

Of Men and Angels

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THOMAS AQUINAS teaches that angels are more in the image and likeness of God than are human beings. The basis for this resides in one's intellectual nature. "Thus the image of God is more perfect in the angels than in man, because their intellectual nature is more perfect." Man may "accidentally" be more in the image of God than are angels, for example, "in the fact that man proceeds from man, as God proceeds from God," but "absolutely speaking, the angels are more to the image of God than man is" (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 93, a. 3).

Now, obviously, angels do possess a higher intellectual ability than do human beings and so, again, they are obviously, in this sense, more in the image of God. While I am an ardent Thomist, what has bothered me for quite some time is that there is very little, if any, biblical warrant for saying that angels are more in the image and likeness of God. Nowhere in the Bible is such a statement made. If Aquinas is correct, why was this not made known within the Old or the New Testament revelation? Since such was not revealed, could it be that intellectual ability is not solely, or even primarily, the criteria for establishing a creature's relative likeness to God, and thus that human beings, and not angels, could be more like God?

My musings on this question were stirred anew when recently I read Aquinas's *Commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews*, where again, not to my surprise, he argues that angels are more in the image and likeness of God than are human beings. Nonetheless, I became, instinctively, more convinced that this is not so, but I could not figure out why. In frustration I said: "Holy Spirit, somewhere along the line you are going to have to teach me why men are more in the image and likeness of God than are angels." The thought that came immediately to mind was that it all

has to do with the giving of life. The following is, hopefully, a somewhat mature expression of my further musings on this issue.

I first want to examine the nature of God as a Trinity of Persons, for it is this Trinity of Persons in whose likeness human beings (and/or angels) are created. Secondly, I want to show that human beings are indeed created more in the image and likeness of God than are angels. Thirdly, I will discuss, in a somewhat random fashion, though I hope not totally illogical manner, what I consider various important theological spinoffs from this truth that have practical ecclesial and social/cultural consequences. This is not simply an esoteric issue!

The Fecundity of God

The one God is a Trinity of Persons, but not just any sort of persons. These Persons have names and two of them possess gendered names—the Father and the Son. The Father is the Father precisely because he begets the Son. The Father is a begetter; and so, by definition, necessarily is fecund. The Son is the fruit of the Father's fecundity. The fecundity of the Father resides in the Holy Spirit, in that, the Spirit proceeds from the Father as the paternal love of the Father in whose love the Son is begotten. If the Father did not love the Son in the Spirit, he would not have begotten him in the love of the Spirit. The Son is not fecund within the Trinity as is the Father, but the Son, as the perfect Son, loves the Father with the same love with which he himself is begotten, that is, in the Holy Spirit. Thus, in the Holy Spirit, the Son confirms the Father's fatherhood, for if he did not love the Father with the same love with which the Father loved him, the Father would not truly be the loving Father of a truly loving Son. This is one reason why the title "Holy Spirit" is not a gendered name for the Holy Spirit conforms (literally en-genders) the Father to be the loving begetter of the Son and conforms (literally en-genders) the Son to be the loving begotten Son of the Father. This is equally why the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father as his paternal love for the Son and proceeds from the Son as his filial love for the Father.

Aquinas, following Augustine, principally sees the image of God in the mind or intellect, in that, "as the uncreated Trinity is distinguished by the procession of the Word from the Speaker, and of Love from both of these, so we may say that in the rational creatures wherein we find a procession of the word in the intellect, and a procession of the love in the will, there exists an image of the uncreated Trinity" (*ST I*, q. 93, a. 6). Now, this may be true, but in such an understanding what is missing, as the above demonstrates, is the radically personal and creative nature of this proceeding of the Word and the procession of this Love. We are not dealing,

within the Trinity, with mere concepts proceeding from an intellectual source, but with the constitutive inter-relationships of persons. At the heart of these inter-relationships, which ontologically constitute the persons and so define the persons as to who they are, is fecundity. The Father is the eternal loving source of all life, in that he eternally begets the Son in the love of the Spirit; and the Son would not be the eternal Son if he were not eternally begotten in the love of the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit would not be the Holy Spirit if he were not the eternal love that conformed (en-gendered) the Father to be the eternal loving Father of the eternal Son and the eternal love which conformed (en-gendered) the Son to be the eternal loving Son of the eternal Father.

