

Scheeben the Reconciler: Resolving the Nature-Grace Debate

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REPUTATIONS come. Reputations go. On occasion they even return, often with such renewed vigor and *éclat* that historians are at a loss to explain the intermediate neglect: How could so powerful a mind ever have lost a hearing? What Shakespeare called “the bubble reputation” is fickle indeed.

In the field of historical theology, the premier exhibit for these ups and downs in reputational fortunes is of course St. Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–1274): Three years after his death, his writings met with early condemnation by the Archbishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier; but their author was canonized a generation later, in 1323, and Rome suspended Tempier’s condemnations in 1325. Later, during the Enlightenment, even orthodox Catholic authors, including the most vigorous apologists for the faith, had little time for him;¹ even later, most Roman universities in the nineteenth century—especially during the long reign of Pope Pius IX—regarded him with suspicion because of his denial of the doctrine of Mary’s Immaculate Conception.² But soon after, he experienced a sudden resurgence with the publication of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical

¹ Consider the case of Pascal, easily the most influential Catholic apologist of the Enlightenment era: “The metaphysical proofs of God are so far removed from man’s reasoning, and so complicated, that they have little force. When they do help some people, it is only at the moment when they see the demonstration. An hour later they are afraid of having made a mistake” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi [Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 63)—not exactly a ringing endorsement of Thomas’s *quinque viae*.

² See Romanus Cessario, O.P., *A Short History of Thomism* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 58–59.

Aeterni Patris in 1879,³ after which he virtually monopolized the curriculum of Catholic seminaries, both philosophical and theological, until the wind-shear of Vatican II grounded his influence yet again.⁴ But lo and behold, he is now enjoying another resurgence, shown not least in the existence of this journal.

Another example of such reputational vicissitudes might be (in a minor key, of course) Matthias Joseph Scheeben (1834–1888), the nineteenth-century German theologian who was highly regarded in the twentieth century until, again, changes that came about through the postconciliar outlook led to widespread neglect of his writings.⁵ But that too seems to be changing, shown not least by this specific issue of this journal.

In the rest of what follows, I wish to propose one area in particular that proves Scheeben's ongoing relevance: the contemporary nature-grace debate. I will suggest that this debate has now reached a kind of stalemate—

³ "In the eighteenth century the Dominicans had 25,000 members in the whole Order. The Napoleonic Revolution left them with almost none. For a time they remained under a cloud at Rome because of their opposition, which was traditional, to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin. In 1876 they were still only 3,341. But when that doctrine was defined, and even more when Pope Leo XIII turned to St. Thomas Aquinas as the philosopher of the Church and entrusted the Dominicans with the duty of caring for his texts and propagating his doctrine, they began again to expand." Owen Chadwick, *A History of the Popes: 1830–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 516–17.

⁴ *Revue Thomiste* dedicated two issues to the theme of anti-Thomism from the thirteenth to the twentieth century. See especially Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., "Qu'est-ce que l'antithomisme?" *Revue Thomiste* 108, no. 1 (2008): 9–30; and Michel Fourcade, "Thomisme et antithomisme à l'heure de Vatican II," *Revue Thomiste* 108 no. 2 (2008): 301–26. Complicating the issue further is of course Thomas's debt to Aristotle, who has endured his own turbulent history of vicissitudes, especially when it was realized that his cosmography had to be jettisoned in the wake of Copernicus and Galileo and later when his notion of the fixity of species had to be at least radically modified after Darwin: "[I]n the minds of some Catholic writers, Scholasticism relied upon outdated Aristotelian concepts and definitions that served no useful purpose in terms of understanding the natural world." Alexander Sedgwick, *Jansenism in Seventeenth-Century France: Voices in the Wilderness* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 9. Faced with that challenge, some Thomists try to disengage Thomas from Aristotle (Étienne Gilson), while others try to defend Aristotle's more permanently valid metaphysics by disengaging it from his more strictly scientific hypotheses (Ralph McInerny).

⁵ No less a luminary than John Courtney Murray wrote his dissertation in 1938 on Scheeben; it was later republished as: John Courtney Murray, S.J., *Matthias Joseph Scheeben's Doctrine on Supernatural Faith* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1987). See also John Courtney Murray, S.J., "The Root of Faith: The Doctrine of M. J. Scheeben," *Theological Studies* 9 (1948): 20–46.

but that if Scheeben's contributions are brought back into the discussion, he will prove to have shown all along the way around the current impasse.

I

Debate on the nature-grace issue in the twentieth century has consistently run aground on this dilemma: how can the gratuity of grace be preserved without disengaging grace from man's nature? Can grace be both gratuitous and relevant, both gracious and fulfilling, both unexpected yet the healing of a felt misery ("I once was blind, but now I see"), both a new creation and the restoration of the old?

The expression "the gratuity of grace" refers to the fact that God does not owe the human race his benevolence, that we have no claim or *right* to grace. This lack of any human claim on God holds true even of our first parents before their fall: complaints from them about the living conditions in the Garden of Eden would have been, to put it mildly, unsporting and unseemly. But any claim on God would be especially out of place after the event of sin—that is, after humans deliberately rejected God's offer of fellowship with himself. It has long been a proverbial example of human folly when the (no doubt apocryphal) defendant, who has been hauled up on a charge of murdering his parents, throws himself on the mercy of the court because of his new status as an orphan. So too with the human race after the fall: we have no one to blame but ourselves.

So the fact that God has in fact continued to act to save man, even immediately after the fall (Gn 3:15), should astonish us with the Lord's unexpected benevolence: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. . . . But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace that you were saved" (Eph 2:1, 4–5).

