

Aquinas and Maritain on Whether Christ's Habitual Grace Could Increase

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ACCORDING TO THOMAS AQUINAS, the habitual grace of Christ is perfect and infinite. Moreover, as Christ possessed this unsurpassable amount of grace from the first moment of his human existence, his human life was not marked by any growth in holiness. Jacques Maritain, however, in his last book, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, claims that Christ's grace was able to increase during his earthly life. Maritain argues that he and St. Thomas disagree over this point because Aquinas held what Maritain calls a Platonist conception of human nature that ignores how the possibility for change and growth mark any truly human existence. According to Maritain, this conception of human nature led Aquinas to ignore the clear teaching of the Gospel of Luke which tells us that Christ grew in grace before God and men. In what follows, we will compare the different accounts of Christ's grace that are found in Aquinas and Maritain. Our goal is to clarify the differences between Maritain and Aquinas on this topic and to argue for the superiority of Aquinas's account over Maritain's in three areas: in its understanding of human nature, in its explanation of why Christ possesses infinite habitual grace, and in its accord with the way that Christ is portrayed in the Gospels.

St. Thomas on Christ's Grace

Before turning to what St. Thomas claims is unique about Christ's grace, it will be useful to begin by considering briefly his general account of grace. Here we must consider what habitual grace is in itself

and how it is related to the infused virtues. As Aquinas notes, some theologians held that grace and the infused virtues are only conceptually distinct.¹ According to Aquinas, however, we can see that this is not the case if we consider the relationship of acquired virtues to the soul. Acquired virtues presuppose that the human soul already exists. The human soul is something that, once it exists, can receive virtues in its various powers, and these virtues help to lead the soul towards the fulfillment of its nature. In a similar way, the infused virtues presuppose something also, but what they presuppose is not simply the human soul, but rather the human soul as healed of sin and elevated towards a supernatural end.² It is habitual grace that brings about this healing and elevation. Once the soul exists in this state, infused virtues such as faith, hope, and charity can perfect the powers of the soul in accord with its supernatural orientation.³

It should be noted that, for Aquinas, this general account of grace does not uniformly apply to Christ. For example, grace did not heal Christ's soul, since he was always without sin. Also, Christ did not receive the infused virtues of faith or hope, since he possessed the beatific vision from the first moment of his human existence.

Although infused virtues are distinct from habitual grace, there is an important connection between habitual grace and virtue, for the infused virtues flow into the powers of the soul from habitual grace.⁴ This close connection between grace and infused virtues is important to keep in mind because, when Aquinas or Maritain discuss Christ's habitual grace, they also often refer to the charity that flows from his grace. Thus, as we shall see below, one can discuss whether Christ has perfect grace by discussing whether he has perfect charity since perfect charity would imply his perfection in habitual grace.

When Aquinas turns to a consideration of Christ's grace, he distinguishes three ways of attributing grace to Christ. In one way, Christ's grace refers to God's gratuitous decision to unite a human nature to himself in the person of the Logos. This is called "the grace of the union" because, from the perspective of the human nature that is assumed by the Logos, the hypostatic union is a grace or gift of God.⁵

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (ST) I-II, q. 110, a. 3. All translations from ST are my own and are based on the Latin in *Summa Theologiae Sancti Thomae Aquinatis*, 3rd ed. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1963).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., a. 4.

⁴ Ibid., a. 4, ad 1.

⁵ ST III, q. 2, a. 10.

In another way, grace refers to the habitual grace that is in Christ's human soul.⁶ This is the grace that Christ possesses as an individual human being that elevates his soul to a supernatural state and leads to the infusion of charity into his soul. Finally, Aquinas speaks of Christ's "grace of headship" by which he is the mediator of grace to the members of his body, the Church.⁷

In what follows, we will be concerned chiefly with Christ's habitual grace and his grace of headship. These two graces are in reality one and the same. We speak of this single grace in different ways, however, depending on whether we are speaking of it as something that sanctifies Christ's human soul and, so, perfects its powers or, instead, as something that is a principle of meriting grace for others. Thus, insofar as this grace sanctifies Christ, it is referred to as habitual grace, but as a principle of meriting for others, it is called the grace of headship.⁸

Like other qualities, grace can be possessed by someone in varying degrees. According to Aquinas, Christ possesses grace to such a degree that we can speak of him as possessing the fullness of grace.⁹ Aquinas is aware, however, that we speak of others besides Christ as also full of grace. Mary is called full of grace in the Gospel of Luke (1:28), and Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles (6:8).¹⁰ Yet, Aquinas argues that Christ is full of grace in a unique way. For, we can speak of the fullness of grace either with respect to the grace itself or with respect to the one who has grace.¹¹ In the first way someone has the fullness of grace when he possesses it to an unsurpassable degree. Christ alone has the fullness of grace in this sense. When we turn from a consideration of the grace itself to a consideration of grace relative to the person who possesses grace, others besides Christ can rightly be called full of grace. This would be true of anyone who accepts and receives all the grace that God wills for a person relative to his or her own calling. As Aquinas writes of Mary and Stephen:

The Blessed Virgin is not called full of grace on the part of grace itself because she did not have grace in its highest possible excellence. Also, she did not have grace in such a way that she

⁶ Ibid., q. 7, a. 1.