Of Angels and Men

While this section will primarily focus on why human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, I first want to draw what is probably now an obvious conclusion. Angels are not, in the absolute sense, created in the image and likeness of God because, while they may most closely resemble his intellectual ability, they are unable to reproduce themselves. Aquinas himself teaches that each angel is his own species and is therefore, by definition, one of a kind. Angels, therefore, are not fecund in a manner analogous to that of God. Angels never beget.

While there is some Jewish and Christian traditional warrant suggesting that the angels were, in some manner, co-workers with the Father and the Son in the creation of the world, yet they are not authors of life themselves. Moreover, while the angels, as God's messengers, are instrumental in the imparting of divine revelation, both within the Old and New Testaments, and so nurturers and guardians of the subsequent salvific life of the Spirit within human beings, they are, again, not the generators of that divine life. Angels are creative in that they cooperate in the life-giving activity of the Trinity, but they are not creative in the sense that they are able to generate, as an essential part of their nature, life. While Angels may not be absolutely sterile, yet they are deficient in what is most at the heart of who God is as a Trinity of Persons—eternal fecundity wrought by eternal love.

Human beings are, in the absolute sense, created in the image and likeness of God precisely because they are fecund; they are life-giving. It is fascinating that Aquinas does say this as quoted above. There is "a certain imitation of God, consisting in the fact that man proceeds from man, as God from God." However, because Aquinas limits this "proceeding" to an "accident" within human beings and so not a substantial defining element as is their rationality, he refuses to allow such an ability to be an essential

element constituting them in the image and likeness of God. While Aquinas rightly does say that such an ability “presupposes the first likeness, which is in the intellectual nature; otherwise even brute animals would be to God’s image,” he forgets that it is the whole human person, body and soul, that is made in the image of God and not merely that part of him that is rational, for human rationality is itself dependent upon the bodily senses and the human brain. Human beings’ ability to procreate rationally and lovingly is not something then apart from who they substantially are as human beings and so not something apart from who they substantially are as images and likeness of God. It is precisely because they can rationally and lovingly procreate that not only sets them apart from animals but equally that sets them above the “merely rational” angels.

It is not by chance then, but by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that the Book of Genesis clearly states: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (1:27). Man as “male” and “female” is in the image and likeness of God, and “male” and “female” have to do specifically with fecundity, procreation, the begetting of life. This is accurately witnessed in God’s very next words, a command that is in accord with his own very nature as a Trinity of Persons: “And God blessed them, and God said the them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ ” (Gen. 1:28). To be in the image and likeness of God is to possess the ability to be fruitful. As the Father begot his Son in love, so male and female, in imitation of God, are to multiply, in love, their own kind. The ability to beget life is indeed at the heart of being in the image and likeness of God. It is human beings’ ability to rationally and lovingly procreate, moreover, that authorizes their dominion over the whole of creation. God, as the author of all life, is the supreme Lord over all of creation, and those whom he has created after his own life-giving image he empowers to be his vice-regents upon the earth, rationally overseeing and dutifully husbanding, and so actively assisting, all else that brings forth life. Human beings, and not angels, possess divinely constituted cosmic authority.

Men and Jesus as Images of the Father

Based upon this truth that human beings are created in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God in that they are able, rationally and lovingly, to procreate, I want now to begin a series of theological spinoffs. Now, my first spinoff will be controversial and the height of political incorrectness, but we must return to the Trinity by way of introduction.

