

Christ's Human Nature and the Cry from the Cross: St. Thomas Aquinas on Psalm 22:2

PHILIP NOLAN, O.P.

Holy Innocents Parish

Pleasantville, NY

Christ's cry from the Cross quoting Psalm 22 (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46) has become a central focus for contemporary Christological debates.¹ A number of modern thinkers have read this verse as expressing in Christ an experience of dereliction incompatible with traditional positions concerning divine impassibility, Christ's beatific knowledge, and Trinitarian relations.² Thomas Joseph White has recently offered an insightful Thomistic critique of these interpretations:

¹ For a comprehensive study of this verse and an introduction to the debates attending it, see Gérard Rossé, *The Cry of Jesus on the Cross: A Biblical and Theological Study* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). Other more recent engagements with this verse include Evaggelos Bartzis, "My God, My God, Why Have You Abandoned Me?": *The Experience of God's Withdrawal in Late Antique Exegesis, Christology and Ascetic Literature* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021); William L. Bell, "God Hidden from God: On Theodicy, Dereliction, and Human Suffering," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 88, no. 1 (2019): 41–55; Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 143–75; Beth A. Rath, "Christ's Faith, Doubt, and the Cry of Dereliction," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 81 (2017): 161–69; Holly J. Carey, *Jesus' Cry from the Cross: Towards a First-Century Understanding of the Intertextual Relationship Between Psalm 22 and the Narrative of Mark's Gospel* (London: T & T Clark, 2009); Anthony Clarke, *A Cry in the Darkness: The Forsakenness of Jesus in Scripture, Theology, and Experience* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2002); and Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 308–39.

² God's impassibility: Jürgen Moltmann, a prominent proponent of divine passibility, treats the cry from the Cross in *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation*

The final cry of Christ on the cross cannot be interpreted as a cry of either despair or of spiritual separation from God. By contrast, it must be understood theologically as a prayer of desire related to Christ's abandonment to the Father and his hope to introduce humanity into the eschatological gift of redemption.³

In his work, White is concerned to engage with modern Christological themes using principles derived from the Thomistic tradition. For this reason, he articulates a rather original alternative to modern theologies of dereliction—especially those marked by divine kenoticism and Luther's theology of the Cross. In offering a view inspired by Thomistic principles, White presents his own creative retrieval of Aquinas's ideas concerning the cry from the Cross.

At times, however, White's argument leaves somewhat obscure the literal meaning of the words of that cry: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"⁴ For example, in pushing back against radical interpretations

and *Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 145–52. For a contemporary defense of divine impassibility in regard to the cry from the Cross, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2000), 209–11. For a more general introduction to the contemporary debate about divine passibility, see Pavel L. Gavriljuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–20; *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James Keating and Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). For a challenge to the traditional position on Christ's possession of the beatific vision, see Jean Galot, "Le Christ terrestre et la vision," *Gregorianum* 67 (1986): 429–50, who argues: "The cry of Jesus on the Cross manifests all the depth of a suffering incompatible with the beatitude of vision" (435, trans. mine). In a similar vein, see Thomas Weinandy, "Jesus' Filial Vision of the Father," *Pro Ecclesia* 13 (2004): 189–201. Regarding challenges to classical formulations of Trinitarian relations, see, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 228–29, 529–31. For an analysis and response to Balthasar's thought on the cry from the Cross, see Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 117–29, and John Yocum, "A Cry of Dereliction?: Reconsidering a Recent Theological Commonplace," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 1 (January 2005): 72–80.

³ White, *Incarnate Lord*, 310. White treats this subject throughout chapter 7: "Did God Abandon Jesus? The Dereliction of the Cross" (308–39), engaging, among others, Hermann Reimarus, Albert Schweitzer, Karl Barth, Moltmann, Balthasar, and Galot.

⁴ White modifies the Revised Standard Version translation from "forsaken" to "abandon," a modification I follow for the sake of consistency. Likewise, unless otherwise noted, I use the RSV.

of dereliction, he shifts the language of “abandonment” from God’s abandonment of Christ to Christ’s abandonment to the Father. My argument in this article is that the textual commentaries on Psalm 22⁵ by Augustine and Aquinas—material that White does not consider specifically—can provide an alternate and somewhat complementary Thomistic approach to the one White proposes, and one more soundly based on Aquinas’s texts themselves.⁶ Christ’s cry is a quote from this psalm, and Aquinas’s commentary on Ps 22:2⁷ develops the Augustinian interpretation of this verse in order to give greater emphasis to Christ’s human nature. This emphasis helps to explain, in a classical way, what it can mean that Christ is abandoned. Thus, Aquinas’s exegesis bolsters the orthodox response to contemporary revisionist theologians by providing a clear literal understanding of this contested biblical passage without applying an experience of damnation to Christ or denying classical positions concerning divine impassibility, Christ’s beatific knowledge, and the nature of Trinitarian relations.

To make this argument, I will first look at the rich tradition of reflection on the Christological meaning of the Psalms, and Psalm 22 in particular, inherited by Thomas. This tradition includes a series of psalm commentaries, conciliar documents, and a variety of other theological works. In this tradition, I argue, we see two primary interpretative approaches. The first is what I will call the Augustinian approach, which insists that Christ is speaking on the Cross for sinners and in the voice of sinners. The second interpretation places more weight on Christ’s own voice and insists that he is speaking in a real way for himself—Christ in some way truly is *abandoned* by God. These interpretations need not and should not be read as contradictory. In fact, all the authorities I examine insist on the first approach. Differences emerge, however, in how they coordinate the latter interpretation with the former. I will discuss Thomas’s synthesis of these interpretations, a synthesis that he grounds in the reality of Christ’s human nature. Finally, I will suggest

⁵ In Thomas’s classical numeration, this is Psalm 21. I use the text of the *Super Psalmos* from the 1863 Parma edition, which the Aquinas Institute has reprinted with a facing English translation: *Commentary on Psalms*, trans. Albert Marie Surmanski, O.P., and Maria Veritas Marks, O.P. (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2022). I use this translation (available online at aquinas.cc) with some modification. The verse as Thomas had it was: “Deus, Deus meus, respice in me: quare me dereliquisti? Longe a salute mea verba delictorum meorum”—“My God, my God, look on me, why have you abandoned me? Far from my salvation are the words of my sins.”

⁶ White does not include Aquinas’s *Super Psalmos* in the bibliography of *Incarnate Lord*.

⁷ The RSV does not treat the title prescript of the psalm as the first verse, while the Vulgate does, as does the New American Bible Revised Edition. I follow the NABRE’s enumeration here.

how a close reading of Thomas's mature treatment of Ps 22:2 supplements contemporary Thomist responses to modern Christological concerns and misguided interpretations of Christ's cry on the Cross.

Thomas's Sources for Reading Psalm 22:2

Thomas's primary source for understanding Ps 22:2 is Scripture itself. Both Mark and Matthew report that Christ spoke the words of this psalm from the Cross, a fact which necessitates for Thomas a Christological interpretation of the psalm.⁸ Augustine links Ps 22:2 with passages in St. Paul's epistles, such as 2 Corinthians 5:21—"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"—and Romans 8:3—"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh." These links inform Augustine's interpretation of Ps 22:2 as primarily a revelation of Christ's relationship to his members—the Church. Later theologians who build on this Pauline/Augustinian interpretation include Cassiodorus and Peter Lombard, as well as sources such as the *Glossa Ordinaria*.⁹ These later commentators largely follow the lines of Augustine's thought, either implicitly or explicitly.