⁷ Ibid., q. 8, a. 1.

⁸ Ibid., q. 8, a. 5; q. 48, a. 1.

⁹ Ibid., q. 7, a. 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., q. 7, a. 10, obj. 1.

¹¹ Ibid., q. 7, a. 10.

could produce all the effects of grace. She is said to be full of grace, however, because she had sufficient grace for that state for which God chose her, namely that she be the mother of God. Similarly, Stephen is called full of grace because he had sufficient grace to be a fitting minister and witness of God, the office for which he had been chosen.¹²

Aquinas also teaches that Christ's grace has such fullness that it can even be called "infinite" in a certain sense. To explain how this is so, Aquinas distinguishes Christ's grace *as it is a being* from his grace *insofar as it is a specific instance of grace*.¹³ As a being, Christ's grace is finite since it is a created entity. Yet, as an instance of grace, it can be called "infinite" because in itself it is not limited in any way.

Maritain on Christ's Grace

Aquinas distinguishes between two states in which Christ's humanity existed during his earthly life. In some respects, Christ was a *viator*, someone who was still travelling toward his ultimate end. Christ's non-glorified human body, for instance, is an example of how he remained a *viator* during his earthly life. In other respects, Christ was a *comprehensor*, someone at rest in his ultimate end. According to Aquinas, Christ possessed the beatific vision during his earthly life, and in this respect, he was a *comprehensor*. To speak of the ways that Christ did and did not improve during his earthly life, Maritain borrows Aquinas's distinction between Christ as a *viator* and a *comprehensor*. According to Maritain, anyone who is truly human and who is a *viator* must also be able to grow in grace,¹⁴ and he finds support for this in the Gospel of Luke, where we read: "And Jesus advanced in wisdom, and age, and grace with God and men" (2:52). Maritain interprets Luke to be speaking about Christ's habitual grace,¹⁵ and the implication seems to be clear: just as Christ grew in age, so also his habitual grace increased over time. For Maritain, Luke's teaching confirms the reality of Christ's human nature because "growth is characteristic of the *verus homo* in the state of way."¹⁶

¹² Ibid., q. 7, a. 10, ad 1.

¹³ Ibid., q. 7, a. 11.

¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (London: Burns & Oates, 1969), 54.

¹⁵ Ibid., 50–54.

¹⁶ Ibid., 52.

Maritain also affirms that, in some respect, Christ was a *comprehensor* during his earthly life. Like Aquinas, Maritain affirms that Christ was a *comprehensor* insofar as he possessed the beatific vision from the first moment of his human existence. Indeed, according to Maritain, as a *comprehensor*, Christ always possessed an infinite degree of grace through which he knows and loves God.

When Maritain turns to explaining how, in one sense, Christ's grace could be perfect or infinite and, in another sense, incomplete, he suggests that we apply the *comprehensor-viator* distinction to Christ's grace itself. Maritain writes: "The idea that I propose to you therefore, is that, just as the human nature of Christ was at once under two different states, the state of *comprehensor* and the state of *viator*, so also the grace which perfects this nature, the habitual grace of Christ was also under these two different states of *comprehensor* and of *viator*. This is my fundamental presupposition."¹⁷ According to Maritain, then, Christ's grace would have existed under two different states during his earthly life: the state of the *comprehensor*, in which it is infinite or perfect, and the state of the *viator*, in which it is finite and susceptible to growth.

Maritain's case for thinking that a single instance of habitual grace can exist under two different states begins with his explanation of how Christ's soul can be divided into two different spheres: a sphere relative to his state as a *comprehensor* and a sphere relative to his state as a *viator*.¹⁸ To help us think about how the soul of Christ could be divided in this way, Maritain draws on the notion of the "unconscious" from modern psychology. Maritain writes: "There is a *philosophical instrument* which was lacking at the time of St. Thomas, and which is, I believe, indispensable: a psychological notion which, as we shall see, applies in the case of Christ in a *transcendent and absolutely unique* sense, but which it was necessary indeed to have disengaged first of all on the plane of the purely human and experimental analogue within our reach, I mean the explicit and explicitly elaborated notion of the *unconscious* in man."¹⁹

In taking the notion of the unconscious from modern psychologists, Maritain is quick to point out that, when psychologists speak of the unconscious, what they describe would more properly be called the "infraconscious." By the "infraconscious," Maritain is referring to

¹⁷ Ibid., 67.

¹⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹⁹ Ibid., 48–49 [emphasis original].

