

The Natural Desire to See God¹

SERVAIS PINCKAERS, O.P.

The Merit of the Question

IS THERE any merit in once again raising the question of the natural desire to see God? Is there really anything more that can be said on the subject? Have not theologians already rehearsed all the imaginable arguments, raised them from every conceivable angle, and still failed to reach any agreement until, finally, the fighting has ceased, not because it has yielded to the force of any particular argument, but simply has exhausted itself by weariness? Some say that the question is too bound up with scholasticism, and so has therefore been superseded by more progressive developments in theology, centered on man, his liberty, and human nature already touched by grace and the supernatural.

The underlying reality of the question, however, is that of the relation of God and man, and so it lies unavoidably at the heart of Christian life and does not yield to the vagaries and intricacies of opinions and theological fashions. The problem of the relation of God and man lies beyond books and ideas, and so demands the attention of the theologian who wishes to follow the thread of truth rather than the current of fashion. But the new theology that takes man, nature, or science as its principle axis, will it not in the end result in the practical elimination of the supernatural under the guise of a general reinterpretation? When this new theology declares that the question of natural desire has been superseded, does it not at this point betray a secret fear of the resurgence of the problem of the supernatural? Is it not at this point subject to the reproach of having rejected an essential aspect of the Christian mystery, and so of revising the ground upon which the Christian mystery is founded? If there exists in the heart of man a desire for God rooted in his very

¹ Originally “Le désir naturel de voir Dieu,” *Nova et Vetera* 4 (1976): 255–73. Here translated by Aaron Riches.

nature—a distant desire, different from all other desires and needs, capable of getting the upper hand over them—then are not both the theologian and the philosopher compelled to take account of this desire and to accord it special attention, even if the existence of this desire might disrupt the anthropologist of the day?

The question of the natural desire for God in man is born with the creation of man according to the image of God and receives new vigor in light of the Christian revelation of the call of all men to the vision of God. This desire for God is not subject to either the silence or variations of theological opinion, rather it is present and active in the heart of every man and every Christian. It falls therefore to the theologian to express this desire in his own manner, to elucidate it with clarity, candor, and humility, and even courage.

In order to treat the problem of the natural desire to see God, we must begin with the terms in which it was classically elaborated. Thus, insofar as the limits of a brief article allow, we will retrace the contours of the classical elaboration of the natural desire to see God in order to propose a fresh response to this great difficulty, which involves the topic of natural desire as it is related to the supernatural and gratuitous character of the vision of God. After the great Augustinian intuition, the famous *inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat te*, St. Thomas Aquinas is the principle theologian of the natural desire of man to see God, and he expressed this theme with the rigor of the language of scholasticism. It is St. Thomas who forged with precision the apparatus that came to provide later theologians with the essential terms of discussing the natural desire to see God. It is thus to St. Thomas that this exposition is dedicated.

Part One: The Question of Natural Desire According to St. Thomas and His Posterity

The Importance of the Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas

When we read the texts of St. Thomas that treat the natural desire to see God and which demonstrate the possibility of the vision of God (which is the only true beatitude of man), when we follow his reasoning without prejudice or fear for the difficulties that may follow from his reasoning, it becomes clear that the natural desire to see God constitutes an essential aspect of Thomistic theology and its dogmatic orientation to the vision of God. More, theological knowledge of this natural desire to see God is an integral preparation and moral orientation, which disposes man toward the bliss of the loving vision of God that is his ultimate end.

At the beginning of the *prima pars*, q. 12, a. 1, answering the arguments of Arab and Jewish philosophers who, anxious to safeguard divine transcendence, deny that any creature could ever attain the vision of God, St. Thomas proposes the natural desire that animates the spiritual faculties of man (intellect and will) to demonstrate (according to reason itself, he says) the radical possibility of man seeing God in his very essence. "Therefore some who considered this, held that no created intellect can see the essence of God. . . . But this opinion is against reason [as well as faith]. For there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees; and thence arises wonder in men. But if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void. Hence it must be absolutely granted that the blessed see the essence of God" [*Summa theologiae* I, q. 12, a. 1].

Here we should note two things. First, the natural desire in question is that which draws the mind toward the truth and the will toward the good by love. This is not a desire superadded. It is a desire constitutive of our spiritual faculties, natural to them in the strongest sense of the word. Secondly, the argument proposes the radical possibility of vision of God by man—vision of God is not impossible, as it was for the Arab philosophers. If the natural desire which drives man toward the true and the good ran up against the impossibility of seeing God, nature would do something in vain and we would have to admit a contradiction in the work of God, who would thus have ordered human nature to an impossibility. This radical possibility can be called a passive capacity to see God: a capacity to receive a vision unique to spiritual beings. This is not to claim that the vision of God is an active possibility, a power man possesses in himself by which he could attain this end of himself. The vision depends on God. Nevertheless, the argument takes on a special force in light of divine revelation, by which man is called to vision and given the promise of grace. No argument of reason can set aside the possibility of this vision of God; on the contrary, the movement of intellect and will yearning by the force of natural desire suggests the positive ordinance of man to the vision of God.

