

“Circa res . . . aliquid fit”
(*Summa theologiae* II–II, q. 85, a. 3, ad 3):
Aquinas on New Law Sacrifice

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I

IN HIS TREATISE “On Virgins,” St. Ambrose praises a Roman teenager named Agnes: “Today is the birthday of a virgin; let us imitate her purity. It is the birthday of a martyr; let us offer ourselves in sacrifice.”¹ The Roman Church observes the feast of St. Agnes on January 21. The Roman Canon includes her name in the list of saints found in the prayer, *Nobis quoque peccatoribus*, which is said by the priest after the consecration of the Mass. Her witness to Christ is recalled following the proclamation of the “Mystery of Faith”: “We proclaim your death, Lord Jesus.”²

I cite this patristic text for two reasons: First, it introduces the theme of the present essay, Aquinas on new law sacrifice. It does so by identifying the connection between martyrdom and sacrifice: “circa res . . . aliquid fit.” In the example of a martyr, of course, the “something” that is done to the “res”—in this case, a living person—is the delivery of a deadly blow. Second, St. Thomas Aquinas cherished a special devotion to this Roman virgin and martyr, whom both St. Ambrose and St. Augustine eulogized as a great witness to the power of the new law of grace. Twice in his writings, Aquinas himself mentions St. Agnes in order to show how the virtues of temperance and fortitude are found united

¹ Saint Ambrose, “On Virgins,” Bk 1, cap 2.5 (PL 16 1845): 189.

² See the 2003 encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 11.

exemplarily in the virgin martyrs.³ Those familiar with the work of Aquinas recognize that he does not customarily offer personal examples of the theoretical lessons that he develops. We may reasonably infer, then, that his direct references to St. Agnes afford rare glimpses into the personal piety of Friar Tommaso D'Aquino.

One of Aquinas's early biographers tells us that he also kept relics of St. Agnes on his person: "reliquias dicte sancte, quas ad pectus suspensas ex deuotione portabat." In other words, Aquinas piously wore the relics of St. Agnes at his breast. On one occasion we know that St. Thomas used these relics to obtain the intercession of the young saint in order to cure his sick socius or priest-companion, Friar Reginald of Piperno. When St. Agnes's mediation was discovered to have been successful, and Reginald's health had improved, Aquinas spontaneously promised to sponsor a special meal for his students on every twenty-first of January.⁴ This cure took place in 1272, and thus it happened, as a contemporary chronicler observes, that Aquinas was able to fulfill his votive promise only once—namely, in the winter of 1273.⁵

By January of the next year, 1274, Aquinas himself had been taken ill, though he was still preparing to journey on the road toward France whence Blessed Pope Gregory X had summoned him to attend the Second Council of Lyons (1274). While en route to Lyons on the Rhone, Aquinas, in the early hours of March 7, 1274, died at the Cistercian monastery of Fossanova, whose white monks guarded his body for nearly a century thereafter. His present place on the liturgical calendar, January 28, commemorates the day in 1369 when his relics were transferred solemnly from that venerable monastery, located off the old Via Appia, south of Rome, to the church of the Jacobins in Toulouse, where they have been preserved since. That is, except during about two centuries when Aquinas's mortal remains were kept out of harm's way in the neighboring basilica of St.-Sernin, which though the largest Romanesque church in the west, serves as a parish church in Toulouse. This temporary transfer happened toward the end of the eighteenth century, when the French Revolution threatened to expel the Dominicans from one of their most spectacular Gothic installments in Europe, *l'église des Jacobins*. In any case, divine Providence so arranged that the bones of Aquinas would return to the city

³ We find at least two mentions of St. Agnes as an example of purity to the point of martyrdom: *IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 5, qc. 3, ad 9; and *Quodl.* III, q. 6, a. 3 [17], ad 3.

⁴ See Jean-Pierre Torrell, OP, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, revised edition, 2005), 271.

⁵ See Tolomeo of Lucca, *Ptolomaei Lucensis Historia ecclesiastica nova*, lib. XXIII, 10.

where, as Father Weisheipl observes, the Dominicans had begun their existence: Toulouse on the river Garonne.⁶ There is something fitting in this providential turn of events, *conveniens* as Aquinas himself would say.