“the vast psycho-somatic unconscious of tendencies and of instincts, of sensations not yet elaborated in perceptions, of latent memories, etc.”²⁰ Maritain draws on the concept of the unconscious in order to develop a notion that he calls the “supraconscious of the spirit.” He mentions the activity of the agent intellect as an example of something that occurs in this supraconscious realm.²¹ We are not conscious of the workings of the agent intellect, but what occurs unconsciously through the agent intellect is not something at some lower level of the human person, as is the case with the instincts, sensations, and memories of the infraconscious. Both the infraconscious and supraconscious carry on unnoticed by the person, but the supraconscious is a feature of our soul because of its spiritual dimension, while the infraconscious results from the connection of our soul to the body. Even though there is a realm of the supraconscious for all human beings, Christ’s supraconscious was unique because it was divinized by the beatific vision, even as he remained a *viator* in other respects.²²

Although Maritain sharply distinguishes Christ’s grace as it is received in his supraconscious realm from how it is received in the conscious realm, there is an important connection between these two realms. Maritain uses the image of an oblique line that eventually touches a horizontal line to symbolize the relation between the two states of Christ’s grace. We can imagine the supraconscious realm of Christ’s soul as a horizontal straight line that is extended from the first moment of his human existence up to the present moment. This line represents the infinite grace that Christ possesses. His life as a *viator* is represented by an oblique line that “starting from below . . . rises towards the horizontal straight line, and signifies that ascensional movement, that growth, that progress of which St. Luke speaks to us, that growth in grace and in wisdom, as in age, which is an essential property of every *verus homo*.”²³

It may seem that Maritain posits two instances of habitual grace in Christ—one that is perfect and one that is susceptible to growth—but this is not in fact the case. Maritain cautions us from thinking of the grace in the conscious realm of Christ’s soul as something that in itself can become greater. This is indeed precluded because of the perfec-

²⁰ Ibid., 55.

²¹ Ibid., 49.

²² Ibid., 54–58.

²³ Ibid., 75.

tion of grace that he enjoys as a *comprehensor*.²⁴ Christ does grow in grace insofar as he is a *viator*, but strictly speaking, this is not because his habit of grace increases, but rather because his already perfect habit of grace as it exists in his divinized supraconscious gradually takes root more and more in the lower part of his soul over the course of his earthly life.²⁵

A Defense of the Teaching of St. Thomas on Christ's Grace

As we have noted, Maritain invokes Luke 2:52 in support of his account of Christ's grace. Aquinas sees that, on the surface, Luke's passage contradicts his own position. Yet, for Aquinas, there is a passage from John that must also be taken into account when considering the biblical teaching on Christ's grace.²⁶ In John we read: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (1:14). John speaks here of the very act of the Incarnation wherein the Logos assumes a human nature to himself, and he also speaks of the Incarnate Logos as full of grace. He seems to indicate that Christ, in his humanity, possesses the fullness of grace from the beginning of the Incarnation, whereas Luke seems to suggest that Christ only grew towards this fullness over time. There is, then, on the surface, a tension in the Gospel's own teaching about Christ's grace.

Aquinas and Maritain resolve this tension in different ways. Aquinas does so by distinguishing between two ways that someone might be said to increase in grace. This could be said when the very habit of grace increases, but it could also be said when the habit (without itself increasing) leads to the performance of greater and greater works. There is an increase in the effects of grace, but not in one's grace itself. According to Aquinas, it is only in the latter sense that Christ increased in grace. As Aquinas writes: "[Grace could be said

²⁴ Ibid., 77: "When one says that grace, charity, wisdom, grew in the here-below of the soul of Christ-*viator*, one does not at all say that God infused into it there a grace, a wisdom, a charity which *in themselves would have been more and more great*. How would this have been possible, since in the paradise of His soul Jesus already had grace, charity, the gift of wisdom, at their sovereign and eternal degree, under the state of limitless plenitude due to the condition of a *comprehensor* possessing an infinite Beatific Vision."

²⁵ Ibid., 77–78.

²⁶ For Aquinas's use of John 1:14 to support his understanding of Christ's grace, see *ST* III, q. 7, a. 12. In objection 3 of this article, Aquinas cites Luke 2:52, and in the *sed contra*, he cites John 1:14. See also Sermon 8 in *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, trans. by Mark-Robin Hoogland (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 89.

to increase] with respect to its effects inasmuch as someone does more wise or more virtuous works. It was in this way that Christ advanced in wisdom and grace, just as he did in age. As he advanced in age, he accomplished more perfect works, so that he could demonstrate that he was true man, both in the things of God and in the things of man.”²⁷ Therefore, Aquinas interprets Luke’s statement as referring to the multiplicity of works that Christ did over the course of his life that revealed more and more something about his identity.

Maritain, however, offers an alternative way of harmonizing the passages from Luke and John about Christ’s grace. According to Maritain, John is speaking of the divinized supraconscious realm of Christ’s soul, whereas Luke is speaking of its conscious realm.²⁸

Both Aquinas and Maritain offer plausible ways of harmonizing Luke 2:52 and John 1:14 so long as their respective presuppositions are kept in mind, and in order to determine which interpretation is more plausible, we must evaluate the principles on which each is based. Thus, we will first consider whether growth in grace is essential for being truly human. We will then turn to an examination of the different explanations of Maritain and Aquinas as to why Christ possesses infinite grace. Finally, we will ask how the biblical witness beyond Luke 2:52 and John 1:14 provides support for affirming or denying Christ’s perfection in grace.

Maritain’s interpretation of Luke depends most crucially on his philosophical anthropology. As we have noted, Maritain claims that Aquinas’s interpretation of Luke was based on a deficient understanding of human nature because it overlooks the place of development or growth in the life of any true man.²⁹ The difference between Maritain’s and Aquinas’s conception of human nature seems to be as follows: according to Aquinas’s understanding of human nature, someone can be a true man if he has and exercises the powers that are essential to man, whereas Maritain’s understanding of human nature adds to this that, in ordinary circumstances, every true man who is not entirely at rest in his ultimate end must also increase his

²⁷ ST III, q. 7, a. 12, ad 3.