The natural desire of man forms the basis of the argument found in the treatise on beatitude at the beginning of the *secunda pars*, where an investigation into the true happiness of man entails a transition from man to God, proving that the full happiness of man cannot reside in anything whatever save God alone. In question 2, which inquires about the multiple objects which correspond to the desires of man (riches, honors, glory, power, bodily goods, pleasures, spiritual goods), proving that St. Thomas applies himself to the universal dimension of the desire of the will in order to demonstrate

that none of these goods can fully satisfy man, that only the universal good—that is, God—can constitute the perfect beatitude of man.

In question 3, responding to the question from the point of view of the human subject and the nature of happiness that is formed in him, after having shown that beatitude consists in an activity of our spiritual faculties—intellect and will, with priority given to intellect—St. Thomas distinguishes every knowledge of the creature between that of science and that of angelic knowledge, and this in order to support natural desire, the fact that man cannot be fully happy apart from the vision of the essence of God. “If therefore the human intellect, knowing the essence of some created effect, knows no more of God than ‘that He is,’ the perfection of that intellect does not yet reach simply the First Cause, but there remains in it the natural desire to seek the cause. Wherefore it is not yet perfectly happy” (*ST* I, q. 3, a. 8).

The whole investigation of the treatise on beatitude converges on the natural desire to see God inscribed in our spiritual faculties, in our inclination to the true and the good, and to love.

The importance, therefore, of the natural desire to see God for St. Thomas cannot be overstated, especially since, at least on my reading, the treatise on beatitude lays the groundwork for his moral theology and is, in fact, the backbone of the structure of his thought on the matter. For St. Thomas, as for all of antiquity, the question of morality is preeminently the question of what is the true happiness of man. The moral life is nothing but a response to this question. The natural desire to see God is thus brought to bear by St. Thomas on the final answer to this question of happiness, which underpins the desire for happiness, and so the whole realm of moral action. Later, in the seventeenth century, the question of morality became first and centrally that of moral obligation dissociated from the treatise on beatitude, severing consideration of man’s natural desire for God from his fundamental morality. Thus was the advent of a new conception of morality.

The Originality of the Thomist Argument Concerning Natural Desire

We should also note how the conceptualization of natural desire according to St. Thomas was an original contribution he made, a formulation proper to him. In his first work, the commentary on the *Sentences*, in book IV, distinction 49, at the place where Peter Lombard offers his own theological exposition of final beatitude, here St. Thomas does not yet raise the issue of natural desire. This is noteworthy especially because at this juncture it would have served St. Thomas well, since he is forced here to address the argument of the impossibility of seeing God, as held by

certain Arab philosophers among others (IV *Sent.*, d. 49, q. 2, a. 1: *Utrum intellectus humanus possit prevenire ad videndum Deum per essentiam*). Nevertheless, at this early stage, St. Thomas had not yet formulated his conception of natural desire.

St. Thomas's argument concerning natural desire does not in fact appear until the third book of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, where, even in this first formulation, it comes already to occupy a central position in the long and extensive discourse on human happiness, which is a first draft of the treatise on beatitude and occupies chapters 1 to 63, and principally chapters 48 to 50. In chapter 48 we read: "[I]t is impossible for natural desire to be unfulfilled, since 'nature does nothing in vain.' Now, natural desire would be in vain if it could never be fulfilled. Therefore, man's natural desire is capable of fulfillment, but not in this life, as we have shown. So, it must be fulfilled after this life. Therefore, man's ultimate felicity comes after this life." And, recurring like a refrain after each argument in chapter 50 is the phrase "ex hac cognitione non quiescit desiderium naturale,"² or similar such expressions.

The argument concerning the desire natural to see God, along with the role it plays in the question of the happiness of man, is a discovery of the genius of St. Thomas. Moreover, it plays an essential role within his overall theological system.

The Personal Character of the Desire for God according to St. Thomas

A long and deep familiarity with the work of St. Thomas is needed to pierce beneath the shell of the technical tone of his language and thereby apprehend the sensibility underpinning the logical rigor of the author. Thus we come to see how the desire to know God in himself is in fact a very precise expression of the soul St. Thomas himself, of his own love of the truth joined with the desire for happiness that animated his life and directed his theological trajectory. Have we not heard it said of him that he began earlier than others to seek after God? St. Thomas expresses this theme with incomparable discretion, as a personal experience at once theological and mystical, which for him is one. The soul of St. Thomas himself and all of his theology is related to the natural desire to see God, which is the cornerstone of his system.

The question of the vision of God has for St. Thomas a double aspect: (1) There exists in man, in his spiritual faculties, a natural desire which cannot be fulfilled except in the vision of God's essence. There is thus a

² Our natural desire is not satisfied by this knowledge.

passive capacity to see God inscribed in man, which differentiates him from creatures that lack reason.³ (2) On the other hand, it is impossible for man, as for any creature, to attain to the vision of God by his own natural power; he requires a special divine assistance, the “light of glory,” which is entirely gratuitous and supernatural, as is the grace by which he proceeds toward that vision (cf. *ST* I–II, q. 5, a. 5).