II

Our theme is Aquinas on new law sacrifice. The new law refers to the grace that the Incarnation of the Son of God introduces into the world. This grace distinguishes new law sacrifice from the divinely ordained sacrifices of the old law. St. Thomas explains this distinction by appeal to the reality of a sacrament: "The sacrifice of the New Law ('sacrificium novae legis'), the Eucharist, contains Christ himself, the author of our sanctification, for 'he sanctified the people by his own blood' (Heb 12:12). Hence this sacrifice is also a sacrament. The sacraments of the Old Law, however, did not contain Christ, but prefigured him, and so they are not called sacraments."⁷ We may further conclude that new law sacrifice is to be distinguished from sacrifices that pertain to the natural law, which every human creature is required to offer to God.⁸ One fact is clear. Aquinas helps us to recognize that when Christians speak about new law sacrifice, they mean only one thing, the passion and death of Christ "sacramentally perpetuated" in the Eucharist.⁹

There is something fitting about returning in 2006 to the theme of the Eucharist as sacrifice. For example, consider the October 2004 apostolic letter *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, which announced the Year of the Eucharist. This period of grace and indulgence began during October of that year and came to an end at the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in October 2005.¹⁰ Pope John Paul II himself urged us to ponder during that year the unique sacrificial character of the Eucharist. I would suggest that the pope directed us to undertake a reconsideration, even a rehabilitation, of the theological notion of sacrifice. His successor, Pope Benedict XVI, will surely complete this project, as the *instrumentum laboris* for the fall synod suggests.

What prompted this papal directive? In the abovementioned apostolic letter, the late pope suggested, at least implicitly, that a certain amnesia has

⁶ James A. Weisheipl, OP, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 331.

⁷ *ST* I–II, q. 101, a. 4.

⁸ *ST* II–II, q. 85, a. 1.

⁹ See *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 12.

¹⁰ For details, see the "Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Gift of an Indulgence during the 'Year of the Eucharist,'" published in Italian and Latin in the January 15, 2005, Italian edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*.

enveloped many theologians of the postconciliar period.¹¹ What have they forgotten? That the sacrifice of the new law, the “sacrificium novae legis,” finds its proper expression in the Eucharist, “which makes present what occurred in the past.”¹² Pope John Paul II suggested that too exclusive an emphasis has been put on the Eucharist as shared meal: “It must not be forgotten,” he wrote, “that the Eucharistic meal also has a profoundly and primarily *sacrificial* meaning.”¹³ This papal admonition follows upon the publication of two very important magisterial documents, the 2003 encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* and its companion 2004 dicasterial document *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, which provides detailed instruction about the reverence that is owed to the Blessed Eucharist, especially during the actual celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* is built around the infallible Catholic truth that “the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*.”¹⁴

The encyclical recalls the ancient Catholic dogma that the “sacrificial meaning” of the Eucharist remains indissociable from the promise of “universal charity” that this sacrament of Christ’s love embodies.¹⁵ Many persons who have been catechized during the last forty years will find this strong papal assertion about the “sacrificial meaning” of the Eucharistic banquet surprising. They may also wonder why they came away from their lessons in Christian doctrine with the notion that the Eucharist is a shared meal and were not taught about sacrificial meaning one way or another. They may even ask themselves whether to think of the sacrament only in terms of a shared meal is adequate to dispose the communicant to recognize in the Eucharist the power to create authentic love. In order to put this surprise or disappointment into some perspective, we need to step back from our present moment, and take a look at some aspects of Catholic liturgical life during the past four decades.¹⁶

¹¹ There are some indications that the notion of sacrifice has begun to interest theologians, however. For example, see the essays collected in *L'idea di sacrificio. Un approccio di teologia liturgica*, ed. E. Mazza (Bologna: EDB, 2002).

¹² *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, no. 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 12, citing CCC, no. 1367.

¹⁵ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 12: “This aspect of the universal charity of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is based on the words of the Savior himself. . . . Jesus did not simply state that what he was giving them to eat and drink was his body and his blood; he also expressed *its sacrificial meaning* and made sacramentally present his sacrifice which would soon be offered on the Cross for the salvation of all.”

¹⁶ For further reflection on this movement, see Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Catholic and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), esp. 233–34.

It is generally agreed among Catholic theologians that the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) failed to address at length three areas of theological investigation. To acknowledge this omission is not to signal a defect. No ecumenical council addresses every aspect of Catholic doctrine. The reception given to the Second Vatican Council, however, favored the impression among many persons that 1965 marked a fresh start for the Catholic Church and her teachings. Moreover, events that transpired in the secular culture of the period encouraged the spread of this false impression. By the mid-1960s, cultural changes were expected routinely. In any case, the view developed among some Catholics that the documents of Vatican II were meant to serve as the founding articles of a new period in the history of the Church. No previous ecumenical council had generated this sense of discontinuity with what had gone on before, with what had been taught before, in short, with the Tradition.