²⁸ Maritain, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, 67–75 (especially 74n21, where Maritain claims that his understanding of Christ’s grace can account for John 1:14).

²⁹ Ibid., 54: “In the next place, there was (and this was rather a mentality at a given epoch), the idea, tinged with Platonism, that in order to be truly man it sufficed to satisfy the non-temporal *type* of humanity,—the notion of development or of growth in time being left in the background.”

own ability to exercise these powers well over time. Increasing one's ability to use one's powers well necessarily involves the possibility for an increase in those virtues that perfect man's essential powers. Thus, the possibility for growth in grace, as well as in knowledge and love, will ordinarily be a part of any truly human life.

To support his claim that a capacity for growth is essential to being human, Maritain points to our ability to gain knowledge. He chooses this example because, on this point, St. Thomas seems to have seen the limits of what Maritain calls the Platonic conception of human nature. In his commentary on the *Sentences*, Aquinas had denied that Christ possessed any acquired knowledge, limiting his knowledge to beatific and infused knowledge.³⁰ As Maritain suggests, Aquinas was moved to change his teaching out of a deeper understanding of what is implied in calling Christ truly human. Aquinas did come to realize that anyone who is truly human would necessarily have the capacity to engage in abstraction and (unless impaired in some way) would do so. Abstraction, by its very nature, is a process that takes time and leads to an increased understanding of the world around us. Growth and development are characteristic of how the human intellect performs its function well.³¹ Maritain believes that attributing to Christ growth in grace and the infused virtue of charity is a logical extension of what Aquinas came to realize about Christ's knowledge.³²

Maritain is correct to state that human knowing of its very nature requires the possibility for growth. Indeed, perhaps there is a sense in

³⁰ See *In III Sent.* d. 14, a. 3, qa. 5 and solutio (I draw on M. F. Moos's 1933 edition). Even Aquinas's mature treatment of Christ's acquired knowledge has provoked many objections because of the manner in which Christ is said to have acquired knowledge (namely, without learning from others) and because of the depth of natural knowledge that Christ supposedly possessed. For a helpful analysis of these objections, see Simon Francis Gaine, O.P., "Christ's Acquired Knowledge According to Thomas Aquinas: How Aquinas's Philosophy Helped and Hindered His Account," *New Blackfriars* 96, no. 1063 (May 2015): 255–68.

³¹ *ST III*, q. 12, a. 2.

³² Maritain, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, 52: "Along with this it is fitting to remark that what I am going to try to say goes in the very direction in which St. Thomas was advancing, and does but extend his movement of thought; for his theology tended to bring more and more completely to light, at the same time as the divinity of Jesus, the full reality of his humanity. . . . In any case, he was so preoccupied with the humanity of Christ in its essential exigencies that after having first admitted in Jesus infused science only, he taught the necessity of recognizing also in Him an experimental or acquired science."

which all activities that are natural to man involve the potential for growth. We cannot, however, infer from this that any true man must also have the possibility for growth and progress in the supernatural realm of grace and the infused virtues. The way that we attribute human knowledge to Christ must rest on the very nature of the intellect. This will imply the possibility for growth and progress. Yet, in attributing grace to Christ or anyone else, we must first consider God's purpose in granting grace, for it is God's purpose in granting grace to someone that determines the degree to which grace and subsequent infused virtues are able to be received by that person. The only ways in which human nature could condition the reception of this grace are the two ways that Aquinas identifies: any grace will be finite in its *esse*, and any actions that grace and the infused virtues make possible will unfold progressively in time. Thus, with regard to the question of whether a true man could be perfectly confirmed in grace from the first moment of his existence, the assumptions that St. Thomas relies on when interpreting Luke 2:52 and John 1:14 seem more well-founded than those of Maritain.³³

Maritain and Aquinas offer different explanations for why Christ possesses infinite grace in the first place. As we shall see, Aquinas's attribution of infinite grace to Christ is based on soteriological principles in a way that Maritain's is not. Considering this topic will provide further support for the contention that Aquinas's treatment of

³³ In *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation and the Vision of God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 165–68, Simon Gaine follows St. Thomas in upholding Christ's perfection in habitual grace, but he does not believe that this implies that there was no genuine growth in grace in another sense. As Gaine points out, grace is at work not only when a habit is conferred on the soul but also when a person elicits whatever acts become possible after receiving habitual grace. As St. Thomas teaches, habitual grace provides a disposition to perform graced actions that is brought to realization through the additional grace of *auxilium*. According to Gaine, these considerations should make us hesitate before we say that there was no genuine growth in grace in Christ, but only a growth in grace's manifestation. For, there can be growth in grace with reference to the graces that bring about the acts of grace without there being growth in habitual grace. Gaine is right to call our attention to how Christ's life in grace is not static, but ongoing. Yet, from the addition of graces over the course of Christ's life, it does not follow that Christ was able to grow in holiness (and it is this point that divides Maritain and Aquinas). For, he was perfected in grace from the beginning of his human existence. Thus, there is still a sense in which Christ's growth in grace is a growth merely in manifestation, even though this manifestation requires additional graces that aid Christ in exemplifying his perfect holiness in different ways throughout his life.