The vision of God is thus supernatural because no creature can attain it by his own natural power, nor does any creature possess an active capacity for it. This desire is nevertheless natural to spiritual beings insofar as it is inscribed in them as a passive capacity to receive from God this vision. Such is the clear and explicit position of St. Thomas. He does not appear to be the least bit anxious about the coordination of this natural desire with the gratuity and transcendence of the vision of God, which is grace.

The Problem of Natural Desire in the Sixteenth Century

Changes in Thinking Between the Thirteenth and the Sixteenth Centuries

The problem of natural desire as we now understand it was not explicitly raised until the sixteenth century. By this time, intellectual inquiry and the context of theological reflection had changed from what it had been in the thirteenth century. Thus, even while they adopted the *Summa* of St. Thomas as the basis of their theological instruction, nevertheless they interpreted him through the ideas and problems of their own age.

In particular, the thirteenth century, and St. Thomas primarily, constructed a theology characterized by a harmony established between God and man, faith and reason, grace and freedom, supernatural gifts and human nature. This theology originated first of all in the divine truth communicated by faith and derived from reason. As a result of the advent of nominalism, however, a new vision of man and his relation to God, to wider society, and to other created natures was elaborated. Characteristic of this new vision was the imposition of a radical tension between these elements (God, society, and nature) on the one hand, and human freedom on the other. The new perspective is particularly manifest in the question of the relation between grace and nature, which lies at the root of the Lutheran crisis and the cause, later on, of the fissures between the different schools of

³ This passive capacity needs to be distinguished from the simple obediential potency we find in every creature, cf. *ST* I–II, q. 114, a. 10; II–II, q. 2, a. 3; III, q. 4, a. 1; q. 9, a. 2, ad 3. See also L. Charlier, “Puissance passive et désir naturel,” in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 7 (1930): 5–28, 639–62.

theology—Jesuits, Jansenists, Dominicans, etc. If we begin from a notion of human freedom as absolutely self-determining in its choice between good and evil, between yes and no with regard to grace, a freedom of indifference, then we are led to conceive of human nature as radically self-sufficing. Thus the problem of the relation of nature with the supernatural becomes critical. And the problem of the relation is raised in a particular way by the notion of the natural desire for the vision of God as it was articulated by St. Thomas, who became the dominant theological authority. If human nature is self-sufficing—at least according to the principle of a freedom to act—then how do we conceive a desire for God that is really natural but yet concerns the vision of God, which is evidently supernatural?

This problem is rendered more acute by the separation that has developed between speculative theology, with its technical precision taught in universities, on the one hand, and mysticism and spirituality, which tend to be expressed in the more common language of the experience of the relation of God and man in the life of faith, on the other. Thus the desire for God, bound up with the experience of humanity and of Christianity, is reduced in theology to a “concept” and is treated in terms abstracted from the contours of experience.

If we wish to remain faithful to St. Thomas—who evidently maintains in man a natural desire to see God—we must interpret and discover explications of this desire which correspond to the problems of his age.

The Status of the Problem of Natural Desire

Reflecting on natural desire, theologians of a certain period tended to make the hypothesis of a state of pure nature their starting point—whether they admitted that the first man was placed by God in a state preceding the gift of grace or refused this interpretation of the book of Genesis, they nevertheless made pure human nature a starting point from which to reason about human nature. This hypothesis, we should note, is not unrelated to the philosophical penchant among modern philosophers to posit a state of nature for man anterior to the formation of society.

Thus the problematic of natural desire was taken according to this dilemma:

- Either we allow that there exists in human nature a real desire for the vision of God, prior to the intervention of grace. The beatific vision thus becomes the sole ultimate end of man, and the link between the order of nature and that of the supernatural is strongly established. But in this case, we are forced to presume a certain requirement of human nature toward the beatific vision according to the principle of

St. Thomas that a natural desire cannot be in vain. God would be unjust to human nature, it seems, if he did not respond to this natural desire, leaving it unaccomplished. In this way we compromise the purely gratuitous character of the vision of God, of grace and of the supernatural order, and thus it becomes difficult to safeguard the transcendence of supernatural and divine action.

- Or we affirm before all else the supernatural character, gratuitous and transcendent, of the beatific vision and the order of grace, such that we are led to reduce to the extreme—if not to cancel all together—the natural desire in man to see God, forced to posit for him an ultimate end and natural beatitude that is different from this vision. Thus, if we do not wish to abandon the doctrine of St. Thomas concerning natural desire, we must reinterpret it. The risk in this case is that we will begin to see the natural and supernatural orders as independent from one another, as two parallel worlds without any need of being reciprocally related. This position inevitably becomes detrimental to the supernatural order, while, on the other hand, man can now do anything without any detriment to his nature.

In conclusion we restate our question: Can there be a natural desire for the supernatural? It seems one is forced to choose between either the transcendence of the grace of the vision of God on the one hand, or the existence in man of a natural desire to see God on the other.

The Principle Answers Given to the Problem of Natural Desire

The principal answers given to the modern problem of natural desire are as follows. We shall reduce them to their essential points. We seek here, not to rehearse the history of opinions on the subject, but rather to outline their most characteristic aspects. The authors themselves interest us less than the elements of thought they occasion.