Something else occurred after the Second Vatican Council that was unprecedented. A new class of “theologians” came into prominence. These “popularizers,” as Father Matthew Lamb has characterized them, were mainly responsible for ensuring that the spin about this “new period” reached a wide audience.¹⁷ Many Catholics, including certain bishops who themselves were present at the Council, were persuaded by this new brand of theologians to view the mid-1960s as the dawn of a new day. Many of the popularizers, however, were not trained theologians, who had become well-versed in the Sacred Scriptures and in Sacred Tradition; they were rather journalists, essayists, and other frequent contributors to the mass media who claimed the mantle of the professional theologian.¹⁸ Before the Council, the Church had recognized certain “approved authors” whose views could be absorbed without risk

¹⁷ Father Matthew Lamb mentions popularizing at the end of a response to Margaret Farley in the *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 21 (1998): 2–5: “Any effort to spin Papal and Vatican concern for Catholic theological orthodoxy as ‘stifling scholarship’ is just plain false. The dissent is not based upon serious theological scholarship but on superficial popularized distortions. Orthodox Catholic faith enlightens human intelligence. Dissent weakens both faith and intelligence.”

¹⁸ In a private communication to the author, Father Lamb recalls the history as follows: “The mass media began the process during the second session of Vatican II when they imposed a framework of conservative versus liberal on all the proceedings. Those theologians and *periti* who went along with this found they were media stars, quoted often. After the Council bishops and religious superiors turned to them, rather than approved theologians, for how to implement the Council. So the liberal progressives were all over the place, and continued the Xavier Rynne tradition by writing columns, etc. The truth came with *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 and then we had the mass media supporting widespread dissent.”

of falling away from Catholic doctrine. These “auctores probati” only became such after death, moreover. Somehow in the fall of 1965—a period when rather commonly authority, especially that exercised by either civil or religious officials, lost standing—anyone who could write a newspaper column gained putative approbation. And as we know, these freelance theologians considered themselves competent to pronounce on everything from the hierarchical structure of the Church to the moral structure of human sexuality. It is easy now to see why the first significant expression of Catholic life in this new climate was the rejection of the 1968 encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*.

It is not the case that every Catholic in the United States adopted the outlook of the popularizers. Still less is it true that every Catholic joined the ranks of the dissenters. At the same time, the Second Vatican Council left work to be done. The fathers did not address, except to call for a genuine renewal, fundamental issues in moral theology; they did not take up a project left undone at the First Vatican Council, namely, developing the *praeambula fidei*, or apologetics; and they chose to address liturgical reform without at the same time considering the long elenchus of accepted theses that made up classical sacramental theology. Even the casual observer of things Catholic recognizes that today a certain chaos surrounds Catholic moral teaching, Catholic sacramental life, and, what is perhaps less apparent, Catholic apologetics, the artful science that provides arguments designed to persuade those outside full communion with the Church to embrace her truths.

These lacunae have begun to be filled during the postconciliar magisterium of Pope John Paul II. First, in 1993, the encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor* provided an authentic statement of the Church’s teaching “regarding certain fundamental questions of the Church’s moral teaching.” Second, in 1998, the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* provided a reaffirmation of what the Church recognizes as the powers of natural reason to discover the existence of God, citing the First Vatican Council’s dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* IV: “There are two orders of knowledge, distinct not only in their point of departure, but also in their object.”¹⁹ In 2003, we received the encyclical on the Eucharist, “On the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church,” as the English title runs, whose content illuminates in some measure the other sacraments as well. Further magis-

¹⁹ 1998 encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 53. See also the prologue: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”

terial clarifications in these and other areas of Catholic doctrine may be required in the future. Again this contingency does not signal defect. It rather shows how the Church carries on in the person of the Successor of Peter the teaching mission that Christ has confided to her.

It would not be frivolous to opine that each of the aforementioned papal documents challenges not a few of the prevailing theological outlooks that have gained acceptance among professional theologians, especially those who enjoy standing in the learned academies of theology. Many moral theologians still avoid *Veritatis Splendor*. Other theologians cavil with words in *Fides et Ratio*. And though it is still too early to evaluate the reception that *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* will receive, it is likely that an assortment of avant-gardist theologians, both liturgical and sacramental, will be surprised to discover that in the early numbers of his encyclical on the Eucharist, the Holy Father returns priests and laity to doctrinal determinations that were formulated in the sixteenth century: "How can we not admire," he says, "the doctrinal expositions of the Decrees on the Most Holy Eucharist and on the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass promulgated by the Council of Trent?"²⁰ Forty years later, this newest (and as it turns out, the last) encyclical of Pope John Paul II gives moment for pause to those who have been persuaded that it was a complete fresh start after 1965.