To this Augustinian line of interpretation of Ps 22:2 Thomas adds a second interpretive tradition which focuses on the human nature of Christ. Thomas insists that Christ spoke not only for the Church and for sinners, but also for himself, in his own human nature, when he cried out on the Cross. Such a view is not altogether absent from Augustine's thinking, but the African bishop's focus is elsewhere. On this point, Thomas was influenced by his reading of the *acta* of the Second Council of Constantinople

⁸ In the Vulgate, the psalm verse differs slightly from the quotation in the Gospels. Matt 27:46 and Mark 15:34 quote only the first half of the verse, have "Deus meus, Deus meus" in place of "Deus, Deus meus," do not include "respice in me," and have "ut quid dereliquisti me" in place of "quare me dereliquisti."

⁹ Martin Morard notes Thomas's dependence on these sources and locates his originality in his brief summaries of earlier glosses, in his introduction of other sources, especially biblical ones, in his theological explanations, and in his division of the text. See Morard, "Sacerdoce du Christ et sacerdoce des chrétiens dans le Commentaire des Psaumes de saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue thomiste* 99 (1999): 121. See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentaire Sur Les Psaumes*, trans. Jean-Eric Stroobant de Saint-Eloy (Paris: Cerf, 1996). The notes in Stroobant's French translation offer some guidance but are incomplete. Morard has a helpful critical review of Stroobant's work: "À propos du *Commentaire des Psaumes* de saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue thomiste* 96 (1996): 653–70.

(especially in its condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia), as well as by the writings of John Damascene. Convicted of the need for an adequate literal interpretation of Ps 22:2, Thomas emphasizes the place of Christ's human nature in his cry from the Cross.

Augustine

Turning now to a closer look at the sources Thomas relied upon in his own interpretation of the cry from the Cross, it is clear that Augustine's foundational exegesis of the Psalms has pride of place. His exegetical principles and Christological focus set the trajectory for the Western engagement with Ps 22:2,¹⁰ a trajectory that Thomas largely follows. Augustine reads Christ's cry as a vicarious expression of the experience of sinners, not primarily as something pertaining to Christ's own experience.¹¹ As a result of this approach he concludes, "God had not abandoned him, since he himself was God"¹²—a conclusion that defends divine impassibility and the union of Father and Son, but leaves somewhat ambiguous the meaning of the words Christ speaks from the Cross.

Augustine develops his interpretation of the cry from the Cross in his commentary on the Psalms, written over the course of his career (ca. 396–420). A first thing to note about Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* is his underlying conviction that the Psalms are prophetic.¹³ Augustine thinks that the Psalms were written by King David, but that does not mean that the words of all the Psalms are primarily about the Israelite king. Augustine notes of Psalm 22: "The passion of Christ is recounted in this psalm as clearly as in the Gospel, yet the psalm was composed goodness knows how

¹⁰ Gregory Vall, "Psalm 22: *Vox Christi* or Israelite Temple Liturgy?" *The Thomist* 66 (2002): 175–200. Vall ascribes to Augustine the "authoritative voice" that confirmed the Christological reading of the psalm (180–81).

¹¹ I will examine Augustine's two commentaries on Psalm 22, as well as his treatment of the psalm in his epistolary response to the bishop Honoratus, who asked for exegetical help in interpreting the cry from the Cross.

¹² Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* [*En. Ps.*] 21.2.2.3, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* III/15 (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2000), 229. I take all the English translations of Augustine's *En. Ps.* from Boulding's work.

¹³ Michael Cameron, "The Emergence of *Totus Christus* as Hermeneutical Center in Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*," in *The Harp of Prophecy: Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms*, ed. Brian Daley, S.J., and Paul R. Kolbert (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 205–28; Michael Fiedrowicz, "General Introduction," in Boulding's translation of *En. Ps.*, p. 43.

many years before the Lord was born of the virgin Mary.”¹⁴ Christ himself, Augustine argues, speaks Psalm 22 from the Cross to teach us how to read Scripture: “Why did he say, *My God, my God, look upon me, why have you forsaken me?* unless he was somehow trying to catch our attention, to make us understand, ‘This psalm is written about me’?”¹⁵ Thus, Augustine sees himself as following the Gospel writers in hearing Psalm 22 as “spoken in the person of the crucified one.”¹⁶

Augustine’s conviction that we must read the Psalms as referring to Christ raises the question about how we should understand Christ speaking in Ps 22:2 as if he were abandoned or a sinner. How, in other words, does Christ make “our sins his own, in order to make his righteousness ours”¹⁷? Any answer to this conundrum must defend the clear scriptural witness to Christ’s sinlessness (1 Pet 2:22). To adjudicate this dilemma, Augustine relies upon the literary device of *prosopopoeia*, whereby one person speaks in another’s voice.¹⁸ From the Cross, Christ speaks in the voice of sinners, or “in the character of our old self [*veteris hominis noster*].”¹⁹ St. Paul’s teaching about the mystical body stands at the root of this teaching.²⁰ In multiple treatments of Ps 22:2, Augustine relies upon Rom 6:6, in which St. Paul applies the idea of the mystical body to the crucifixion: “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.”²¹ Christ, “who deigned to assume the form of a slave, and within that form to clothe us with himself, he who did not disdain to take us up into himself, did not disdain either to transfigure us into himself, and to speak in our words, so that we in our turn might speak in his.”²² Because he took our form, “we were there” with him on the Cross.²³ As Christ “has made our sins his own,”²⁴ so he makes our voice his

¹⁴ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.2.2 (pp. 228–29).

¹⁵ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.2.3 (p. 229).

¹⁶ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.1.1 (p. 221).

¹⁷ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.2.3 (p. 229).

¹⁸ See Cameron, “Emergence,” 209–12; Fiedrowicz, “General Introduction,” 50–60.

¹⁹ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.1.1 (p. 221).

²⁰ See, for instance, Augustine’s reference to 1 Cor 12:2 in *En. Ps.* 3.1.9 (p. 81).

²¹ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.1.1 (p. 221). See also Augustine’s letter to Honoratus, which Thomas knew as *On the Grace of the New Testament* (see *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1), and which is known presently as Letter 140, in *Saint Augustine: Letters*, vol. 3, *Letters 131–164*, trans. Wilfrid Parsons, Writings of Saint Augustine 11 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 58–135.

²² Augustine, *En. Ps.* 30.2.3 (p. 323).

²³ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.2.3 (p. 229).

²⁴ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.2.3 (p. 229). Note the reference to 2 Cor 5:21, a verse Thomas also uses in his exposition of this psalm.

own, that we might receive his righteousness. This Augustinian reading of St. Paul becomes a Christological pillar for subsequent commentators on the Psalms, including Thomas Aquinas.

Building upon St. Paul, Augustine develops the notion of the “whole Christ,” who speaks in the Psalms both in the voice of the head (Christ himself) and of the members (the Church). Augustine says that Christ must at times be speaking in the voice of his members, not his own voice as head:

Do you suppose, brothers and sisters, that when the Lord said, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (Mt 26:39), he was afraid to die? . . . Why did he make that prayer, then, except because he was bearing our weakness, and made it for those members of his body who still fear death? That was where the words came from; this was the voice of his members, not of the Head, as also are these words of the psalm: “I have cried by day and by night, and you will not listen.”²⁵

Similarly, Augustine thinks, Christ must be speaking in the voice of the Church when he asks “why have you abandoned me?,” because “God had not abandoned him, since he himself was God.”²⁶ For Augustine, to say that Jesus had an experience of God-forsakenness would contradict his divinity. An experience of abandonment is proper to sinful humans, not to Christ, because Christ is not only human, but is himself God. Christ the head can speak in the voice of his members for their sake, without expressing something properly about himself.