As we have already suggested, these theologians all generally presuppose a hypothesis, at least theoretical, concerning the existence of man in a state of pure nature.

1. Cajetan (1469–1534), the great commentator on St. Thomas, construes the difficulty of natural desire in the work of St. Thomas in a rather simple manner: the Angelic Doctor, he thinks, speaks of natural desire in the context of human nature as it exists historically, which is now effectively called to grace and the beatific vision. The natural desire for this vision is thus already a work of grace in man and consists therefore in the order of the supernatural. According to

this hypothesis, which is not posited by St. Thomas, the state of pure nature would have been merely an obediential potency toward the supernatural, the disposition in every creature to be a recipient of the effect of any divine action, as for example in the case of miracles.

2. Suarez (1548–1617) rigorously expressed the spirit of his epoch. He begins from an idea of man as a creature who possesses a nature that entails a normative end that can be completed within the limits of that nature, according to the Aristotelian principle that all natural beings have an end proportionate to their nature. By virtue of his creation, man is therefore made for a beatitude, the essence of which conforms to his nature and so is natural. Supposing man finds himself called to a higher end, this higher end will necessarily involve a superaddition to his nature, a superaddition that cannot enter into our definition of man. With regards to the natural desire for a supernatural beatitude, Suarez rejects categorically this possibility, in conformity with the principle of Aristotle according to which natural appetites follow the power of nature.
3. The Salamancans of the seventeenth century sought to undermine the reality of natural desire, which they supposed St. Thomas never to have spoken of as ‘real’ desire. On their view, St. Thomas was not concerned with a substantial or innate desire, but rather with an elicited desire, optional and freely given, a desire ineffective and conditional on God’s call to vision, mere velleity of nature insofar as it conforms to nature.
4. Other theologians, for example Père Descoqs, S.J., have more recently tried to discern a purely natural end that orientates the natural desire to see God. On this view, the vision of the divine essence is to be distinguished from the supernatural vision of the persons of the Trinity—knowledge of God is part of God’s work.
5. Père Henri de Lubac, S.J., in his work *Surnaturel* (1946), reignited the debate concerning natural desire that had raged between the two world wars. De Lubac sought to retrieve the patristic tradition, Greek and particularly Augustinian, which conceived man as the image of God and thus as essentially directed to God by his spiritual nature as to its model and archetype. Père de Lubac vigorously attacked the system of pure nature, with its self-sufficient and natural end independent of the supernatural. He argued that there was not—nor could there ever be—any but one end of human nature, of the human spirit: the supernatural end. For Père de Lubac, the vision of

God is the object of natural desire, the real desire of man, concrete and absolute and not conditional.

To the objection that this scheme places in man a necessarily entitlement to the vision of God, Père de Lubac responds:

What we desire necessarily, what we desire with an absolute desire, in general we can say we desire this with exigency. Provisionally this can even be said of our desire for God. But we must immediately add: we do not have this exigency because it pleases us to have it, rather this exigency is the reality that *we cannot not desire God*. Far from being dominated by this exigency, the object of our desire rather imposes itself upon us, even when our conscience ignores it, even when our freedom turns away from it. The exigency of our desire is such that we cannot be without it. Therefore if we have an exigency for God, it is that he first demands this exigency of us; and by the same means, he transforms our nature. The necessity of desire is a harsh law: it is *received* by the spirit, not dictated by it. . . . This exigency is therefore an essential exigency, an exigency in nature, which—though it is natural—is in reality no more natural in its source of desire than in its object of desire.⁴

Further, Père de Lubac considered St. Thomas a transitional author in whose system there is both a patristic notion of man ordained to the vision of God coupled with the Aristotelian conception of human nature as closed in on itself. On Père de Lubac's view, these two conceptions were not fully harmonized in St. Thomas.

As we perceive the discourse of these different opinions and interpretations, the problem of natural desire is concentrated on the exigency of this desire regarding the vision of God, which appears to compromise the character of the supernatural. It is on this critical point that we make our specific reflection. Here lies the nettle of our problem.

Part Two: A Response to the Problem of Natural Desire

The Spiritual Nature of the Desire to See God

We have already noted above how theology during the Renaissance suffered from a separation from spirituality and mysticism, from the expression of the Christian experience of the relation of God and man. Separated thus, theology became overly speculative, abstract, and rational. The consequence of this orientation was an excessive diminishing of

⁴ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Surnaturel: Études historiques*, Théologie 8 (Paris: Aubier, 1946), 490.

theological matters to the plane of concepts, ideas, and rational propositions. Under this condition, the natural desire for God becomes a merely theoretical notion, the more abstract, the more it is associated with a state of pure nature in which, in any case, man no longer actually exists, and of which there can be no question he no longer has any experience of. Theologians who reason from this natural desire will do so without any sense of how it confronts actual experience. They will not think to analyze the desire, but rather will accept it as a primary datum, a primitive tendency of the appetite found in all beings, even unreasonable beings. This natural desire of which we speak will thus be the blind desire of all beings toward the good. In this way, we will imagine this desire in the same manner as any other natural desire we find in man, like hunger, thirst, or sexual appetite, the kind of desire that is exercised before the intervention of reason and will. In this case, it will be clear that if this natural desire remains in vain, with no opportunity to attain its object, leaving man in a state of hunger, we could then justly reproach to the creator for the defectiveness of his work. For this kind of desire bears within it an exigency directed toward its satisfaction, or at least the possibility of its accomplishment. Every appetite is ordered from within toward its satisfaction as to its own natural end, and therefore involves a natural exigency to be able to achieve this end.