The reference to the doctrinal discussions about the "Holy Sacrifice of the Mass" and the sacraments that were carried on at the Council of Trent points us back to the figure of Thomas Aquinas. It is well-known that his doctrine, especially as set forth in the *Summa theologiae*, guided the work of the drafting committees that served the bishops at Trent. In the 1920s, Dom Anscar Vonier wrote in his book, *A Key to the Doctrine of the Eucharist*, which is now enjoying a renaissance in Catholic circles: "The remarkable feature . . . of that most scholarly and exact presentment of the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharistic sacrifice by the Fathers of Trent is this, that it gives an exact reproduction of the doctrine of St. Thomas, whose line of thought and whose very expressions are easily recognized in the more classical treatment of the subject by the great council."²¹ What Abbot Vonier does not mention is that the theological consultants responsible for these decrees of the Council of Trent were drawn mainly from the ranks of Spanish Dominicans, whose native land it was thought had not been compromised by the introduction of Lutheran theology.²²

²⁰ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 9.

²¹ Anscar Vonier, *A Key to the Doctrine of the Eucharist* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1946, 2002), 145–46.

²² See Angelo Walz, *I Domenicani al Concilio di Trento* (Rome: Herder, 1961).

Whatever Martin Luther held about the Eucharist, and we may assume that his views were closer to being Catholic than those of many present-day Lutherans, the reformer of Wittenberg inveighed against the notion that the Eucharist is a sacrifice. His important 1523 pamphlet *Forma Missae et Communione* explained the new Protestant rite of the Lord's Supper. To this day, Protestants refer to the Eucharist as "the Lord's Supper." Since the sixteenth century, Eucharistic sacrifice has occasioned theological debate between Catholics and Protestant theologians, especially Lutherans. The history of this argument falls outside the scope of today's topic, as does speculation on the interesting question of how much *periti* at the Second Vatican Council allowed burgeoning ecumenical considerations to influence their proposals.²³ I would like to mention, in any case, that my own doctoral work was done under the direction of the Irish Dominican, Father Colman O'Neill, who taught sacramental theology at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Because he was convinced that it would be impossible to explain the sacrificial character of the Mass in ecumenical circles without first discovering the original presentation of satisfaction that St. Thomas gave to the "theory" that he had inherited from St. Anselm, Father O'Neill encouraged research on the notion of satisfaction in Aquinas.²⁴ It is well-known that the *Cur Deus Homo?* nowadays is a difficult text for most Catholic and Protestant theologians. One thing is sure: Aquinas does not repeat the commercial and juridical metaphors that seem to color Anselm's account of satisfaction.

However much the acrimonious debates that alienated Protestants from Catholic during the four-hundred-year period before 1965 may have shaped theological attitudes at the Second Vatican Council, one circumstance now appears evident. The well-known liturgical renewal that issued from this council seems to have unwittingly contributed to the eclipse of attention paid to the Eucharistic Sacrifice. On December 4, 2003, we observed the fortieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's constitution on the sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. It may be startling for some to learn that this conciliar document on the Church's liturgy mentions the Eucharistic sacrifice itself only four times.²⁵ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* cites this conciliar constitution once, namely, number 47, which sets forth the Catholic doctrine that "our Savior instituted the Eucharis-

²³ It was sometimes argued that the Catholic position on sacrifice had become distended as a result of several centuries of sometimes heated rhetorical polemic.

²⁴ The book is still available under the title, *The Godly Image: Christ and Salvation in Catholic Thought from Anselm to Aquinas* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1990).

²⁵ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 10, 12, 47, and 55.

tic sacrifice of his body and blood, in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout time, until he should return.”²⁶ That the liturgical renewal failed to encourage reflection about the Eucharist as sacrifice and that its proponents took up themes other than that of sacrifice may require no more elaborate explanation than the sudden shift in quantitative emphasis on sacrifice that many persons observed in a document that was the first pronouncement from the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. The distinguished then-Lutheran scholar Jaroslav Pelikan wrote in 1966 that “this Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy . . . does not merely tinker with the formalities of liturgical worship, but seeks to form and to reform the very life of the Church.”²⁷ He may have been right.

The first chapter of the 2004 encyclical in its opening paragraph sets the notion of Eucharistic Sacrifice within the biblical context of the Passion of Christ: “‘The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed’ (1 Cor 11:23) instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his body and his blood. The words of the apostle bring us back to the dramatic setting in which the Eucharist was born. The Eucharist is indelibly marked by the event of the Lord’s passion and death, of which it is not only a reminder but a sacramental re-presentation. It is the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages.”²⁸ This affirmation reflects what Aquinas himself set down when he discusses the ritual for the Eucharist in *Summa theologiae* III, question 83, article 2: “in celebratione huius mysterii attenditur repraesentatio dominicae passionis.” In the celebration of this mystery (of the Mass), attention is paid to the representation of the Lord’s Passion. In another place, Aquinas uses the provocative phrase, “celebratio huius sacramenti est imago repraesentativa passionis Christi.”²⁹ The celebration of this sacrament is a representational image or icon of the passion of Christ.