While both men and women are created in the image and likeness of God in that together, as sexual beings, they possess the potential to bring forth life, yet man, in the restrictive sense of male, most images the Father. God the Father “makes” himself Father in begetting the Son for it is only in ontologically begetting the Son that he is constituted ontologically as the Father (not in the sense that he could not have been the Father, but rather in eternally begetting the Son he is eternally the Father). While a man cannot become a father apart from a woman, yet a man becomes a father in a different manner from which a woman becomes a mother. This is precisely the point: A man “makes” himself a father in the act of begetting, and in so making himself a father a woman “becomes” a mother, in that what is conceived in her is begotten by the father. A woman cannot “make” herself a mother for, unlike a man, she is not a begetter. It is specifically in man’s potential ability to beget that he is the image of God the Father.

Having argued that men bear the image of God the Father, I want now to return again to the Trinity. The reason God the Father begets a Son is because the Son, like human fathers, must be a begetter as well if he is to be truly the perfect image of the Father. If God the Father begot a Daughter, then that Daughter, unlike him, would not be able to be a begetter, and so not the Father’s perfect image. She would be dependent upon another for her fruitfulness. Of course, this is what we find in pagan mythology. Goddesses are always dependent upon some divine male consort for their fruitfulness. (This is equally why the term “Mother” cannot be substituted for the term “Father.” If “God the Mother” actually existed, she would, by ontological necessity, remain sterile unless some male deity came to her aid, and so we would again return to an extreme form of pagan anthropomorphism.) But how is the Son of God a begetter and how does he manifest his perfect imaging of the Father?

Within the immanent life of the Trinity, while the Son is the perfect image of the Father, he could not manifest his perfect likeness to the Father as a begetter. However, the Father loved the Son so much that the Father created the world through his Son so that the Son could manifest his perfect likeness to the Father. Actually, the Father, if he were to create the world, had to do so through his Son because his Son is precisely the perfect likeness to the Father’s creative and life-giving ability. The Father bears witness to his own and, in turn, his Son’s fecundity in the act of creation. In the act of creation the Father allows his Son to become a “begetter” and so manifests his perfect likeness. Moreover, it is the live-giving love of the Holy Spirit, shared by the Father as begetter and the Son as the perfectly begotten begetter, who compels them to create,

freely and lovingly, other beings, especially human beings created in their own image and likeness.

However, it is not the act of creation that fully reveals the Son's perfect life-giving likeness to the Father. Rather, it is within the Incarnation and the work of redemption that the Son fully manifests himself as a life-giver and so the perfect icon of his Father. The Son, then could not have become an angel for, if he had done so, he could not have become a life-giver and so be unable to manifest his divine likeness to the Father—that of being a begetter. The Son had to become what was created in his own image. Thus, the Son of God had to become a man and not a woman, for it is man who bears the image of the Father, and so, if the Son is to reveal the image of the Father in a human manner, it must be as a man that he does so. Moreover, in becoming a man, the Son was able to reveal that he, too, like the Father, was inherently a begetter, a giver of life. (This is why it is theologically imprecise, if not actually erroneous, to say simply that the Son of God/Word became “a human being” rather than “a man.” Jesus was obviously a human being, but it is only as man that the Son could authentically reveal himself to be the Son.)

Jesus, as the Son of God incarnate, by dying on the cross and rising from the dead made himself the redeemer of the world and so the begetting cause of eternal life. In union with the Father of life, he becomes of the author of new life, for the Church, the new Eve, in accordance with the Johannine imagery and reminiscent of Adam, is born from his pierced side. Moreover, because of Jesus' life-giving actions, the Father presented to him as bridegroom his bride, the Church. The Church testifies, as do all brides, to the life-giving actions of her bridegroom, for she raises up, through the Holy Spirit, sons and daughters for the Father. Thus, the analogical image of Christ, the new Adam bridegroom, and the Church, the new Eve bride, complements and corroborates the more literal notion of the risen Christ being, through the Holy Spirit, the life-giving head of his body the Church. Here the image takes on ontological depth for the risen Christ, in the unity of the Spirit, actually does become “one flesh” with his body the Church, and equally, through the same Spirit, gives life to that body.