Christ's grace emphasizes in a special way God's purpose in granting grace as the primary factor in determining the degree of grace that one possesses.

According to Maritain, Christ had infinite grace as a *comprehensor*, even while he was a *viator* in other respects. Maritain explains why Christ possessed this infinite grace in the following way: "Let us recall that the Beatific Vision was not given to Christ as the fruit of a previously acquired merit. It was given to Him from the very first, as an exigency of the hypostatic union, and, so to speak, as a gift from the latter. From the moment that the Word becomes incarnate, it is necessary that His human nature participate in the Deity to the sovereign degree possible."³⁴ He continues: "To have a habitual grace *infinite in its order or to the point of supreme and unsurpassable perfection* . . . is thus a privilege unique to Christ, since every other man has a *finite* person, and since accordingly in every *purus homo*, even the consummated grace proper to the blessed, is also of *finite* mode, at a given degree of perfection which admits always above it the possibility of a greater degree."³⁵ For Maritain, the infinite degree of Christ's participation in the beatific vision is an automatic consequence of the human nature of Christ being assumed by a divine person.

Maritain takes this as Aquinas's own teaching and one that he himself modifies only by limiting the infinitude of grace to the supra-conscious realm of Christ's soul during his time as a *viator*. Maritain can draw on passages from question 7 of the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae* to support his interpretation of Aquinas. In this place, Aquinas writes: "Christ has the fullness of grace . . . because he has it in the highest degree according to the most perfect way in which it can be had. This is clear first from the nearness of the soul of Christ to the cause of grace. For it was said [a. 1] that the closer that something is to the outpouring of a cause, the more abundantly it receives. Therefore, the soul of Christ, which is conjoined more closely to God than any other rational creature, received the greatest outpouring of grace."³⁶ Aquinas elsewhere compares the cause of grace in Christ's soul to the

³⁴ Maritain, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, 69. For an argument that Christ does not automatically possess the beatific vision because of the hypostatic union, but rather for soteriological reasons, see Guy Mansini, "Understanding St. Thomas on Christ's Immediate Knowledge of God," in *The Word Has Dwelt Among Us: Explorations in Theology* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2008), 45–71.

³⁵ Ibid., 70–71 [emphasis original].

³⁶ *ST* III, q. 7, a. 9.

way that the sun gives light: “Grace is caused in man by the presence of divinity, just as light is caused in air by the presence of the sun. . . . The presence of God in Christ is understood according to the union of the human nature to the divine person. Thus, the habitual grace of Christ is understood as following upon this union, just as brightness follows upon the sun.”³⁷ These passages seem to support the claim that Aquinas teaches that the degree of Christ’s grace is an automatic result of his human nature being assumed by the Logos or, as Maritain puts it, “an exigency of the hypostatic union.”³⁸

Yet, to draw this conclusion, one must read these passages outside of their proper context. The passages above come from question 7 of the *tertia pars*, and Aquinas tells us in his prologue to this question that he is now treating of those things that were “co-assumed” by the Son of God in his human nature. We must, therefore, keep in mind the distinction that Aquinas makes between what is “assumed” by the Logos in becoming man and what is “co-assumed.” Under the category of the “assumed” falls anything that automatically results from the assumption of the human nature by the Logos. Aquinas lists human nature and its parts—such as a human intellect and a physical body—as what the Logos assumes in the act of Incarnation. Under the category of the “co-assumed” are various perfections and defects that can accrue to human nature. As for what Christ co-assumes, Aquinas lists whatever perfections or defects are required for Christ to serve as our redeemer.³⁹

A central aspect of Christ’s redemptive mission includes meriting grace for others. It is in virtue of receiving this grace that our justification and salvation can be accomplished. To carry out this aspect of his mission, Christ was given grace not only to elevate his own soul to a supernatural state but also to be the meritorious and effi-

³⁷ Ibid., q. 7, a. 13. Maritain is not alone in interpreting Aquinas as holding that Christ has perfect grace because of the hypostatic union. More recently, for example, Marilyn McCord Adams has written the following about Aquinas’s teaching: “Because hypostatic union places Christ’s human nature as close as any creature can come to the Divine essence, fullness of habitual grace beams into His soul like splendor from the sun.” See *What Sort of Human Nature? Medieval Philosophy and the Systematics of Christology*, The Aquinas Lecture 1999 (Marquette, WI: Marquette University Press, 1999), 52.

³⁸ Maritain, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, 35.