The remainder of the first chapter of the encyclical contains in summary form a very basic catechesis on Eucharistic theology. The Holy Father explains how the sacrifice of the Mass fulfills God’s saving purpose in the world. Specifically, what happens at Mass relates to the establishment of communion in Christ among the Catholics: “The Eucharistic Sacrifice is intrinsically directed to the inward union of the faithful with Christ through communion; we receive the very One who offered himself for

²⁶ See *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 11, note 9.

²⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, “A Response,” in *The Documents of Vatican II in a New and Definitive Translation*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, SJ (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966), 179.

²⁸ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 11.

²⁹ *ST* III, q. 83, a. 1, ad 2. For a brief but incisive commentary, see Inos Biffi, “Eucharist as the perfect sign of Christ’s Passion,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (English) (March 30, 2005): 10.

us.”³⁰ It remains a fair generalization to remark that this intrinsic relationship between sacrifice and communion has not informed many theological or catechetical or even preaching exercises over the past forty years. On the contrary, the impression has been given oftentimes that communion among persons results from the collective goodwill of those who choose to join a community whose focal point happens to be God. Even the Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson laments a “transformation of the Eucharist into a religious social event, celebrating believers’ own commitments and feelings for each other.”³¹ Within this sort of perspective, it would be easy to forget about the sacrifice of Christ, the thought of which may even, from this perspective, be judged to throw up an obstacle to fostering bourgeois sensibilities. One may recall some of the histrionic reactions to the realism of Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*.³²

It, of course, would be wrong to conclude that the eclipse of sacrifice in Eucharistic theology followed logically from the Second Vatican Council’s pronouncements on the liturgy. *Sacrosanctum concilium* was meant to renew the liturgy. While journalists and other popularizers imposed their own spin on things, some professional theologians took the occasion of liturgical renewal to instigate doctrinal revisions. Although gathering the testimony required to justify the claim that theologians conspired to sabotage Catholic doctrine on the Eucharist would require extended research, it is possible to point out at least one influential book that illustrates the directions that were being set by English-speaking liturgical theologians during the period after 1963. In 1987, a priest who has taught liturgy and sacraments at the Catholic University of America, David N. Power, OMI, published a slim volume titled *The Sacrifice We Offer: The Tridentine Dogma and Its Reinterpretation*. Toward the end of this study, which is based on doctoral research done by the author at a much earlier date, Father Power affirms: “The most serious conclusions that follow from this interpretation [of what Trent said about the Mass] are the need for the catholic church to reconsider the role of the priest and the language of sacrifice on the one hand, and the possibility of doing this in a differentiated historical continuity with Trent on the other.”³³ Powers’s conclusion in fact reveals

³⁰ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 16.

³¹ Robert W. Jenson, “The Church and the Sacraments,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 222.

³² For further information, see my “Mel Gibson’s Movie & Thomas Aquinas’s Modes: How the Passion of the Christ Works,” *Saint Austin Review* 4 (2004): 27–32.

³³ David N. Power, *The Sacrifice We Offer: The Tridentine Dogma and Its Reinterpretation* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 161.

a program that had been pursued since the 1970s at least, and would be promoted aggressively after 1987: redefine the role of the priest and reinterpret the language of sacrifice.³⁴ Confusion about these two issues continues to hamper both the pastoral care given in parishes and priestly formation offered in seminaries.

One area of Church life that illustrates this claim is catechetical instruction given to children and young adults. Archbishop Daniel Buechlein, who was appointed in 1994 chair of the Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for the Use of the Catechism, reports that "the fullness of doctrine" has suffered much since the Second Vatican Council. In a report commissioned by this same committee, it was observed that deficiencies in catechetical material can be catalogued under ten headings. One of these headings cites "a pattern of inadequate presentation of the sacraments."³⁵ "Particularly," the archbishop declares, "the sacraments of the Eucharist and Holy Orders evidence deficiency."³⁶ Whatever may someday be determined as the cause of the departure from the fullness of doctrine, the practical results are clear. Many Catholics have forgotten what the Church teaches about the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* signals a reversal in this downward and disturbing trend. The pope now wants us to ponder deeply the sacrificial character of the Eucharist. To do this we, like the theologians at Trent, can depend on the help of the saint who found in St. Agnes a model of sacrificial love.

III

The "infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be endowed in defining a doctrine of faith and morals" never fails.³⁷ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* provides the warrant for a reconsideration of Eucharistic Sacrifice, which, as we have seen, remains a central element of Catholic doctrine. Since the Holy Father has chosen to remind the Church about the Eucharistic Sacrifice, Catholics are encouraged to take up again the question of what distinguishes a sacrifice made to God from other kinds of offerings that are not sacrificial. The subtitle of this paper is taken from a text of St. Thomas: "circa res . . . aliquid fit." It is found in the *secunda*

³⁴ E. Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist*, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), had been published in Europe only the year before. This small volume takes up a reconsideration of the Tridentine decrees on the Eucharist.