This is obviously why Christian marriage is a sacrament. The indissoluble union of husband and wife symbolizes the fruitful indissoluble union of Christ and the Church, as his body. Equally, this is one of the reasons why sexual activity is morally virtuous only within marriage for it too symbolizes the life-giving activity between Christ and his Church and ultimately of the Trinity itself; and also then why all positive contraceptive sexual activity is immoral for it desymbolizes and so deconstructs

Christ's life-giving activity in union with his Church and similarly desymbolizes and so deconstructs human beings' fecund likeness to the Trinity. Moreover, this is why all homosexual activity is unbecoming of human beings as images of God for such activity is sterile and so fails to reflect both Christ's creative relationship to his Church and the loving and life-giving nature of the Trinity.

Mary as the Perfect Image

Now it might appear that this essay has become an exercise in establishing the superiority of the human male. While I have certainly attempted to express clearly the importance of maleness, one of the greatest theological spinoffs is equally the supreme importance of Mary and, with her, of all women. While men, including Jesus, bear witness to the likeness of God the Father in that they possess the ability to beget and generate life, yet, if we take fecundity or fruitfulness as the chief characteristic of human divine likeness, as this essay argues, then Mary in one sense becomes, from within the economy of salvation, the perfect exemplar of what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God. She does not image the Father, but what she does exemplify supremely, in a feminine manner, is human beings' fecundity.

Again, it would seem that the Son could not become an angel, but if he could do so, it would have to be done apart from the cooperation of another angel since angels by their very nature are not fecund. No angel could conceive the Son of God as an angel. Moreover, no man could contribute to the Incarnation of the Son, for no man possesses the capability to effect the Incarnation, that is, the coming to exist of the Son of God as man, and thus no man could fully exemplify the potential fruitfulness embedded within the human divine likeness or the extent of the life-giving nature of God. However, a woman could conceive as man and give birth to as man the Son of God—and did. So life-giving is the Father that the Son of God, through the engendering power of the Holy Spirit, could become man, and so fruitful is woman that only within a woman's womb could the Son assume, through the engendering Spirit, his manhood.

While Mary could not "make" herself the Mother of God on her own, as no woman is able to "make" herself a mother, yet, because she conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and not by a man, she became the perfect image of the God's inherent fruitfulness. She became the perfect image of God's fecundity because, by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, she became the human mother of the Father's divine Son. Moreover, because Mary became the Mother of God by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, and not by man, she remains a virgin as well.

Mary is the Virgin Mother of God because she displays that woman's complete potential fecundity, and so her full divine likeness, resides not in her relationship to man but in her relationship to God. This is why the Church is exemplified foremost in Mary for only because Mary first became the Mother of God, by the power of the Spirit, and thus the Mother of Life, could the Church become the mother of all those begotten again of the Spirit and so born into the likeness of Mary's Son. Moreover, while men may bear the image of the Father in that they are begetters, yet all women, like Mary, bear the full image of divine fecundity and fruitfulness, in this sense that only in them is what is begotten conceived. It is from only within the wombs of women that all human life comes (or should come) forth.

Celibacy, Priesthood, and the Image of God

I have argued that human beings' likeness to the Persons of the Trinity resides specifically in their ability to rationally and lovingly bring forth life. If such be the case, what is to be said of those men and women, who, for the sake of the Kingdom, have vowed celibacy and so have forsworn procreative activity? Here I am not able to develop a theology of the religious life where men and woman, through their vow of chastity, image, in their unique respective ways, the divine likeness. Suffice it to say that, within the Church, non-ordained celibate men bear witness to and actively engage in fatherly activity and celibate women equally bear witness to and actively engage in nurturing and fostering new life in a properly maternal manner. What I would like to do is to explore briefly the truth that celibate priests image Christ as begetters.

Firstly, priests, unlike angels, are begetters, though now the life that they beget is the new life of Jesus' Spirit within men and women both within and outside the Church. This is done specifically in their preaching of the Gospel and in the celebration of the sacraments, particularly in the Eucharist. Within the Eucharistic liturgy, priests enact and so make present the life-giving activity, the begetting activity, of Jesus' death and resurrection. While all Christians can baptize because of their share in Christ's priesthood, yet only the ordained priest, within the Eucharist, fully symbolizes and so fully enacts the begetting and life-fostering activity of Christ's redeeming work in relation to his Church. Women are by nature not begetters and so it is not merely physically impossible but also metaphysically impossible for them to enact priestly actions that are, by their very nature, "begetting" actions, of which the liturgical action of the Eucharist is—Christ, through the priest, "making" himself the bridegroom of the Church, his fruitful bride.