³⁹ For more on the category of the “co-assumed” and Aquinas’s innovation in using it, see John F. Boyle, *The Structural Setting of Thomas Aquinas’ Theology of the Grace of Christ as He is Head of the Church in the Summa Theologiae* (PhD diss., Centre For Mediaeval Studies, University of Toronto, 1989), ch. 3.

cient cause of grace in others. As Aquinas writes, “the soul of Christ received grace in such a way that in some manner others receive grace because of it. Therefore, it was fitting that he had the greatest grace, just as fire, which is the cause of heat in all hot things is the hottest of all things.”⁴⁰

Because of the unique role that God has allotted for him as head of the Church, Christ does not possess grace in the same way as any other *viator*. As head of the Church, Christ is the source of grace for others and merits an unlimited amount of grace for his members. One's merit, however, is proportioned to the degree of one's grace.⁴¹ Therefore, possessing an unlimited or infinite amount of grace is the foundation for his ability to merit an unlimited amount of grace for his members.⁴²

Aquinas's teaching on Christ's headship highlights his precise reason for attributing an infinite degree of grace to Christ. Christ has any number of perfections that are required to carry out his mission, but his degree of grace is linked to his goal of meriting grace for others. If we were to imagine that Christ's redemptive mission did not involve meriting grace for us, then pace Maritain, we would not have to posit infinite grace in Christ. Surely Christ would still need an extraordinary amount of grace to be able to give us an example of holiness, and he would surely still need to have the beatific vision to teach us about God with authority, but if his redemptive mission were limited to giving us a witness and a teaching, he would not need to possess an infinite amount of grace.

We have argued that being truly human does not require that Christ be able to increase in grace. If this is correct, it undermines Maritain's main reason for interpreting Luke 2:52 as he does. We have also argued that we should follow Aquinas's teaching that we attribute grace to Christ in view of how possessing it serves his redemptive mission. Maritain, by contrast, does not draw on soteriological principles in attributing infinite grace to Christ. All of this would at least require that Maritain modify his account of Christ's

⁴⁰ *ST* III, q. 7, a. 9.

⁴¹ For Aquinas's teaching on merit, see *ST* I-II, q. 114. See also Joseph Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action: "Merit" in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). Wawrykow analyzes Aquinas's teaching on Christ's merit on 101–29 and 233–47. See also William D. Lynn, S.J., *Christ's Redemptive Merit: The Nature of its Causality according to St. Thomas*, *Analecta Gregoriana* 115 (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1962).

⁴² *ST* III, q. 8, a. 1.

grace in certain ways. Perhaps Maritain could admit that growth in grace is not, strictly speaking, required for being truly human but that it is still in some way more fitting if Christ does increase in holiness over the course of his life. Maritain could also replace his explanation of why Christ possesses infinite grace with the one developed by Aquinas. Perhaps then we would be left with mutually exclusive, but individually plausible, accounts of Christ's grace. Yet, Aquinas's account should be preferred even to a modified version of Maritain's because Aquinas's account is more in accord with how Christ is portrayed in the Gospels. To see this, we need first to consider the different understandings of Christ's earthly life that follow from the different accounts of his grace that we find in Maritain and Aquinas and then to compare them against biblical testimony about Christ.

As we have noted, Maritain believes that the infinite grace of the supraconscious realm of Christ's soul gradually takes root more and more in the conscious realm of his soul. Christ grows in grace progressively over the course of his earthly life as he continues to meet the challenges that his redemptive mission posed. These challenges reach their highest point on the Cross, which is exactly where his grace as a *viator* comes to be equal to his grace as a *comprehensor*.⁴³ Maritain claims that Christ's human nature could not endure such an intense act of love for more than a moment but that during that brief moment Christ elicits an infinite act of love that merits the redemption of the human race. Only at the very last moment of Christ's life does the grace and charity in the conscious part of Christ's soul come to be infinite, as it always was in the supraconscious part of his soul.⁴⁴

While Maritain suggests that perfection in grace during his whole earthly life would hamper the efficacy of Christ's redemptive work, Aquinas argues for the opposite. When examining how Christ could simultaneously experience beatitude and suffering during the Passion, Aquinas takes note of how the perfection of his knowledge and love increased rather than decreased his ability for redemptive suffering. According to Aquinas, Christ's intellect, will, and imagi-

⁴³ Maritain, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, 78n24, 127–44.

⁴⁴ Maritain is very specific about the moment in which Christ's grace as *viator* meets his grace as a *comprehensor*. He writes that these two meet "exactly at the moment when Jesus utters on the Cross His sixth and His seventh words, declares that all is consummated and delivers up His soul into the hands of the Father. At this moment He is as *viator* at the same degree of grace and of charity at which He was, and will remain as *comprehensor*" (*On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, 75).

nation operate like any other *viator* who undergoes bodily suffering or experiences sorrow over the sins of others. Christ is aware of his suffering and understands its causes. His sorrow over this, however, was more intense precisely because he knew and loved God perfectly.⁴⁵ For, on account of that perfection, Christ as a *viator* could understand like no one else the true horror of sin and grieve over it. As Aquinas writes, “Christ not only experienced sorrow because of the loss of his own bodily life, but also because of the sins of all others. This sorrow in Christ surpassed the pain of every contrite person, both because it proceeded from a greater wisdom and charity, from which the sorrow of contrition is increased, and because at the same time he experienced sorrow over each and every sin, according to Isaiah 53:4, ‘Truly, he carried our sorrows.’”⁴⁶

According to St. Thomas, moreover, Christ's wisdom and his perfection in grace and charity inform not only his Passion but also, indeed, his entire life.⁴⁷ As a result, Aquinas's account of Christ's grace implies that Christ continually merits our salvation over the course of his whole life. In addition to contributing to our salvation through his teaching and the example of his holy life, he was at the same time acting as the cause of our very ability to imitate his life and heed his teaching. This aspect of Aquinas's soteriology indicates the pervasiveness with which the end of the Incarnation—man's salvation—permeated the entire life of Christ. Over and over again, Christ acted in such a way as to merit the grace for us that was necessary for bringing about our reunion with God.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ For an account of how Christ's knowledge and love of God in the beatific vision could influence his knowing and willing as a *viator* that is based on, but goes beyond, the writings of St. Thomas, see Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 236–74 (ch. 5).