³⁵ Archbishop Daniel Buechlein, "The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Ten Years Later: The Challenge of Inculturation," address given at Saint John's Seminary, Brighton, MA, April 2002.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, no. 25.

secundae of the *Summa theologiae* where Aquinas discusses the external acts of the virtue of religion, one of which is sacrifice. In order to examine what Aquinas teaches about sacrifice as an act of the virtue of religion, however, we need to gain some perspective on the theological compositions of the Common Doctor that treat of the Eucharist.

The treatise on the Eucharist comprises eleven questions in the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*. The exposition on the Eucharist is the last sacrament that Aquinas was able to develop completely. The experience that brought his writing of the *Summa* to a halt occurred while he was working on questions related to the sacrament of Penance. It was in fact shortly after having completed his work on the Eucharist that something out of the ordinary happened to St. Thomas while he was saying Mass in the Chapel of St. Nicholas at the Dominican church in Naples. "I cannot do any more," said Aquinas to his astonished companion Reginald. The date was around December 6, 1273. We know then that Aquinas's theology of the Eucharist as found in the *tertia pars* of the *Summa* represents a work of both spiritual and scholarly maturity.

The bishop-theologian, William Barden (1908–2004), who taught the treatise on the Eucharist for many years before becoming archbishop of Isfahan in Iran, has observed that "a piety which would express the theological interest of St. Thomas might find its centre rather in the tabernacle and in the monstrance than on the stone of sacrifice."³⁸ This description is true inasmuch as the bulk of Aquinas's work on the Eucharist aims to clarify issues relating to the Real Presence and transubstantiation. In these discussions, moreover, Aquinas remains without equal. At the same time, Archbishop Barden acknowledges that all the elements for a fruitful study of what happens at the Mass will be found in his discussion of the effects of the Eucharist (particularly in q. 79) and of the ritual that surrounds its celebration (q. 83).

"The Eucharist is at once a sacrifice and a sacrament: it has the nature of a sacrifice in that it is offered, and of a sacrament in that it is received."³⁹ Aquinas makes this distinction in the context of replying to the question: "Is the entire punishment for sin pardoned through this sacrament?" Like everything associated with evil, the punishment for sin resides in the privation of the good that the sinner lacks. This explains why Aquinas begins his direct reply to the question by reminding his readers that the Eucharist "considered as a sacrifice, has the power of rendering satisfac-

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, vol. 58, *The Eucharistic Presence* (3a. 73–78), trans. William Barden (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), xxii.

³⁹ *ST* III, q. 79, a. 5.

tion.”⁴⁰ The Latin expression is “*vim satisfactivam*.” In Christian theology, satisfaction is a way of talking about how the punishment for sin is acquitted, to use a juridical metaphor to express a grace that is ontological, transformational. It would be wrong to think that the identification of sacrifice as satisfaction reduces Eucharistic Sacrifice to an outmoded theological oddity. Christian satisfaction is not a theological throwaway. Within Aquinas’s scheme of things, in fact, the satisfaction of Christ and of his members provides a template through which the theologian is able to explain a central act of the Christian religion, namely the death of Christ on the cross. Aquinas pays full heed to the assertion that St. Paul makes in the Letter to the Romans: “While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6).

In his theology of the Passion, satisfaction supplies one of the five modes that Aquinas considers sufficient to account for everything that the Passion and death of Christ accomplish for the human race. The reason why the notion of penal satisfaction, which always involves the embrace of something that is painful—something that runs against the grain, figures in any complete account of Christ’s Passion hinges on the nature of Christ’s redemptive mission. It is impossible to explain within the context of divine revelation why Christ had to suffer apart from the fact that the first man Adam sinned and so introduced into the world a reign of sin from which the human race alone was unable to extricate itself. Again the Letter to the Romans, “If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ” (Rom 5: 17). St. Anselm summarized this teaching when he affirmed of the satisfaction of Christ, that only God could do it and that only a man ought to do it: The mystery, as Anselm explains it, revolves then around this pairing of *qui potuit* and *qui debuit*. There is much that exists within the divine plan for salvation that flows from the satisfaction that Christ makes during the course of his dolorous Passion: in particular, the seven sacraments of the new law, each of which remits the punishment due to sin. Suffice it for now to observe that satisfaction comes into play whenever the effects of sin require Christian healing.