This manner of approach is defective in that it is grounded in a very particular kind of desire, one that proceeds from the sensitive nature of man, to which a universal dimension is conferred, thanks to its natural characteristic. What is neglected by this approach is that which is proper and unique to the spiritual nature of man, the desire that arises spontaneously from the will of man in the light of his intellect brought before God. It is essential here to bring an analogical conceptuality to bear, a conceptuality of both likeness and difference—this analogical conceptuality must be allowed to affect the nature and property of desire, where we pass from the sensitive to the spiritual plane, when we study man in comparison with irrational beings or with irrational aspects of his own being.

Building on the Spiritual Experience of the Desire for God

In order to discern the movements and properties of the spiritual nature of man, it is necessary to refer to the spiritual experience of the desire for God as it is expressed by the best authors, the Fathers of the Church and the mystics—the experience of a theologian as much as any Christian can be an experience of his life of faith. This desire, like every reality of the order of the will or the affective dimension of man—love, hope, etc.—is best understood when it is grasped from the inside, thanks to some

concrete experience. One of the merits of the work of Père de Lubac was precisely to have reintroduced into the discourse of theology the testimony of the Fathers of the Church concerning the desire for God in man.

Doubtless an objection along the lines of Cajetan will here be raised against us; it will be argued that there cannot be a purely natural experience of desire for God because the Christian is a man who works by grace, the subject of theological virtues and of the action of the Holy Spirit. But what prevents us from taking the Christian experience of the desire for God as that desire flourishes under the action of the Holy Spirit, in order to ask ourselves whether and to what extent this desire corresponds to the nature of man himself, especially his higher faculties? Hereby the essential problem is raised: how can there be a correspondence between the vision of God, the action of grace, the desire and striving it excites in us on the one hand, and human nature on the other. And yet to approach this problem of natural desire we have no need of the hypothesis of a state of pure nature, which in fact escapes our grasp and takes us away from real experience. The problem here is the problem that concerns the whole of theology: the link between vision, grace, God, revelation, and human nature. The question of natural desire is therefore an expression of this difficult point of theology. But to truly study this natural desire do we not need a notion of this desire as it has reached maturity and thereby become sensible, as opposed to imagining the seeds of this desire as it may exist in an inaccessible state?

In this way, St. Thomas treats the natural desire to see God as part of the experience of Christian faith conjoined to reason. But the superior light of faith is not an obstacle to our perception of what is merely natural—to the contrary. For St. Thomas, as for St. Augustine, the more man submits to the light of faith and to the action of grace, the more he comes to know his own true nature. We do not find any trace in St. Thomas of the common modern presupposition according to which the intervention of faith and grace disrupts necessarily, as a foreign element, the activity of reason, liberty, and human nature.

Here however it is important to note how St. Thomas's conception of human nature is not quite the same as the one presented by Père de Lubac. St. Thomas's use of Aristotle does not entail a self-sufficient human nature, as it does with Suarez and others of his time. Rather human nature for St. Thomas is open to God and his grace. This openness of human nature to God works precisely within St. Thomas's theory of the natural desire to see God in man, ordering him to the beatific vision as to his final and true end. St. Thomas is thus not at all the transitional figure Père de Lubac discerns, one who couples positions that nevertheless poorly harmonize. On the contrary, St. Thomas seems rather, to us,

to be more the summit of the equilibrium of theology, even while the equilibrium he achieved was unfortunately all too quickly lost.

The Connection of Desire with Love and Hope

We can directly approach the major problem of the thesis of natural desire by indicating the apparent exigency this desire brings to bear upon God, vision, and grace. Our response to this problem of exigency begins with an analysis of desire in its relation with other movements of the will, given that the will—for us as for St. Thomas—is not only a power of a *conscious pressure of the self for the self*, as it was defined by Mounier, but is above all the source of the spontaneous movements of love, desire, and hope, etc.

In his treatise on the passions, a study which extends into the realm of spiritual theology, St. Thomas conceives desire in such a way that it is clearly not an act or feeling of man, neither does it exist alone. Its origin and cause, in effect, is love, from which it is normatively deployed in the hope of achieving joy. In the movement of the will, therefore, love, desire, joy, and hope form a concrete continuum. Thus, treating the movement of free will in the work of justice, St. Thomas writes in *De veritate* (q. 28, a. 4): “*Primus autem motus affectus in aliquid est motus amoris . . . ; qui quidem motus in desiderio includitur sicut causa in effectu; desideratur enim aliquid quasi amatum. Ipsa vero spes desiderium quoddam importat cum quadam animi erectione, quasi in quoddam arduum tendens.*”⁵

The desire for God in us must therefore be understood in terms tightly bound to its relation, principally, to love, which is the cause, along with hope, in which the desire for God is developed.