Does “abandonment” pertain to Jesus in any way beyond his headship of the mystical body whose members sometimes seem abandoned? Augustine finds an answer to this question in light of Ps 22:3—“O my God, I will cry to you all day, and you will not listen to me. And in the night, but you will not collude with my foolishness.”²⁷ By looking at the Gospel narrative, we see that God does not seem to answer Christ’s prayer for deliverance in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus died on the Cross the next day. The purpose of this prayer, in Augustine’s view, is largely pedagogical, helping us to understand why God sometimes leaves prayers unanswered. God does not answer some prayers because he wishes to teach those praying “not to ask in sinful words prompted by longing for temporal life, but in the words of one converted to you [God] and tending to eternal life.”²⁸ Abandonment, then, refers only

²⁵ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.2.2.3 (pp. 229–30).

²⁶ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.2.2.3 (p. 229).

²⁷ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.1.3 (p. 221).

²⁸ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.1.3 (p. 222). See also Augustine, Letter 140, ch. 6 (pp. 68–71),

to God's decision not to continue to furnish merely temporal goods—in this case the continuance of Jesus's earthly life. While this explains in some sense how Christ was abandoned, it is clear that for Augustine, Christ's motive for speaking is primarily to teach his members how to understand why they experience the loss of temporal goods. Even in the most painful of sufferings that God allows, Augustine argues, divine providence is always at work: "Many people cry aloud in their distress, and are not heard, but this is for their salvation."²⁹

In his long letter to the bishop Honoratus (ca. 412), Augustine repeats the main lines of his exegesis and links the pedagogical and the mystical headship interpretations of Ps 22:2. He writes that when Christ speaks of being abandoned, "doubtless he is forsaken, inasmuch as his prayer was not heard; Jesus transferred this voice to himself, the voice, no doubt of human weakness, to which the goods of the Old Testament had to be refused, that it might learn to pray and hope for the goods of the New Testament."³⁰ Christ, our head, prays in our voice in order to teach us to desire the good of eternal life, not mere bodily perdurance. Christ can speak these words because he came in "the form of a servant" and in "the likeness of sinful flesh."³¹ Thus, Augustine distinguishes between what is proper to the head and to the members in order to emphasize the gift that Christ gives in becoming like us and dying for us.

Drawing together Augustine's response to the exegetical and Christological questions raised by Ps 22:2, we can say that his conviction of the verse's prophetic nature leads to his presentation of the Pauline teaching of the mystical body of Christ—head and members—and the exchange Christ brought about between the old and new man. These Pauline principles reveal the way in which Christ can speak in the voice of sinners from the Cross. By speaking in this way, Christ himself teaches us how to read the Scriptures, purifies our prayer, and instructs us to prioritize eternal salvation over earthly goods, even the good of earthly life. Christ was "forsaken" insofar as his prayer for earthly salvation was not answered, but in another sense, he had "transferred" that prayer and forsakenness to himself for pedagogical purposes—to teach his members to long for eternal life.

on the distinct ends of the Old and New Testaments. Thomas will cite this explanation in *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

²⁹ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 21.2.3 (p. 230).

³⁰ Augustine, Letter 140, ch. 6 (p. 69).

³¹ Augustine, Letter 140, ch. 6 (p. 70).

Cassiodorus and the Glossa Ordinaria

Augustine's exegesis of Ps 22:2 informed subsequent commentators. Chief among these is the sixth-century exegete Cassiodorus.³² Cassiodorus follows Augustine's exegetical principles, repeating his conviction that "Christ speaks through the whole of the psalm."³³ He agrees explicitly that Psalm 22 seems more like gospel or history than prophecy.³⁴ Theologically, Cassiodorus draws upon Augustine and his use of Scripture to understand how Christ could pray in the words of a sinner. He explicitly mentions Augustine's letter to Honoratus, as well as scriptural verses, such as 2 Cor 5:21, that Augustine relies upon for his interpretation of the cry from the Cross.³⁵

Cassiodorus's work, however, does not seem to have influenced Thomas *in toto*. In the *Super Psalmos*, Thomas relies on the *Glossa Ordinaria* and above all the gloss-like commentary by Peter Lombard for many of his references to patristic and classical interpretations of the Psalms.³⁶ So while many ideas from Cassiodorus's commentary are evident in Thomas's *Super Psalmos*, it seems that Thomas's knowledge of this early commentary was filtered through these later glosses. For example, Lombard reports Cassiodorus's tripartite *divisio* of Psalm 22—the first part is "a complaint [*conquestio*] about abandonment and a prayer," the second a description of the Passion and a prayer for resurrection, while the third shows the fruit and power of the Passion.³⁷ St. Thomas loosely follows this *divisio*, only modifying the description of the last part: (1) a complaint, (2) the story of the Passion, (3) a petition for freedom.³⁸ However, neither Lombard nor the *Glossa* mentions

³² For a recent translation of Cassiodorus's *Expositio Psalmorum* with helpful notes, see *Explanation of the Psalms* [*Ex. Ps.*], 3 vols., trans. P. G. Walsh, Ancient Christian Writers 51–53 (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).

³³ Cassiodorus, *Ex. Ps.* 21.1 (1:216).

³⁴ See Cassiodorus, *Ex. Ps.* 21.1: "Though many of the psalms briefly recall the Lord's passion, none has described it in such apt terms, so that it appears not so much as prophecy, but as history" (1:216). See also 21.9: "We surely seem to be reviewing the gospel here, rather than a psalm, since these things were fulfilled so authentically that they seem already enacted rather than still to come" (1:221).

³⁵ Cassiodorus, *Ex. Ps.* 21.2 and 21.29 (1:218, 232).

³⁶ Mark D. Jordan, "Préface," in Stroobant's trans. of *Commentaires sur les Psaumes* (note 9 above), 10. For the gloss of Psalm 22, see *Biblia Latina cum Glossa Ordinaria*, Facsimile Reprint of the 1st ed., Adolph Rusch of Strassburg, 1480/1481, vol. 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992), 478–480. See also Martin Morard's *Glossae Scripturae Sacrae electronicae* (<https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/>).

³⁷ See Cassiodorus, *Ex. Ps.* 21.1 (1:216). For Lombard's commentary on Psalm 22, see *PL*, 191: 225B–242B. He reports Cassiodorus's tripartite division in 191:225C. The translations of Peter Lombard are my own.

³⁸ *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

Cassiodorus's interpretation of the cry "look upon me" as a prayer for the resurrection.³⁹ Thomas himself reads "look upon me" as a prayer for mercy.⁴⁰ These examples show the filtered nature of Thomas's reliance on Cassiodorus.