Aquinas mentions the Eucharist as a sacrifice in the course of answering the question whether the entire punishment for sin is pardoned through the Eucharist. He makes this identification in order to show that the perfective graces of the Eucharist, which are unity and charity,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

proceed to the extent that we are released from disordered attachment to sin (which is itself a punishment of sin). Punishment for sin is another one of those categories that has not received much attention during the past forty years. We are led to consider another reason that explains why the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist was neglected. That we forget, however, does not mean that God forgets. Every Eucharistic community is obliged to ask itself to what extent the frequency of communicating and the numbers of communicants translates into a community that is identified as a place where the truth about the human and divine good flourishes in the lives of each member.

Aquinas's discussion of the ritual that celebrates the Eucharist more clearly connects the sacrifice of the Eucharist with the Sacrifice of Golgotha. In *Summa theologiae* III, question 83, article 1, Aquinas asks whether Christ is sacrificed in this sacrament. Two lines of consideration are offered, one that justifies calling the Mass a sacrifice, and the other the communication of the benefits of the Passion. The key affirmation is found when Aquinas asserts that "the celebration of this sacrament is a definite image representing Christ's Passion, which is his true sacrifice."⁴¹ As one commentator observes: "*Imago* should be charged with its full sense, that which proceeds or issues forth according to a likeness and specific meaning."⁴² We could say that the Mass is an icon of Calvary. Then we can recall what Aquinas teaches in an earlier question of the *tertia pars* when he explains that reverence is given to a representation of Christ as to Christ himself, but not as an artifact but only as an image—"solum in quantum est imago."⁴³

The Eucharistic Sacrifice insofar as it is a representational image of Christ's Passion is a true exemplar cause (*exemplar effectivum*) of the graces God bestows in this sacrament.⁴⁴ We could say that the graces of the Eucharist exist in cruciform composition. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* references an important teaching of the Council of Trent, one that addresses the objection lodged by the Reformers that a strong representational account of the Sacrifice of the Mass leads people to imagine that the once and for all—*semel, hupax*—Sacrifice of Calvary stands in need of multiple repeti-

⁴¹ ST III, q. 83, a. 1: "Celebratio autem huius sacramenti . . . imago quaedam est representativa passionis Christi quae est vera eius immolatio."

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, vol. 59, *Holy Communion* (3a. 79–83), trans. Thomas Gilby (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 134–35, note "c."

⁴³ See ST III, q. 25, a. 3.

⁴⁴ See ST III, q. 83, a. 1, ad 1: "Hoc autem sacrificium exemplum est illius." Father Gilby in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, vol. 58, *Holy Communion*, (3a. 73–78), trans. Thomas Gilby, OP, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 137, renders this text thus: "Christ offered once, and that was the exemplar of our offering."

tions or reiterations in order to accomplish the work of redemption. The mystery runs deeper than this mechanical view of things. "It is one and the same victim here offering himself by the ministry of his priests, who then offered himself on the Cross; it is only the manner of offering that is different."⁴⁵ What is different between the representational image of the sacrifice of Calvary and the death that Christ actually underwent on the cross? In a word, the sacrifice that is offered daily in the Mass is sacramental, whereas the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, his offering to God in obedience and love, is expressed in the physical event of crucifixion.

The way that divine Providence allowed Christ to die brings us back to the title of this essay. "Circa res . . . aliquid fit."⁴⁶ I have mentioned that even a connoisseur of Aquinas's Eucharistic theology such as Archbishop Barden felt compelled to admit that the *Summa* devotes more time to explaining the metaphysics of Real Presence than it does to the way that the sacrifice of the Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross. One explanation for Aquinas's ordering of his materials is the fact that sound theologians, like Aquinas, address more freely those topics that are challenged than those that remain uncontested. For instance, Aquinas does not theorize a great deal about community, but he surely appreciated the dimensions of community life, given the way that it was lived in the thirteenth century, more than do the theoreticians of community who seldom leave their individual studies.

There is another way to view Aquinas's treatment of new law sacrifice. We discover what Aquinas thinks about new law sacrifice by looking at what he says about sacrifice in general. This discussion is not in the Christological and sacramental questions found in the *tertia pars*, but in the *secunda pars* where Aquinas treats the moral life. In particular, sacrifice belongs to the virtue of religion, which itself is placed under the cardinal virtue of justice as one of its potential parts.⁴⁷ A potential part means that while the allied virtue corresponds to the main virtue, it exercises the power or *potentia* of the virtue within a limited sphere of activity. In the case of religion, the just man renders what is owed to God. Since it is impossible to render to God all that is owed him, religion is a potential part of the cardinal virtue of justice.⁴⁸ The virtue of religion expresses itself in internal acts, devotion and prayer, and also through the external

⁴⁵ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 12 at note 16, Ecumenical Council of Trent, session XXII, *Doctrina de ss. Missae Sacrificio*, ch. 2 (DS, no. 1743).