Love of Friendship as the Root of the Natural Desire for God

The decisive point for our question lies in the causal connection that links love and desire. The first movement of the “appetite,” which is at the origin of all other movements and remains constantly present in them, is love, which we can define as a direct and simple delight in the object perceived and known as good (this object and its good can obviously be a person, as when one says: this or this person gives me joy, intrigues me, touches me, etc). Different species of love correspond with different species of desire.

The two species of love are: (1) love of friendship and (2) concupiscent love (*ST I–II*, q. 26, a. 4). Love of friendship consists in loving someone for himself—this is love in the proper and full sense of the term, such

⁵ “The first motion of the affections toward anything is the motion of *love* . . . ; this motion is included in *desire* as a cause in an effect; for something is desired as loved. *Hope*, moreover, implies desire accompanied by the rousing of one’s spirit as tending to something arduous.”

love desires the good of the other. This is how we love a friend. The intention and the desire that directs it are both related to the friend and remain with him. Concupiscent love, on the other hand, is related to a good that appears and affects us, but it is related to someone, ourselves or another, to whom the object is pleasant or useful. Thus we love wine, an animal, a car, or a collaborator, or a pleasant companion. In the case of concupiscent love, the intention that animates love and drives desire supersedes its object and is thus ordained to an end other than the object. The object of desire is not loved for itself, but rather in view of something else, profit or pleasure usually.

Here is an example of this distinction. With money we can buy all the goods we want or need, including companions who will share our interest and joy. But we cannot attach a price tag on friendship, on the true love according to which we are a friend both in poverty and in abundance. Such love, that of friendship, is of another kind and of another order.

Desire born of concupiscence is fixedly interested in utility and satisfaction; while the desire that proceeds from friendship is disinterested to the extent, not that it will exclude utility and satisfaction altogether, but to the extent that utility and satisfaction will be subordinated to the principle intention determined by the relation of friendship between persons.

Why Natural Desire Does Not Impose any Demand on God

The decisive point of our inquiry is to understand and show how the love of friendship confers on desire a quality that engenders it such that we will be able to remove the bind of exigency that imposes a demand on what it loves and desires. Our thesis is as follows: when man loves God with friendship—that is, with true love—the desire which proceeds and drives man toward God (as toward beatitude) contains in itself, in its source from man's side, a decisive refusal to impose any exigency on God under the pretext of a demand for the satisfaction of this desire. Such an exigency would evidently contradict both the love of friendship, which is the source of this desire, and God who is its object.

To clarify this point, we take as an example the relation of friends who open themselves in love of friendship to one another in maturity. This is a profound desire and one that is natural in man, who desires to have friends, to love and to be loved. Aristotle justly esteemed that we cannot be happy without friends. This desire nourishes us and fortifies us in our exchanges with friends, who love nothing more than to be together, to speak, live, and work together. This desire, however, bears on all the desires that are interested in the other's wellbeing; thus friends voluntarily consent to sacrifice for each other and to put in common what they possess.

The experience of friendship quickly shows that the greatest danger to friendship is that one would impose a demand of service or affection on the other, thus using the auspices of friendship to impose a selfish claim. Such a exigency of desire is directly opposed to the heart of friendship and in fact signals its destruction. The true law of friendship lies in liberality and gratuity, in respect and in the love of the freedom of the other as one's own freedom. A true friend would refuse, following the spontaneous movement of his sentiments, to make a demand a pretext of his friendship. Indeed a true friend would be prepared to deprive himself of his friend's presence, even for a long time, if that was what was needed for the good of the friendship. The most important thing for a true friend is to know of his friend's happiness, from which he draws his highest joy.

We have here an example drawn from the common experience of natural desire which, in powerfully and profoundly human terms, displays an internal refusal to exert any exigency upon the object of desire in the name of liberality and gratuity. This constitutes what we can call a natural law of friendship from which this desire proceeds. This is the paradox of friendship as true love: the cause of the most powerful and natural human desire is wholly opposed to the imposition of any exigency on its object. Such is the love that serves for St. Thomas as the basis of his definition of charity and establishes the connection of charity with the natural desire for the good, which forms the foundation of St. Thomas's moral theology.

If we proceed now to the relation between God and man, we discover an intensification of this natural paradox of love. To the extent that man discovers God as the source of all truth and goodness, he comes spontaneously to love him as the most desirous object of his love. From this love of friendship toward God proceeds a natural desire to know God in himself and to attain him as the cause of goodness and truth. Such is the natural desire to know the truth of God which St. Thomas places in the law of nature and as the ground of theological and philosophical exploration (cf. *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2).

However, and at the same time, such a love, because it seeks to love God for himself, refrains from every demand of desire that would seek to grasp God, which would attempt to place a restriction on God's liberality, on the gratuity of his giving, and especially on God's revelation of his intimate life. Is not the most significant betrayal of friendship to demand that one's friend reveal his personal secrets? The most serious sin of the spiritual life will likewise be to demand of God that he reveal and give himself—such would be an inconsiderate desire that would betray the friendship of God.