Peter Lombard

Peter Lombard serves as an important source for Thomas, providing in some sense a summation of the tradition of exegesis that has Augustine as its greatest monument. Thomas so relies on him that portions of his commentary on Ps 22:2 are near-verbatim replications of Lombard's commentary. Compare for instance, Thomas's and Lombard's explanations about how Christ must be speaking in the psalm in the words of his members in the Church. Lombard writes:

For God did not abandon him, since he was God, the Word of God, but for us he said this, for we are one in him as members, and we are his body. . . . And these "words," namely, "you have abandoned me," and "far from," and "why," are not of a just man, but of "my transgressions," that is they show me not to be just, but a sinner.⁴¹

Thomas argues very similarly that the words of Ps 22:2 should be taken as Christ speaking in the voice of the Church:

These words, namely, "you have abandoned," "far from," and "why," do not seem to be of a just man or of justice, but seem to be "words of my transgressions," namely of human sin, that is, they show me not to be just but a sinner. Therefore, Christ spoke these words in the person of the sinner, or of the Church.⁴²

On a textual level alone, it is clear that Thomas relies on Lombard to express how Christ prays from the Cross in the voice of a sinner.

Summing up the main lines of the Augustinian reading of Ps 22:2, we see that this tradition reads the verse as prophetically written by David in the voice of Christ, who himself is speaking in the person of his members. The key for this tradition's understanding of Ps 22:2 and Christ's quotation of it on the Cross is St. Paul's teaching regarding the mystical body and the "exchange" worked in Christ: "For our sake he made him to be sin who

³⁹ Cassiodorus, *Ex. Ps.* 21.1 (1:216).

⁴⁰ *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

⁴¹ *PL*, 191:227A.

⁴² *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). It is worth briefly noting that White’s emphasis on Christ’s eschatological desire as the interpretive key for the cry from the Cross falls squarely within this Augustinian tradition. Although White acknowledges the role of Christ’s desire for his own exaltation in the cry from the Cross,⁴³ it is Christ’s “soteriological desire *on our behalf* which characterizes above all the cry of Christ from the cross.”⁴⁴

The Acta of the Second Council of Constantinople

Thomas was influenced by other sources beyond this tradition of psalm commentaries in his understanding of the cry from the Cross, and these sources, as we shall see, lead him to nuance the Augustinian interpretation. First, Thomas’s discovery of the *acta* of Constantinople II (ca. 553) and its condemnation of both the exegetical principles and the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia shape, in turn, his own exegesis and Christology.⁴⁵ In fact, Martin Morard suggests that Thomas is unique among Scholastics for the way he relied on the Council, especially with regard to principles of exegesis.⁴⁶ Since Thomas himself explicitly mentions the Council’s condemnation of Theodore in his own exegesis of Psalm 22, I will here briefly present the relevant aspects of this conciliar source.

Theodore denies the prophetic quality of Ps 22:2, asserting that “it is beyond doubt that the psalm does not at all fit the Lord,” because Christ himself is not a sinner.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, “the Lord himself, according to the common law of men, when he was being crushed by the passion, uttered the words, ‘My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?’”⁴⁸ Theodore argues, however, that Christ’s quoting of Ps 22:2 does not legitimize reading the

⁴³ White, *Incarnate Lord*, 338: “The desire that informs this exclamation should be interpreted as a beseeching by Jesus for both his own deliverance/exaltation and our salvation in one inseparable act. In praying for both these objects, Christ’s words on the cross are eschatological in nature.”

⁴⁴ White, *Incarnate Lord*, 337.

⁴⁵ *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 553*, trans. Richard Price, Translated Texts for Historians 51 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009). For an analysis of the historical data regarding Thomas’s discovery of Constantinople II’s *acta* and its effect on his theology, see Martin Morard, “Une Source de Saint Thomas D’Aquin,” *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 81, no. 1 (1997): 21–56. For a more exclusively theological analysis, see Daniel E. Flores, “Thomas on the Problem of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Exegete,” *The Thomist* 69, no. 2 (2005): 251–77.

⁴⁶ Morard, “Une Source,” 36.

⁴⁷ *Acts of the Council of Constantinople*, sess. 8, no. 28 (p. 246).

⁴⁸ *Acts of the Council of Constantinople*, sess. 8, no. 28 (p. 246).

psalm as about Christ himself, despite the fact that the Passion narratives are laced with allusions to many other verses from the psalm. Rather, he says, the Gospel uses language from Psalm 22 in the Passion narratives because “the evangelist, understanding the words in the light of the reality, applied them to the Lord.”⁴⁹ Theodore’s concern for Christ’s sinlessness thus leads him to reject the prophetic nature of the psalm.

Why did Constantinople II condemn Theodore’s positions? As one scholar notes, “with the single exception of Theodore of Mopsuestia, late antique theologians identified unanimously Jesus as the ‘I’ that cries out in Ps 22:2.”⁵⁰ Following the near-universal position of their forefathers (including, as we saw, Augustine), the fathers of Constantinople II saw that the prophetic nature of the Psalms was something other than mere subsequent application. Rather, Christ teaches us from the Cross a truth about God’s plan of salvation as foretold in the Old Testament. To deny that Psalm 22 is about Christ, the Council fathers insist, is to reject the clear prophecies about Christ in the Old Testament.⁵¹ As we shall see, Thomas takes this condemnation of Theodore’s denial of the prophetic nature of Psalm 22 quite seriously.

John Damascene

A final inspiration for Thomas’s understanding of the cry from the Cross that I will consider is John Damascene. This monk from the late seventh and early eighth centuries is widely acknowledged as having influenced Thomas’s Christology to take fuller account of Christ’s human nature.⁵² Thomas Ryan, however, calls John Damascene only an implicit authority in Thomas’s *Super Psalmos*.⁵³ It is true that Thomas does not name John Damascene in his analysis of Ps 22:2. There is reason, however, to consider the Greek doctor as having a significant influence on Thomas’s reading of the passage, for both historical and theological reasons. Thomas worked on the *Super Psalmos* at the same time as he was writing the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*.⁵⁴ This chronological overlap leads M. Michèle Mulcahey

⁴⁹ *Acts of the Council of Constantinople*, sess. 4, no. 29 (p. 247).

⁵⁰ Bartzis, *My God, My God, Why Have You Abandoned Me?*, 77.

⁵¹ *Acts of the Council of Constantinople*, sess. 8, no. 29 (p. 247).

⁵² See Paul Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ’s Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Munster: Aschendorff, 2002), 58–66.

⁵³ Thomas Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms*, Studies in Spirituality and Theology 6 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 41.

⁵⁴ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Works*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 247–66.

to suggest that, while in Naples, Thomas gave his course on the Psalms in the morning, and lectured on the first half of the *tertia pars* in the evening.⁵⁵ J. G. Ginther notes the logic of this argument, while pointing out that it is hard to maintain on a textual basis. Pertinent to our study, however, Ginther states that a “minor exception is found in Thomas’s comments on Psalm 21 [22].”⁵⁶ That is, Thomas’s treatment of Psalm 22 has links to the Christological questions of the *tertia pars*. Since John Damascene is “the key source of Thomas’s Christological psychology,”⁵⁷ it would not be surprising at all if that influence carried into Thomas’s broader treatment of Ps 22:2.

In the one place I can find that Thomas explicitly uses John Damascene to explain Ps 22:2,⁵⁸ he puts him and Augustine in conversation. In his argument against there being any sin in Christ, Thomas gives Ps 22:2 as the very first objection, claiming that in his speech from the Cross, Christ himself speaks of “the words of his sins.”⁵⁹ Thomas is raising the same concern that we saw in Augustine: Ps 22:2 seems to designate Christ as a sinner.⁶⁰ Before going to the Augustinian interpretation, however, Thomas first presents John Damascene’s double principle of predication from chapter 25 of *De fide orthodoxa* III.⁶¹ Thomas paraphrases: “Things are said of Christ, in one way, with reference to his natural and hypostatic property, as when it is said that God became man, and that he suffered for us; and in another way, with reference to his personal and relative property, when things are said of

⁵⁵ M. Michèle Mulcahey, “*First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .*”: Dominican Education before 1350 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998), 313–15.