⁴⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 85, a. 3, ad 3.

⁴⁷ See *ST* II-II, q. 80: "There are certain virtues which render another his due, but not to its full extent. . . . Religion is a potential part of justice."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

acts, such as, adoration, sacrifice, and vows. Sacrifice falls within the category of those acts whereby men give things to God: sacrifice, oblation, first fruits of the harvest, and tithes. It is easy to see that Aquinas is organizing large amounts of biblical material, especially religious duties prescribed by the law of Moses.

In question 85, article 3, Aquinas records the argument that states: “[A]nything offered to God seems to be a sacrifice. Yet many things are offered to God, such as devotion, prayers, tithes, first fruits, oblations, and holocausts. Therefore, sacrifice does not seem to be a distinct act of a definite virtue.”⁴⁹ In the body of the article, Aquinas explains that generally speaking a sacrifice is any good action offered to God, especially in order to cling to God in spiritual union.⁵⁰ In the reply to objection 3, however, Aquinas introduces a more proper notion of sacrifice: “A sacrifice in the proper sense of the word means that something is done to the thing offered to God, for example, when animals were killed and burned and when bread is blessed, broken, and eaten.”⁵¹ This text affords a glimpse of the theological coherence that informs the *Summa theologiae*. Deep within the *secunda pars*, which treats the moral life, Aquinas is obviously thinking about the Eucharist: bread blessed, broken, and eaten.

To ponder in faith the sacrifice of Calvary requires understanding what makes a sacrifice. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* develops this point: “The sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic mystery cannot therefore be understood as something separate, independent of the Cross or only indirectly referring to the sacrifice of Calvary.”⁵² Catholic faith recognizes that on Calvary something was done to the one who was crucified. Christ’s self-offering on the cross is “‘a sacrifice that the Father accepted, giving, in return for this total self-giving by his Son, who ‘became obedient unto death’ (Phil 2:8), his own paternal gift, that is to say the grant of new immortal life in the resurrection.’”⁵³

I began this essay by drawing your attention to the example of St. Agnes. The mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice achieves its highest expression among the saints in the life of the martyrs. The witness of a teenage girl is meant to encourage all Christians to know that participation in Christ’s sacrifice is open to them. One reason the Church reserves

⁴⁹ *ST II-II*, q. 85, a. 3, obj. 3.

⁵⁰ See *ST II-II*, q. 85, a. 3, obj. 1 and ad 1: “the act of any virtue assumes the character of sacrifice if it is performed in order to cling to God in spiritual union.”

⁵¹ *ST II-II*, q. 85, a. 3, ad 3.

⁵² *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 12.

⁵³ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 13, citing Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), no. 20: *AAS* 71 (1979): 310.

priestly ordination to men is because the priest immolates at the altar.⁵⁴ Each Mass enacts a true sacrifice. The Catholic holds “that Christ’s Eucharistic Body under the appearance of bread, and Christ’s Eucharistic Blood under the appearance of wine, represent Christ’s natural Body and Christ’s natural Blood as they were on Calvary. This is the true and final expression of sacramental representation; and such representation suffices by itself to constitute the sacrifice, because the representation is of that period of Christ’s wonderful existence when he was nothing but sacrifice, as his Blood was separated from his Body.”⁵⁵ “Circa res . . . aliquid fit.”

I would like to close by suggesting how young men may serve the mystery of the Eucharist. The proposal is self-evident. Some young men must sacrifice certain of their potentialities so that this precious gift of Christ to his Church will continue to sanctify the world. There is special reason to appreciate the example of the virgin martyr Agnes. Purity of life prepares for sacrifice. This axiom applies especially to the priest. A young man makes every effort to lead a chaste life so that he will be fully disposed spiritually to handle the bread and wine of the Eucharist. And young women should help them in imitation of St. Agnes. Both men and women believe that in the double consecration, the sacrificing priest plays his role in representing the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. God has provided no other solution to take away the sins of the world and to establish the reign of universal charity. These supernatural gifts Christ won for us by his obedience and love expressed externally during his crucifixion by Roman soldiers some two thousand years ago. From his pierced side flow blood and water, which the Church proclaims to be the fountain of sacramental life in the Church. This is the message that Pope John Paul II wants us to ponder as we read his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. It is also a message that comes to us from St. Thomas Aquinas through the mediatorship of the Catholic Church, which continues to recognize his perennial contributions to Catholic thought. **N V**

⁵⁴ Father Benedict Ashley discusses this argument in his *Justice in the Church: Gender and Participation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press of America Press, 1996), 82–84.

⁵⁵ Vonier, *Key*, 118–19.