⁴⁶ *ST* III, q. 46, a. 6, ad 4. Gagne calls our attention to a related way in which Christ's perfection in grace and knowledge enhances the value of his suffering in addition to enabling him to experience great sorrow and contrition over human sin. He notes that the beatific vision would enable Christ to know and love in his human intellect each person for whom he suffers and dies. As Gagne writes, “it was thus Christ's vision of God that enabled him to love perfectly both God and those for whom he was to undergo his saving death, and so die for them out of this perfect love in his humanity, this immense beatific charity that would never be bettered” (*Did the Saviour See the Father?*, 177).

⁴⁷ *ST* III, q. 1, a. 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, q. 48, a. 1, ad 2: “To the second objection, it must be said that, from the beginning of his conception, Christ merits eternal salvation for us.”

Thus, Maritain and Aquinas present us with different images of Christ's life. In the case of Maritain, Christ is continually developing until the point where he finally has the internal qualities to serve as our redeemer, whereas in the case of Aquinas, Christ possesses those qualities from the beginning of his human existence and exercises them over and over again. Having seen the different images of Christ's earthly life that result from Aquinas's and Maritain's accounts of Christ's grace, we can now ask which image is better supported by how Scripture portrays Christ.

It must be acknowledged that making a biblical case for St. Thomas's teaching on Christ's grace will be difficult, precisely because, by Thomas's own teaching, Christ's actions gradually reveal more and more something of his true identity and mission. Thus, this gradual unfolding could easily be interpreted as a result of a growth in grace and not simply as a new level of self-revelation. The series of passages in the Gospel of John in which it is claimed that "the hour" of Jesus has not yet come, for example, seem open to this type of ambiguity.⁴⁹ Raymond Brown notes that "the hour" of Jesus is a technical term in John that refers to the period of Christ's Passion, death, Resurrection and Ascension.⁵⁰ Although Maritain does not consider the passages from John about "the hour," perhaps they could support his developmental understanding of Christ's perfection. Maritain could interpret them to imply that Jesus's hour is not yet come because he is not yet sufficiently advanced in grace and wisdom to undergo a saving Passion and death. The arrival of Christ's hour, then, would depend on whether the internal qualities of his soul have developed to such a point that he is able to undergo a saving Passion and death.

In his *Commentary on John*, Aquinas argues for a different explanation of why Jesus, at various points in his earthly ministry, claimed that his hour was not yet come. Aquinas interprets "the hour" of Jesus as the time that God providentially willed Christ's Passion and death to occur. Aquinas writes that the hour of which Jesus speaks is "the time for him to suffer, an hour not fixed by fate, but predetermined from all eternity by his own will. Thus Augustine says: 'his hour had not yet come, not in which he would be forced to die, but in

⁴⁹ See John 2:4; 7:6; 7:30; 8:20. I thank the anonymous reader for suggesting that I consider these passages.

⁵⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i-xii)* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 99.

which he would not refuse being killed.”⁵¹ That this hour has not yet arrived does not diminish Christ's internal ability to undergo a saving a death, but it does limit when it would be appropriate to accept or refuse such a death.

While the passages in John about “the hour” might be susceptible to interpretations that could be compatible with the Christology of either Maritain or Aquinas, there are some passages of Scripture that are incompatible with Maritain's Christology. Consider, for example, one of the episodes in which Christ invites people to hand him over to death by promising that he will raise up the temple of his body in three days, if they would only destroy it. As Nicholas Lombardo writes about John 2:

In the Gospels, Jesus does not merely interpret his death as integral to his mission; he also provokes it. In John's Gospel, after the temple cleansing, he is asked for a sign to justify his actions. In response, he says, referring to the temple of his body, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). This response contains layers of meaning. On one level, Jesus is saying that he can and will overcome their violence. But that is not all he is doing. On another level, like the temple cleansing itself, his words are deliberately provocative. They are a taunt. It should not be glossed over that Jesus is speaking in the imperative mood. He is not making a conditional statement about what will happen if the temple of his body is destroyed. He is goading his opponents to kill him.⁵²

Christ's taunt here presupposes that he is in fact ready to die and not simply gambling that he would come to be ready if his interlocutors happened to heed his command. Maritain's account, however, does imply that Christ was not prepared to die at the moment he uttered these words.

Consider also how Christ is described to the shepherds in the Gospel of Luke. The shepherds learn from the angels that the Messiah and Lord has been born. For Christ to be called Messiah and Lord, he

⁵¹ Aquinas, *Super Ioan* 8, lec. 2 (Marietti no. 1163), in *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1–8*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher, ed. The Aquinas Institute (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), 443.