Secondly, celibacy is an inherent part of these priestly begetting actions. While men who are married can and do become priests, the married priest conflates within himself, and so renders unfocused, the two manners in which a man is a begetter. He is an image of the Father, as are all men, in that he is able to beget children of his wife. He is also, as a priest, the image of Christ as the begetter of spiritual life. However, the very presence of a wife and children weakens and even subverts the primary vocational task of a priest, that of imaging Christ as the begetter of the new life of the Spirit within the Church. It is only the celibate priest as such who bears exclusive and singular witness that his whole life is modeled after Christ as the begetter and nurturer of the Spirit's life within the Church and the world.

While it is often stated that priestly celibacy is merely a Church discipline and so can be discarded at will, I am not convinced. As the above demonstrates, celibacy is intrinsic to the male priestly witness as a "begetter" after the manner of Christ, and, as such, it is much more than a mere canonical law. It specifies precisely the manner in which men, as priests, are in the image and likeness of the Father and so make present the live-giving actions of his perfect image, the risen Christ. Instead of seeing a development of doctrine in the normative sanctioning of a married priesthood within the Roman Catholic Church, I would argue that authentic doctrinal development, which is presently groaning to mature, will confirm that priests, by the very nature of their priesthood, ought normatively to be celibate, for only then is that priesthood exercised in its most complete fashion and to its fullest extent.

The Angels' Flawed Brief

In approaching my conclusion, it is necessary to examine a couple of scriptural passages that look to undermine my thesis that human beings are more in the image and likeness of God than are angels, passages that the angels themselves might employ in their own defense. The first resides in the fact that the procreative activity of human beings is limited to this life. "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven" (Mk 12:25). In this passage Jesus appears to assert two truths. Firstly, it is precisely human beings' ability to procreate that distinguishes them from angels. This I would agree with. It confirms my thesis. However, secondly, in heaven human beings will not procreate because they will be like angels, the seeming implication being that they will be raised to a higher status, that of being in the likeness of angels. Thus, angels are more in the image and likeness of God and human beings, having become like angels, will be more like God in

heaven than they were when on earth. While it is true that heavenly human beings will be like angels in that in heaven they will not be given in marriage and so procreate, I do not think that this necessarily implies that angels are therefore more in God's image.

In heaven, the risen life of grace perfects absolutely each human person. What a person was on earth comes to its heavenly completion. I would therefore argue that as Christ bears the glorious marks of his earthly life-giving passion as a sign of his salvific risen triumph over sin and death and, thus, to his supreme lordship, so each human being will bear a similar glorious mark that will designate his or her singular life-giving activity on earth. This mark, along with a new heavenly name, will reveal and designate precisely who this person is and in what life-giving activity he or she excelled so as to obtain eternal life. Moreover, as human beings are life-givers in various ways on earth so they do not cease to be life-givers in heaven. They may no longer procreate, but yet, as functioning risen members of the Body of Christ, they will still, in some real manner, nurture the life of Christ's risen body and they will each do so in a manner in keeping with their earthly vocations. As the risen Christ, the Head, nurtures perfectly, through the Holy Spirit, the risen life of the members of his Body, so each risen member, in union with Christ, nurtures perfectly, through the same Holy Spirit, the same risen life within of Christ's body. While angels will contribute to the life of Christ's body in heaven, they are not life-giving members of that body, specifically because they do not possess bodies. Moreover, since heaven consists in the perfect vision of and so the perfect communion with the life-giving Trinity, so those who perfectly participate in this vision and communion will share fully, each in their singular fashion, in the life-giving nature of the Trinity. Thus, I would again conclude that human beings, precisely because of their life-giving ability, are more in the image and likeness of God both while on earth and in heaven.