⁵⁶ J. G. Ginther, “The Scholastic Psalms’ Commentary as a Textbook for Theology: The Case of Thomas Aquinas,” in *Omnia Disce: Medieval Studies in Memory of Leonard Boyle, O.P.*, ed. A. J. Duggan, J. Greatrex, and B. Bolton (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 221n44. Ginther’s note refers to *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 50, a. 3, in particular, but, I suggest, his argument opens up other possibilities.

⁵⁷ Gondreau, Passions of Christ’s Soul, 58.

⁵⁸ ST III, q. 15, a. 1, obj. 1. English translations of ST (with some modifications) are from vols. 13–20 in *Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., ed. John Mortensen and Alarcón Enrique (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012).

⁵⁹ ST III, q. 15, a. 1, obj. 1.

⁶⁰ The extent to which Thomas is thinking with the tradition is evident in his use of 2 Cor 5:21—a verse so often quoted by Augustine and later commentators—as obj. 4 in the same article.

⁶¹ John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa* 3.25, trans. Frederic H. Chase, Jr., in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 37 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), 330–31. For a critical edition of the Greek with a French translation, see Jean Damascene, *La Foi Orthodoxe*, 2 vols., trans. P. Ledrux, *Sources Chrétiennes* 540 (Paris: Cerf, 2011).

him in our person which nowise belong to him of himself.”⁶² Augustine’s reading emphasizes the second way that things are said of Christ, a reading that St. Thomas supports: “Christ, speaking in the person of his members, says: ‘The words of my sins’—not that there were any sins in the head.”⁶³ Nonetheless, John Damascene’s distinction helps to clarify for Thomas how to discuss Christ’s human nature as related to Ps 22:2. As we shall see in the second half of this article, John Damascene’s distinction influences Thomas’s reading of Ps 22:2 in the *Super Psalmos*.

Thomas and Psalm 22:2

Turning from the sources that informed Thomas’s understanding of Ps 22:2 to Thomas’s own exegesis, I will first describe more generally the context for his engagement with the verse, above all in his *Super Psalmos*. I will then look at the exegetical principles he applies, and suggest how his sources influence him. Finally, I will look at his Christological reading of Ps 22:2 and the special weight he gives to Christ’s human nature. I argue that Thomas’s conviction concerning the psalm’s literal Christological meaning necessitates, for him, a greater emphasis on Christ speaking in his own human nature in the cry from the Cross.

Thomas’s engagement with Ps 22:2 fits within the larger context of his life as a Dominican friar and master of the Sacred Page. As a friar, he daily spent hours praying the Psalms; as a medieval theologian, “Thomas’s exegetical work is at the core of his theological study.”⁶⁴ Among medieval thinkers, he especially searches for the literal meaning of the text, without rejecting spiritual meanings built upon that literal meaning.⁶⁵ This focus on the literal sense shapes his exegesis and gives it an originality, even as he is indebted to the thinkers and sources examined above.

These general observations apply in a particular way to his engagement with the Psalms. The text we have of Thomas’s *Super Psalmos* comes to us as a *reportatio* of a course he gave to Dominicans in the Naples *studium*.⁶⁶

⁶² ST III, q. 15, a. 1, ad 1.

⁶³ ST III, q. 15, a. 1, ad 1. In this question, Thomas cites Augustine’s use of the “rules of Tychonius,” from *De doctrina Christiana* 3.30.42–37.56. For an English translation, see Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1990), 187–97.

⁶⁴ Ginther, “Scholastic Psalms’ Commentary,” 211–29. See also Paul Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer: The Bible, Mysticism and Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 83–86.

⁶⁵ See Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 90; Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1:54–74.

⁶⁶ See Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas as Reader*, 11–13, for the most recent critical timeline of

It contains a prologue and commentaries on the first fifty-four Psalms and is clearly aimed at teaching friars who already have had some theological formation. As is the case with Thomas's other scriptural commentaries, this text has received relatively little attention in modern scholarship, although in the past several decades that has begun to change.⁶⁷

The prologue of the *Super Psalmos* orients Thomas's treatment of Ps 22:2. First, Thomas says that the Psalms materially contain the whole of theology.⁶⁸ An implication of this claim is that the Psalms contain truths about Christ. Taking direction from the New Testament use of Psalm 22 in the Passion narratives and the Augustinian tradition of interpreting the Psalms in the voice of Christ, head and members, Thomas reads the Psalms in a thoroughly Christological way. Indeed, Thomas repeats the traditional claim that the Psalms present such a clear picture of the Incarnation that they can seem to be not prophecy, but the Gospel.⁶⁹ Related to this conviction is Thomas's insistence that in certain rare instances the literal sense of a psalm refers to Christ himself.⁷⁰ His treatment of Psalm 22 is perhaps the paradigm case of such a claim.

Exegesis

Because of how he read Constantinople II's condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Thomas believed that the literal referent of Ps 22:2 must be Christ himself. Before Thomas had access to the texts of Constantinople II, he insisted that the verse must be read in the voice of Christ, but he did not insist that to do otherwise is heretical. Thus, in his *Catena aurea in Mattheaum* (1262–1264), Thomas cites Jerome, who says that “it is impiety

all of Thomas's works, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin: sa personne et son œuvre*, new ed. (Paris: Cerf, 2015), 430–86.

⁶⁷ For studies of Thomas's scriptural commentaries, see *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to His Biblical Commentaries*, ed. T. G. Weinandy, D. A. Keating, J. P. Yocum (London: Bloomsbury, 2005). Unfortunately, the book does not contain a chapter on Thomas's *Super Psalmos*. Relatedly, Stroobant's 1996 translation of *Super Psalmos* into French (note 9 above) was the first published translation in a modern language.

⁶⁸ *Super Psalmos*, proem. Thomas notes that the material of theology is all of God's work, which is fourfold: creation, governance, reparation, and glorification. According to his scheme, Ps 22:2 treats primarily of reparation.

⁶⁹ *Super Psalmos*, proem.

⁷⁰ See Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas as Reader*, 109: “Although claims that entire Psalms refer literally to Christ are the exception (much more often, it is Thomas's exegetical strategy to discover Christ at a mystical level), they corroborate Thomas's perception of the Psalms as almost gospel and not prophecy.” See also Flores, “Thomas on the Problem of Theodore,” 275, who notes that Thomas “is particularly careful to protect Psalm 22 and Isaiah 7:14” as examples of Old Testament texts literally referring in Christ.

therefore to think that this Psalm was spoken in the character of David.”⁷¹ By the time Thomas arrives at writing his commentary on Matthew (1269–1270), however, he not only recalls Jerome’s accusation of impiety for those who would deny that Christ speaks in the psalm, but also attributes such a reading to Theodore of Mopsuestia and condemns it as heretical.⁷² Thus, it is likely that Thomas’s discovery and use of Constantinople II ratchets up his conviction that Psalm 22 must be literally about Christ himself. This conviction both confirms and goes beyond the tradition of Augustinian exegesis he receives. As we saw, Augustine reads Psalm 22:2 primarily as pedagogical: Christ quotes the psalm from the Cross at least in part to teach us that the psalm is about himself. A loose treatment of this principle might still allow for some sort of theory of later application. Thomas wishes to avoid any such possibility.