⁵² Nicholas Lombardo, *The Father's Will: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 117.

must have possessed at that time the grace of headship through which he acts for our salvation.⁵³ As Matthew Levering writes, “from the moment of [Christ’s] conception, he enjoys this headship. Thus, the angel can rightly proclaim to the shepherds that ‘today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord’ (Luke 2:11), not who *will be* Messiah and Lord.”⁵⁴

There is one way in which Maritain’s Christology might seem to be in greater conformity with the Gospels than that of Aquinas. The Gospels portray the crucifixion as a unique and central moment in the unfolding of Christ’s redemptive work. Yet, Aquinas insists on the pervasiveness of Christ’s merit of our redemption throughout his entire earthly life, and this seems like a disadvantage of Aquinas’s account when compared to that of Maritain. For, on Maritain’s account, Christ possesses enough grace to merit our salvation only at the very end of his life, when he freely willed to suffer death on our behalf. Maritain’s account seems, therefore, to provide a better explanation of why Christ submitted to the Passion. Perhaps Aquinas’s account of Christ’s grace and merit renders the Cross superfluous to his redemptive work and, thus, not the unique and central moment it is in the Gospels.

While Aquinas does indeed deny that Christ evinces greater charity in the Passion than he evinced in other parts of his life, he also teaches that Christ’s Passion and death do contribute something to his redemptive work that he had not already accomplished during his life.⁵⁵ By suffering, Christ makes satisfaction for sin, and this had not been accomplished prior to his Passion.⁵⁶ According to Aquinas, moreover, the making of satisfaction has an effect that Christ’s prior

⁵³ See Maritain, *On the Grace and Humanity of Jesus*, 63, for a statement that implies a denial that Christ exercises the grace of headship during his earthly life: “I confess that these reasons [for positing infinite grace in Christ prior to the last moment of his life] scarcely satisfy me: . . . perhaps because if I see well that all the graces received by men are participations in the grace of Christ, I see less well that from the earthly life of the latter it was thus because the grace of Christ would have caused them intentionally by its acts.”

⁵⁴ Matthew Levering, *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation according to Thomas Aquinas*, (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 40.

⁵⁵ *ST* III, q. 48, a. 1, ad 3: “The Passion of Christ had an effect that his preceding merits did not have, not because of a greater charity, but because it was the type of work that was more fitting for such an effect, as is clear from the arguments set out earlier regarding the fittingness of Christ’s Passion.” Those arguments are found in *ST* III, q. 46, aa. 1–4.

⁵⁶ *ST* III, q. 48, a. 2.

meritorious acts on our behalf did not. Aquinas speaks of the opening of the gate of heaven as an effect of the satisfaction that he renders to God by freely submitting to the Passion.⁵⁷ This is another way of saying that the last obstacle to full union with God is removed through Christ's Passion, and only because of his Passion. Some people who lived before Christ were nonetheless united to him as head.⁵⁸ While Christ's headship extends even to people who lived before the Incarnation, it is only after Christ makes satisfaction for our sins on the Cross that those who were united to Christ could enter into heaven. Thus, through linking Christ's Passion to making satisfaction and to the opening of the gate to heaven, Aquinas too has an explanation for why Christ's Passion is a central and unique moment in his redemptive work, as Scripture teaches us.

Conclusion

Maritain's account of Christ's grace has an undeniable appeal. It allows one to interpret Luke 2:52 in its most natural sense. Moreover, it preserves some aspects of Aquinas's teaching on Christ's perfection in grace and his possession of the beatific vision alongside an understanding of Christ as *viator* that allows him to develop and grow in ways that are more akin to how other human beings are able to increase in grace. In this way, Maritain's account seems to vindicate the reality of Christ's humanity more than does Aquinas's account. Attributing to Christ this balance between perfection and growth, however, rests on the claim that being truly human requires the possibility for growth in grace. This, however, requires that Maritain overlook the fundamental reasons for which any person has the degree of grace that he possesses, which ultimately lies not in any exigency of human nature, but in God's purposes in granting grace. Maritain's account also falters in the reason for which it attributes perfect grace to Christ as a *comprehensor*, since he takes it to be an automatic consequence of the hypostatic union rather than, as Aquinas argues, something co-assumed by the Logos for the purpose of carrying out his redemptive mission. Finally, John 2:13–22 and Luke 2:11 provide biblical support for attributing perfect grace to

⁵⁷ On Christ's death and the opening of the gate to heaven, see *ST* III, q. 49, a. 5. For an analysis of how the Letter to the Hebrews shapes Aquinas's understanding of this aspect of Christ's redemptive work, see Matthew Levering, *Paul in the Summa Theologiae* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 70–71.

⁵⁸ *ST* III, q. 8, a. 3.

Christ as a *viator* prior to his Passion. For these reasons, St. Thomas's claim that Christ possesses perfect grace and exercises his grace of headship continually throughout his earthly life is to be preferred to Maritain's account that he does so only on the Cross.⁵⁹ N-V

⁵⁹ An earlier version of this article was presented at Thomas Aquinas College in February 2015. I would like to thank the members of the audience for their comments and questions, especially John Nieto. I would also like to thank an anonymous reader for questions and suggestions that have improved the paper in several ways.