The second passage is found in the Letter to the Hebrews where it is said that "we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2:9). Since the Son of God was made for a little while lower than the angels, then human beings, in whose likeness he became, are lower than the angels and so less in God's likeness. Here we come to a topic that had been purposely left to the side—sin. While human beings were created ontologically in the image of God and so being created were ontologically more in his likeness than are angels, yet sin has disfigured and so partially rendered dysfunctional that ontological image. Human life-

giving activity bears the traces of God's image, yet the radiance of that image is very frequently darkened by the deep shadow of sin. While the angels, then, have perfectly maintained their likeness to God, human beings have not. So, while human beings were created ontologically more in God's image than were the angels, yet, in the darkness of human sin, angels presently radiate a truer likeness. This is precisely why the Son of God became man. "For surely it is not with angels that he (Jesus) is concerned but with the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect" (Heb 2:16–17). The Son of God assumed the sin-scarred humanity of his brothers and sisters (and so, in this sense, he too became lower than the angels) so that he might transform it, through his death and resurrection, and in so doing raise it up once more to its divine pristine likeness that exceeds the angels. Without the grace of Jesus Christ sinful human beings cannot fulfill their ontological imaging of God and so, in this sense, they are less than the angels. However, by the healing and divinizing power of the Holy Spirit human beings are able to reclaim their true status, that of being more in God's image than are the angels.

The King and Queen of Heaven and Earth

Following on from the above, I want, by way of conclusion, to make a few points that pertain to the heavenly consummation. The most convincing argument resides within the heavenly hierarchal order, for such an order is the culminating testimony that human beings are more in the image and likeness of God than are angels. Firstly, Jesus Christ, the risen Son of God incarnate, is the King and Lord of heaven and earth. He is such not simply because he is the Son of God, but, more precisely and accurately, because he became man and died on the cross. "When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs" (Heb 1:3–4, see 1:5–13). Equally, "Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9–11). Supremacy, preeminence, and primacy resides solely in the Son as the risen incarnate Lord of glory, and it is him that all creatures, including angels, are to acknowledge as their King.

Secondly, it is Mary, who, in her Assumption, already shares fully in her Son's resurrection and so, as his mother, is Queen of heaven and earth. It is as a risen human woman that Mary reigns alongside her glorious incarnate

Son. Moreover, it will be the Saints, human men and human women, who will be raised up and placed beside Jesus and Mary at the end of time. Beneath the Trinity there ensues, then, a hierarchy of human beings—Jesus, the incarnate risen Son, Mary, and all the Saints. The reason they reside in their respective heavenly rank is because they, as human beings, reflect, each in their own singular way, the very image of the Trinity and they do so because they, like the Trinity, were and are all life-givers. Moreover, human beings, in their respective life-giving activity, as the original stewards of creation, have helped bring about, in union with Christ and by the power of the Spirit, a new heaven and a new earth. Along with Jesus, then, as the Lord of creation, human beings will assume the fullness of their divinely rendered cosmic authority. Only here, within the heavenly hierarchy, appear then the angels. “Are they (angels) not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation” (Heb 1:14)?

While of a higher intellectual nature than are human beings and so reflecting more perfectly God’s omniscience, angels do not bring forth life in the image of God, and so they do not adequately reflect the heart of who God is as a Trinity of life-giving Persons. From within the Franciscan theological tradition, this lower positioning of the angels within the heavenly hierarchy was the specific cause for why some angels rebelled. These “bad” angels could not tolerate the thought that human beings, including Jesus and Mary, were greater than themselves and that they would become, within the heavenly hierarchy, their superiors. They would have argued, as does Aquinas, that as the more intelligent creatures, they were far superior to feeble-minded human beings. Yet, it is the “good” angels who possess the humility, which is their supreme glory, to grasp, in joy, that human beings are indeed created more in the image and likeness of God, and why, even now, they long to peer (as did and does the Angelic Doctor), in wonder and awe, into the mysteries of the faith; mysteries that literally embody the live-giving actions of human beings, those of Jesus, of Mary, and of all of the Saints. NEV