Thomas manifests his conviction that Christ himself speaks in Ps 22:2 in the very way that he cites the text. The full psalm verse as Thomas had it is: “My God, my God, look upon me, why have you abandoned me? Far from my salvation are the words of my sins” (“Deus, Deus meus respice in me: quare me dereliquisti? Longe a salute mea verba delictorum meorum”). Thomas, following earlier commentators, notes that the words “look upon me” are an addition, and thus were not quoted by Christ on the Cross.⁷³ Additionally, as noted above, the verses in Matthew and Mark have a few minor differences from the psalm verse.⁷⁴ In some places, however, Thomas explicitly cites the Gospel version as Ps 22:2.⁷⁵ While this could be taken as an instance of Thomas’s way of paraphrasing quotes from memory, I think it suggests something of the extent to which he himself hears Ps 22:2 as identical in meaning and voice with Christ’s cry from the Cross. Thomas sees Christ himself as the link between the psalm and the Gospel, and only when read in the light of the crucifixion is the literal meaning of the psalm available.

⁷¹ *Catena aurea in Mattheum* 27, lec. 9. Morard has a helpful analysis of Thomas’s use of Jerome in conversation with the Council (“Une Source,” 31–37).

⁷² *Super Matt* 1, lec. 5. For a brief synopsis of the arguments regarding the date of Thomas’s discovery of Theodore’s exegesis, see Flores, “Thomas on the Problem of Theodore,” 251n1.

⁷³ *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

⁷⁴ For example, they read “ut quid dereliquisti me” in place of “quare me dereliquisti.”

⁷⁵ See *Super Matt* 27, lec. 9. Similarly, in *ST* III, q. 15, a. 1, obj. 1, Thomas cites the Gospel quotation as if it were the psalm: “Dicitur enim in Psalmo, ‘Deus, Deus meus, ut quid dereliquisti?’”

Christology

Thomas's strong sense of prophecy has Christological ramifications. It is Christ himself who speaks the words of Ps 22:2. As such, the words of that verse apply literally to him. As we saw, according to John Damascene, words spoken of Christ apply in one way to what is proper to him naturally and hypostatically, and in another way to those with whom he has a relation—his mystical body. Augustine's reading of Ps 22:2 emphasized this second sense, arguing that "abandonment" primarily refers to Christ's members, and it certainly does not refer to Christ's divinity. But is there any sense in which these words apply to the human nature hypostatically united to Christ's divinity? As we saw above, Augustine suggests that there is, insofar as Christ's prayer for deliverance is not answered, but even in this instance Augustine argues that Christ is expressing a desire for earthly goods in order to teach his members to long for eternal goods. Thomas, on his part, insists that it is crucial for us to see that Christ's words apply not only to his members, but also to his own human nature.

THOMAS'S AUGUSTINIANISM

In early engagements with Ps 22:2, however, Thomas inclines to the Augustinian emphasis on the mystical body. In *De veritate*, q. 29, a. 7, in the context of a question about the grace of Christ, Thomas asks whether Christ can merit for others. After listing a number of objections to this position, Thomas includes Ps 22:2 as the key citation for a *sed contra*.⁷⁶ He gives a typically Augustinian line of thought, arguing that when Christ quotes Psalm 22:2, he is speaking in the person of the Church. The union with his members that allows him to *speak* for the Church, Thomas argues, allows Christ also to *merit* for us. In this instance, Thomas gives a reading of Ps 22:2 that emphasizes the members of the mystical body without making reference to Christ's human nature itself.

Thomas also draws on Augustine's understanding of the "abandonment" spoken of in Ps 22:2. As we saw, Augustine understood abandonment to mean God's refusal to answer certain prayers, a refusal motivated by his desire to teach us to long for eternal life.⁷⁷ Citing Augustine explicitly, Thomas argues "God indeed is said to forsake man, according to the ordering of his providence, but only in so far as he allows man to suffer some defect of punishment or of fault."⁷⁸ For Thomas, God's abandonment of Christ in

⁷⁶ *De veritate*, q. 29, a. 7, sc 3.

⁷⁷ Augustine, Letter 140, ch. 6 (p. 69).

⁷⁸ *ST I*, q. 113, a. 6. corp. See also *In II sent.*, d. 11, q. 1, a. 4, qa. 3.

the Passion is an instance of this general principle—the divine permission for suffering—the difference being of course that the defect Christ suffers is for our sake, not because of any personal fault. Thomas reproduces the main lines of Augustine’s argument that this does not mean that Christ was completely abandoned, because “it is evident that neither man, nor anything at all, is entirely withdrawn from the providence of God.”⁷⁹ God exposes Christ “by not shielding him from the passion, but abandoning him to his persecutors,” with his provident goal being nothing less than the salvation of the human race.⁸⁰

Turning from “abandonment” to the related language of “the words of my sins,” we see more distinction between Thomas and his Augustinian inheritance. In question 46 of the *tertia pars*, Thomas maintains Augustine’s interpretation of the “words of my sins” but situates it within his own systematic account of the Passion, an account notable for its focus on Christ’s suffering in his human nature.⁸¹ Where Augustine emphasized that Christ spoke the “words of our sins” to save us, Thomas links those words to Christ’s interior suffering: “The cause of the interior pain was, first of all, all the sins of the human race, for which he made satisfaction by suffering; hence he ascribes them, so to speak, to himself, saying in the psalm: *the words of my sins*.”⁸² Christ speaks these words not only to reveal to us the marvelous exchange he works—the satisfaction he makes—but also to reveal that our sins are the cause of his own human suffering.⁸³

THE CROSS AND CHRIST’S HUMANITY

In the *Super Psalmos*, we see an even more pronounced emphasis on Christ’s humanity. Thomas modifies traditional Augustinian expressions about Christ speaking in the person of the “old man” to focus more on Christ speaking in his own “human nature.” This modification becomes clear by analyzing Thomas’s adaptation of Lombard’s exegesis, which follows Augustine’s use of Rom 6:6 and the language of the “old man” to interpret Ps 22:2. To explain how Christ can say to God, “you have forsaken me,” Lombard writes: “Here is the solution. As if he says, behold ‘why’ [*quare*]: that is, namely, because you are ‘far from my salvation,’ namely, [the salvation] of me, the old man [*veteris hominis*], because salvation is far from sinners (Ps

⁷⁹ ST I, q. 113, a. 6, corp. See also *In II sent.*, d. 11, q. 1, a. 4, qa. 3.

⁸⁰ ST III, q. 47, a. 3, corp.

⁸¹ Gondreau, *Passions of Christ’s Soul*, 59.

⁸² ST III, q. 46, a. 6, corp.

⁸³ For an insightful reflection linking Christ’s knowledge of our sins to his suffering see White, *Incarnate Lord*, 333–38.

118).⁸⁴ As Lombard understands it, Christ speaks in the voice of the old man to ascribe to himself the sins of his members. Thomas follows Lombard very closely, but instead of using the language of the “old man,” he uses the language of “human nature.” He writes “‘far are the words of my sins from my salvation,’ that is, [the salvation] of me, the true man [*veri hominis*], insofar as I have human nature: ‘salvation is far from sinners’ (Ps 118).”⁸⁵ Thomas’s text clearly relies on Lombard’s, but he changes *veteris hominis* to *veri hominis* to emphasize that Christ, in his humanity, prays also for his own bodily salvation from the Cross.

