Audience, November 8, 1995 §10. Text at: www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP95118b.HTM.