The Natural Love for God More than Self

In the case of desire for God, the refusal of exigency is stronger than in the case of normal friendship since, following St. Thomas, man naturally loves God more than himself (at least when his will is not corrupted by sin). St. Thomas writes: “Ideo etiam amore amicitiae naturaliter Deus ab homine plus seipso diligitur. Et quia caritas naturam perficit, ideo etiam secundum caritatem Deum supra seipsum homo diligit, et super omnia alia particularia bona.”⁶ When man knows God as the source of all truth and goodness, and when he recognizes this as something received from God through the creation of his being and the faculties of understanding and love, where he experiences himself before God as a part before the whole—as a being drawn from him, taken hold of by him, and ordered by him—then he is spontaneously inclined to love this divine whole more than himself (cf. *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 3). Charity contributes to this natural love a direct participation in the love and beatitude of God himself, without changing the relation implied by this natural love. Hereby, natural love is renewed in the sinful heart of man, where it is fortified and developed by its proper virtue, that of hope. The imposition of demands and the hoarding of divine gifts will thus be counted among the most severe transgressions contrary to the right intention and spontaneity of charity.

In conclusion, the natural desire to see God—which is rooted in the natural love of friendship for God and is fulfilled in the beatific vision of God in supernatural terms—is proper to the nature of spiritual beings. Because this desire proceeds from the intellect (which seeks to know God in himself, in all truth) and from the will (which tends already to love God in himself in all purity) this desire naturally contains within itself a refusal to assert an exigency by which it could itself reach God. Within the natural desire to see God, therefore, there is inscribed a refusal to breach the liberality, gratuity, and supernatural character of the gifts of God.

The Hypothesis of Pure Nature

Now if we insist on considering man in a hypothetical state in which he is placed in the world by God in a state of pure nature, where he is not accorded the promise of vision, then we must say that whatever happiness man could find would be imperfect yet real. In this state man's knowledge and love of God would be developed according to his natural powers. Happiness for man in this state would have been composed of the orientation of man's being and his faculties toward God, as he is

⁶ *III Sent.*, d. 29, q. 1, a. 3: “By love of friendship man also naturally loves God more than himself. And since charity perfects nature, therefore by charity also man loves God more than himself and all other particular goods.”

known through creation as the source of perfection, truth, goodness, and happiness beyond all things. In this state God would be loved with a love that reverently respected his divine superiority, balancing the desire to know with an indiscretion that would avoid the imposition of any claim or demand. Thus man would love God as a friend who finds his true joy in beholding the superiority of this friend without any jealousy.

Is not this desire, which is full of a reverent respect, precisely what theology calls filial fear?—that which subsists at the heart of charity?

We can add that his reverent respect is rooted in love of friendship, and so is also the surest way of evoking the freedom of the divine initiative. In any case, this is the appropriate disposition of man as he stands before the grace of God. This is, in fact, the nub of the ongoing debate concerning natural desire: the attitude of man must be conformed to his true nature before the divine initiative.

Natural Desire and Hope

When desire forms the basis of love it tends to be transformed into hope. This passage from desire to hope raises a particular question. St. Thomas expresses the difference between desire and hope in terms of their object. Desire has for its object *bonum futurum*, a future good that attracts us simply because it appears as a good and brings pleasure. Hope has for its object *bonum arduum*, an arduous good that is difficult to attain. The object of hope is one from which we are separated by a great distance, a distance which makes us simultaneously afraid that we will not be able to achieve it, while at the same time spurring us on with the effort required to achieve it. In other words, hope adds to desire a judgment on the possibility of attaining a good desired, according to the means and strength that we have at our disposal to attain to it. Desire is broader than hope, for we can desire many things that we do not hope to achieve; desires are often thwarted because we do not recognize any possibility of achieving a particular object. For a long time men desired to voyage to the moon, for example, but they did not hope to go there until man discovered the means of rocketing into space, opening up the possibility of realizing this ancient dream. Then the desire, molded by hope, became active, directing the research and efforts of scientists and technicians.

At the same time, between natural desire and the hope of seeing God there arises the issue of the active possibility of man's attainment. This is the question: *Utrum homo per sua naturalia possit acquirere beatitudinem perfectam?* Can man by his natural powers attain perfect happiness? (cf. ST I-II, q. 5, a. 5). St. Thomas responds in conformity with all of Christian theology that neither can man nor any creature attain, by his own natural

power, the fullness of the blessedness that resides in the vision of God. Only a special help, of a unique kind—the grace we call the “light of glory” in the hereafter—permits the beatific vision. This is why the vision and the whole order of grace, with the virtues and gifts that accompany them, can be properly called supernatural.

The natural desire for God does not therefore become a hope until man has received a positive response to the question of attaining that vision, a response that can come from God alone: the promises revealed in the divine initiative of the call of man to this vision and the means of achieving this by the access granted through faith. This is why, each time God speaks to man, from Abraham to Jesus, he begins with a promise that awakens hope. More precisely, the promises of God are promises of happiness that correspond to the desires of man: the desire to have a son, to be the father of many nations, etc. Wherever these promises are revealed, they are revealed by a certain infinite and eternal dimension (descendants more numerous than the stars of the sky, a blessing to all nations, forever . . .), indicating that they exceed man and all that he can accomplish, and thus they can only be accomplished by the power of God through the faith and hope that is in man.