The difference between Thomas and Lombard is all the more striking when we discover that this Pauline language of the “old man” (*veteris hominis*), which is common in the earlier commentaries, is altogether absent from Thomas’s treatment of Psalm 22 in the *Super Psalmos*. This total absence suggests an intentional effort by Thomas to ground his reading of Ps 22:2 literally in the voice of Christ himself, speaking not only in the voice of his members but also in his own human nature. Such an effort would be in keeping with the exegetical convictions regarding the literal sense of the psalm that Thomas developed after reading the texts of Constantinople II. The psalm is about Christ himself, not simply about the general condition of mankind whose voice Christ takes on.

Thomas further underlines Christ’s human nature by linking the cry from the Cross to the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. In his interpretation, Thomas analyzes the prayer according to the two ways John Damascene predicates things of Christ. Thomas writes:

When his passion was approaching, Christ prayed, “Father, if it be possible,” etc. But these words which Christ prayed can be explained in two ways. In one way, Christ said these [words] as though bearing in his person the infirmities which are in the Church: because it would come about that some of his weak members, when suffering threatens them, would be afraid. In another way, he made this petition, bearing in Christ the office of weak flesh, which naturally fears and flees death.⁸⁶

The first interpretation refers the prayer to struggling Christians in the Church; the second to Christ’s own human nature. Thus, Thomas hears

⁸⁴ *PL*, 191:227A.

⁸⁵ See *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

⁸⁶ *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

Christ on the Cross saying to his Father, “[I am] far from bodily salvation, since this cup, or passion, does not pass from me as I have requested.”⁸⁷ Thomas further argues: “Since [Christ] seeks therefore to be delivered, it [his prayer] becomes the statement either of the members in which sins are found, or of the flesh of Christ in which there is a similitude to transgression or sin.”⁸⁸ We clearly see in this passage Thomas applying John Damascene’s distinction about the two ways things can be predicated of Christ to Christ’s prayer.

In a question in the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas expands his insight regarding Christ’s prayer in such a way as to emphasize his human nature:

Christ prayed with his sensuality inasmuch as his prayer expressed the desire of his sensuality, as if it were the advocate of the sensuality—and this, that he might teach us three things. First, to show that he had taken a true human nature, with all its natural affections; second, to show that a man may wish with his natural desire what God does not wish; third, to show that man should subject his own will to the Divine will.⁸⁹

The prayer of Christ is a revelation not only of the good of eternal life, as Augustine writes, but also of Christ’s true human nature, which itself grounds the pedagogical meaningfulness of the prayer—Christ truly prayed as a human. Where Augustine understands Christ’s pedagogy as eschatologically oriented, in this instance Thomas focuses on Christ’s words as spoken for the sake of revealing to us his own human nature.

Thomas analyzes Christ’s “words of my sins” again with the help of John Damascene’s distinction. To express how Christ can speak of the “words of my sins,” Thomas follows Augustine’s use of Rom 8:3 to argue that, in Christ, there is a “likeness of sin.”⁹⁰ The likeness of sin could pertain to the sin of the members, which Christ refers to himself as their head. Or it can pertain to “the flesh of Christ in which there is a similitude of transgression or sin.”⁹¹ The first explanation follows the Augustinian emphasis on Christ speaking in the voice of his members. The second explanation emphasizes Christ’s own flesh. Christ is not truly a sinner in himself, but he can apply

⁸⁷ *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

⁸⁸ *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

⁸⁹ *ST* III, q. 21, a. 2, corp.

⁹⁰ *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1. Augustine cites Rom 8:3 in Letter 140, ch. 5 (p. 68).

⁹¹ *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

“sins” to himself insofar as he hypostatically bears a passable human nature, which “naturally fears and flees death.”⁹²

I do not mean to suggest that Augustine neglected the truth of Christ’s humanity in his treatment of Ps 22:2, nor that Thomas added something altogether new to Augustine’s interpretation. After all, in his letter to Honoratus, Augustine speaks of Christ’s “carnal desire,” that is, his desire for bodily safety.⁹³ As is typical, however, even in this case Augustine immediately states that these words are spoken in the person of the Church, thus focusing on the exchange brought about by Christ. Christ’s humanity serves in a sense as a necessary but sometimes implicit middle term. Thomas makes what is implicit in Augustine more explicit. For example, in the *Super Psalmos*, Thomas cites Augustine’s explanation of “the words of my sins.”⁹⁴ But right before this citation, Thomas insists that it is as if Christ, in his own weakened flesh (*infirmæ carnis*), “were saying, ‘I do not attain the salvation which I intend. If my petition that I ask should be heard, Father, let this cup pass me by.’”⁹⁵ Thus, while Thomas draws more attention to the role of Christ’s human nature in the prayer from the Cross, we can say that he is highlighting, with the help of John Damascene and Constantinople II, a reality known and loved by Augustine and those who followed his exegesis.

Thomas’s Contributions to Contemporary Debates in Christology

In this final section, I wish to suggest a variety of ways in which Thomas’s emphasis on the humanity of Christ in his interpretation of the cry from the Cross can help address contemporary Christological concerns. First, a focus on Christ’s human nature in interpreting the cry from the Cross contributes to the project of responding to contemporary theologies that use Christ’s cry to call into question basic tenets of traditional Christian doctrine. Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, respectively raise questions concerning Jesus’s unity with the Father and his possession of the beatific vision in part because they understand the primary meaning of “abandonment” to be an experience of damnation.⁹⁶ In his response to these revisionist arguments, in order to deny that Christ experienced damnation and to affirm Christ’s beatific vision, White emphasizes more the ways in

⁹² *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

⁹³ Augustine, Letter 140, ch. 6 (p. 70).

⁹⁴ *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

⁹⁵ *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

⁹⁶ For a brief presentation of the thought of Moltmann and Balthasar on this point, see Rossé, *Cry of Jesus*, 88–95.

which Christ is *not* abandoned than a literal exposition of the cry from the Cross itself.⁹⁷ His focus, for good reason, is elsewhere. Nonetheless, the arguments that Aquinas himself makes in the context of exegeting Ps 22:2, I argue, offer helpful supplementary considerations to White's response, particularly with regard to the meaning of Christ's abandonment and its relationship to his prayer.

Thomas's exegesis keeps theological speculation grounded in what has actually been revealed regarding Christ in the words of Scripture. He reads the "abandonment" of Psalm 22 as expressive of the suffering of Christ in the Passion, a suffering that helps to prove Christ's true humanity. Thus, Thomas's developed treatment of Ps 22:2 shows the necessity of linking the Augustinian theme of exchange to Christ's actual human experience of suffering. Aquinas would certainly agree with the Augustinian note White sounds when he writes that "the real potential 'despair' and 'separation from God' that Christ perceived at Calvary were *not in himself, but in us*."⁹⁸ But Thomas would also be sure to insist that Christ, in his human nature, was in some sense, as the psalm says, "far from salvation," in that his earthly life was coming to an end in death. Without falling into the modern error of ascribing an experience of damnation to Christ, Thomas's exegesis offers a literal reading of the cry, in that he accounts for the meaning of God's abandonment of Christ. Christ's abandonment is not some totalized experience of God-forsakenness, but the experience of the divine allowance of his human death and the lack of fulfillment of his simple desire for the preservation of his life. In this respect, we can indeed say, as Augustine and Thomas both do, that Christ was abandoned by God. Thomas's reading is also theologically sound. He does not obscure classical positions concerning Trinitarian unity and divine impassibility for the sake of extreme speculations about Christ's subjective interior state.⁹⁹

Another area where Thomas's focus on Christ's human nature may offer

⁹⁷ See White, *Incarnate Lord*, 308–39. Summing up his argument, White writes: "I will draw upon theological reflections from Aquinas to argue that the final cry of Christ on the cross cannot be interpreted as a cry of either despair or of spiritual separation from God. By contrast, it must be understood theologically as a prayer of desire related to Christ's abandonment to the Father and his hope to introduce humanity into the eschatological gift of redemption" (310).

⁹⁸ White, *Incarnate Lord*, 337.

⁹⁹ White offers a helpful distinction between what we can say objectively about Christ's agony and his union with the Father and what we can say about his subjective state: "The happiness of being united in will with the Father could coexist with extreme agony in Christ, such that the two experiences were objectively distinct but subjectively (and therefore experientially) inseparable" (*Incarnate Lord*, 330).

some light, I suggest, is the question of divine innocence as related to the crucifixion. Nicholas Lombardo has stated that Thomas seems “untroubled by the questions” raised by the affirmation “that God wills Christ’s passion and death, but does not will the actions of those crucifying them.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, how does Aquinas defend the innocence of God the Father in the death of his Son? In the context of the cry from the Cross, Thomas’s focus is not on the innocence of God the Father (something he would take as paradigmatic first principle), but on the fact that in the cry from the Cross Christ speaks in his human nature both for himself and for his members. Christ shows us the legitimacy of expressing the feeling of abandonment even within a context of absolute confidence in God and his divine goodness. Christ’s cry from the Cross, Thomas insists, not only teaches us to long for eternal life, but also teaches us that Christ is fully human with us and for us. In other words, God’s innocence is on display precisely in the innocent cry of Jesus’s humanity.¹⁰¹

A final problem to which Thomas’s treatment of Ps 22:2 offers insight is the issue of unanswered prayer.¹⁰² In the Garden of Gethsemane, we hear Christ ask: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). As we saw, both Augustine and Thomas draw a link between the cry from the Cross and the prayer in the garden, and they see “abandonment” to be related to God’s leaving this prayer in some sense unanswered. But does God truly refuse to answer Christ’s prayer? In his analysis of this question, Thomas again helpfully refocuses

¹⁰⁰ Nicholas Lombardo, O.P., *The Father’s Will: Christ’s Crucifixion and the Goodness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 145n2. For a lively critique of neo-Thomism as failing to defend divine innocence, see David Bentley Hart, “Providence and Causality: On Divine Innocence,” in *The Providence of God: Deus Habet Consilium*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip G. Zeigler (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 34–56; Hart, “Impassibility as Transcendence: On the Infinite Innocence of God” in Keating and White, *Divine Impassibility*, 299–323.

¹⁰¹ Related to this point, elsewhere White links what Christ offers on the Cross with a Thomist theory of predestination: “What we know from the New Testament is that God’s first response to all who sin is the universal offer of the grace of Christ, which is an offer of divine mercy and saving forgiveness in light of the truth. If this is the case, then we can say that the Thomist theory of God’s ‘antecedent divine permissions’ of sin from all eternity, far from being an obstacle to the theology of divine innocence, is in some way required if we are to maintain an adequate conception of God’s universal offer of salvation to all human beings in the wake of human evil” (“Catholic Predestination: The Omnipotence and Innocence of Divine Love,” in *Thomism and Predestination: Principles and Disputations*, ed. Steven A. Long, Roger W. Nutt, and Thomas Joseph White, O.P. [Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2016], 119).

¹⁰² White, *Incarnate Lord*, 262–74; Lombardo, *The Father’s Will*, 132–42.

on Christ's human nature. In his question on Christ's prayer, Thomas distinguishes between senses of "will." Properly considered, Christ's human will always is in accord with his reason, which in turn is always in accord with God. Therefore, every prayer from Christ's will, properly considered, is answered, because what God wills comes to be. Secondly considered, "will" can refer to the desires proper to the sensuality of human nature, which are "willed not absolutely but conditionally—that is, provided no obstacle be discovered by reason's deliberation."¹⁰³ One such desire is the desire not to undergo death. Thomas sees that Christ did not want to die according to "the movement of his sensuality, which was his as man."¹⁰⁴ This is the desire expressed in the first part of Christ's petition—"take this cup away from me." But Christ goes on to express the fullness of his human will as aligned with his reason when he says, "Not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Christ shows that the most reasonable prayer to make is to ask God that his will be done. In this sense, Christ's will always conformed to God's, "and consequently his every prayer was fulfilled."¹⁰⁵

Both in the garden and on the Cross, Christ teaches us that it is most reasonable, regardless of the difficulty of the situation, to pray that God's will be done, even as it is also good to express one's simple, human desires to God. We can see here Thomas circling back to Augustine's appreciation of Christ's pedagogy: his prayer is "for our instruction."¹⁰⁶ But by focusing on the different faculties of Christ's human nature, Thomas is able to show how Christ could both experience a desire that was not fulfilled and, at the same time and in a deeper way, never desire anything other than what his Father willed. This revelation of the fullness of Christ's human nature teaches all Christians, in turn, how to pray to God in confidence even in the gravest sufferings.

Conclusion

During Thomas's infrequent explicit engagement with Ps 22:2 over the course of his career,¹⁰⁷ his reliance on those who came before him allowed him to read the verse as fully expressive of Christ's headship of the Church,

¹⁰³ *ST* III, q. 21, a. 4, corp.

¹⁰⁴ *ST* III, q. 21, a. 4, ad 1.

¹⁰⁵ *ST* III, q. 21, a. 4, corp.

¹⁰⁶ *ST* III, q. 21, a. 4, ad 1.

¹⁰⁷ An *Index Thomisticus* search for the "Deus, Deus meus" yields only twenty-three results, while a search for "quare me dereliquisti" yields only fifteen results in all of Thomas's works.

as well as fully expressive of Christ's human nature. Contrary to modern revisionist theologians, as White insists, Christ's experience of abandonment does not mean that he experienced damnation or God-forsakenness at the deepest level of his soul. But St. Thomas Aquinas's own exegeses shows that we can still helpfully speak of Christ as being forsaken, since, as fully human, he faced bodily death, and was "abandoned" insofar as God allowed his death. Furthermore, Christ's expression of this experience of abandonment in an act of confident prayer teaches us, his members, how to pray in the face of our own mortality.

Thomas's understanding of the cry from the Cross thus connects a long tradition of exegetical interpretation with a reappraisal of authoritative exegetical principles and conciliar doctrinal statements on the truth of the hypostatic union. In efforts to respond to revisionist theologians, contemporary Thomists can benefit by continuing to return to Aquinas's own exegesis and exegetical principles. Thomas's insights contribute to our own understanding of Christ's human nature and our appreciation of what he won for us in his suffering, death, and resurrection. In short, studying Thomas's exegesis can purify our own reading of Scripture so that we may better hear and love the voice of Christ himself.¹⁰⁸ N.V

¹⁰⁸ I would like to thank Fr. Andrew Hofer, O.P., for his comments on multiple drafts of this essay, as well as Fr. Thomas Joseph White, O.P., for his helpful feedback.