When a desire is for something impossible, it withdraws into itself and becomes merely latent (unless, perhaps, it is redirected to another object). Apart from the promises of God, the desire to see God in man would become atrophied by awareness of the abyss that separates the creature from the creator, an abyss man cannot cross by his own power. But if God has made himself manifest in his works and is thus understood by man, then we must say that he has manifested himself at once as the most “arduous” of all things to attain, the most distant and beyond the reach of man and all of his faculties; while at the same time, God’s manifestation of himself entails the revelation that this great obstacle to man’s desire is not to be experienced by man as a misfortune or injustice (at least not in the state of primitive righteousness). Within man this desire for God refrains itself from exigency, retaining a spontaneous and reverent respect for God rooted in the natural love with which we are made to love God as the God who is beyond us, who is an inaccessible mystery. At this point of demurring before God we experience a very pure joy that could, in principle, constitute a real bliss, though imperfect compared to the vision of God.

What we have said here applies just as much to the present economy of man as it does to the apparent state of pure nature (which of course never existed). Every Christian can discover such a movement and feeling in himself: there, where charity gives us impetus and power, the ability to both desire and hope.

Conclusion

This then is the answer I propose to the question as to whether there is in man a natural desire to see God. How does this desire in man not entail the imposition of a demand upon God? How does it not compromise the supernatural gratuity of the vision of God? On our view, this desire, which proceeds from the spiritual nature of man, must be studied in terms of what is proper to it, and thus in terms different from those of other natural desires such as hunger, thirst, etc. Primarily this desire is related to the love that causes it and to the hope that is born of it. The decisive point, therefore, is to show how love of friendship—which is proper to the spiritual nature of man and is itself deepened in friendship and in love—occurs within a desire of reverent respect for God, which tends toward God as toward a higher good, but also as toward a friend. Thus this desire for God entails a spontaneous self-denial and refusal to place any claim on God in the form of a demand that would diminish God's freedom in the gift of vision—just as a friend loves and respects the freedom and intimate life of his friend. Such is the natural desire for God which serves as the basis of the action of grace and which is perfected through the arousal of hope by means of the promises of God who calls the faithful to vision and guarantees the spiritual help necessary to attain that vision. This natural desire does not disappear when the theological virtues are formed in us; on the contrary, it unfolds, is strengthened, and is enlivened to the extent that the supernatural virtues come to invade the conscience and dominate the other desires of nature—though the manner of this dominion is gentle and discreet, and respectful of the freedom granted to us.

A certain sensitivity to experiences both Christian and human seems therefore necessary to arrive at the association and complementarity integral to the natural desire for God, which is at once born of the love of friendship we have for God and born of the charity into which we are caught up by God. There is therefore a double movement of complementarity within natural desire—a complementarity that will of course seem contradictory to the logic of abstract reason: the more vigorous the desire for happiness, the more it refuses to impose itself in the form of an exigency on God, who is the object of this desire. In this way, man's natural desire to see God is more natural in its origin (in the sense that "natural" signifies above all for St. Thomas spontaneity and harmony), while at the same time it is more supernatural in its object. The gratuity of the divine gift is guaranteed not only from the side of God by his transcendence, but also from the side of man, by his "friendly" nature, his capacity to love God in and for himself.

Response to a Last Objection

We will perhaps be reproached for having made as the basis of our response a domain that could be described as “psychological,” or that yields to the order of affectivity and feelings, or again, for rooting our response in terms that are moral. Theologians, it is supposed, ought rather to seek to ground their observations in the order of metaphysics (or whatever takes the place of metaphysics in the thought of their time).

This criticism is, however, in our view, too much influenced by a rationalism that would separate metaphysics (the order of reason), from affectivity, morality, etc. If, following the scholastic adage, *agere sequitur esse*, then the being of man reveals itself in his acts as the tree is known by its fruit. But the principle of action is constituted in us by the interior acts of love, desire, hope, knowledge, etc., which are not feelings, but rather manifestations of the commitments of our innermost being. So it is in moral action, jointly governed by knowledge and affectivity, that we see at work and discern what might be called the metaphysics of man, the spiritual nature proper to him.

In particular, it is advisable to take into account the new sense of friendship that is operative as a key theme of philosophy and theology from the time of the Greeks to St. Thomas. This new sense of friendship was unfortunately neglected by subsequent modern theologians. Friendship, taken as a superior form of love, reveals the proper nature of man: his capacity to know and love the other as himself and for himself, and so to establish between himself and the other an equilibrium, a union of mutual reciprocity of desire and sentiment, which cannot be found elsewhere. This leads us to define man as a being capable of friendship (which equally makes him capable of enmity and hatred). This is also, beneath and beyond desire, the primordial sentiment that unites man with God and makes him a being capable of entering into friendship with God, thus giving charity its natural foundation. N V