Yet, once grace has been given, further questions arise: Are we allowed to feel more than just the appropriate *gratitude* for having received this gift we could never have merited or deserved? That is, does the unmerited gift of grace cast a retrospective light on our past life of sin so that we are also permitted to feel *relief* that we have been rescued from a plight that we had long recognized prior to receiving grace? Is grace, then, like a trace mineral (zinc, for instance) whose absence from one's diet leads to a kind of vague physiological malaise whose discontents (caused by factors not yet suspected) were never fully appreciated in their outermost extremity until the homeostasis of good health returns but which nonetheless had earlier led to a felt listlessness that went on for years? In other words, does grace heal the soul's prior malaise in a way that makes grace seem, at least retrospectively, *like the answer to a spiritual exigency*,

defined here as a crying need that had all along caused man to ache for grace ever since his expulsion from the Garden of Eden—a longing, moreover, that he had been *noticing* all along?

The usual answer in modern theology, starting with the condemnations of Michael Baius (1513–89) and Cornelius Jansenius (1585–1638)—both of whom had answered Yes to those questions—has been that man cannot have been given an inherent, innate exigency for grace, under the Aristotelian rubric that natural desires cannot be in vain.⁶ Applying that Stagirite axiom, theologians argued as follows: if God had implanted an exigency for grace as part of our very nature, he would accordingly “owe” us grace, which would of course destroy its gratuity, making it no longer truly grace but something we could, *horribile dictu*, “count on.”⁷

While this denial of a natural spiritual exigency is plausible—even inevitable in the wake of Baius and Jansenius—a problem lurks if that answer

⁶ “We call a shoe pointless when it cannot be worn. But God and nature create nothing that is useless.” Aristotle, *On the Heavens* Book I, ch. 4 (271a30). The context here is actually not human artifacts but Aristotle’s discussion of the necessarily circular orbits of celestial bodies. The application of this principle, which properly belongs in Aristotle’s long-superseded astronomy, to theological discussions of nature and grace is ironic indeed. At all events, and only adding to the irony, both Baius and Jansenius accepted that premise too, which is why they held that original sin had so devastated human nature and not just merely deprived our first parents of the grace of original justice: because grace and nature belong together, they reason, loss of grace necessarily means the ruin of nature. Although they came to diametrically different conclusions about the way grace operates in postlapsarian man, they both wanted to stress the devastating effects of original sin on human nature, for which Aristotle’s axiom proved useful. Condemnation of these views obviously required that orthodox theologians make a firmer distinction between nature and grace, which then proved an important catalyst for the Thomist commentators. But because the commentators *also* accepted Aristotle’s principle that nature does nothing in vain, they were perforce compelled to posit natural ends in man that were independent of his ultimate felicity in heaven of enjoying the beatific vision.

⁷ The Stagirite applies the same principle to biology too, of course: “Again, some members of the class of fishes are neither male nor female, as we see in eels and a kind of mullet found in stagnant waters. But whenever the sexes are separate, the female cannot generate perfectly by herself alone, for then the male would exist in vain, and nature makes nothing in vain.” Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* Book II, ch. 5 (741b2). How this “master of all who know” (as Dante called him) would have adjusted his axiom had he studied a colony of bees cannot be guessed, whose drones are “useless” (useless for reproduction, that is). Also, the operation of this principle in the nature–grace debate makes it difficult to account for Paul’s insistence that “creation was subjected to futility, *not by its own choice*, but by the will of the one who subjected it” (Rom 8:20).

becomes too one-sided. For Scripture teaches that *all* of creation (and not just the human spirit) does indeed “groan” for its fulfillment in Christ:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no longer hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Rom 8:22–27)

What makes this passage so fascinating is the way Paul easily ascribes a natural longing to all creation (which can hardly be said to have “sinned”); yet he goes on to assert a further longing *instilled by grace*. Crucially, that longing is one for *adoption*. Now adoption refers to a legal status to which obviously a person has no claim: even a bedraggled, desperately hungry, rag-clad waif cannot go to a court of law and demand to be taken in by any family of his arbitrary choosing. Certain rights accrue naturally to natural-born children; adoption, however, is a freely bestowed legal status by which the one being adopted is (as we say) “graciously” allowed to belong legally to a particular family. My hapless parents were stuck with me and my dreadful infantile caterwauling upon my entrance into the world; but I have no claim to the estate of Bill Gates. (The novels of Charles Dickens, especially *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, often hinge on this universally recognized reality.)

Yet, to swing back to the other side, and sitting uncomfortably alongside passages about our adoption by God, Paul frankly avows that all things were created through Christ and *for* Christ (Col 1:16b), which obviously entails this conclusion: that any radical separation from Christ must result in an *essential* suffering, a suffering that comes from our *natures* as creatures—who have been created aboriginally with natures meant for union with Christ. Based on that insight, Henri de Lubac was led to insist that there can be no such thing as a currently obtaining reality called “pure nature,” that is, a nature operating independently of the creative and redeeming presence of Christ:

For this desire [for union with Christ] is not some “accident” in me. It does not result from some peculiarity, possibly alterable, of my individual being, or from some historical contingency whose effects are more or less transitory. . . . It is in me as a result of my belonging to humanity as it is, that humanity which is, as we say, “called.” For God’s call is constitutive. My finality, which is expressed by this desire, is inscribed upon my very being as it has been put into this universe by God. And,

by God's will, I now have no other genuine end, no end really assigned to my nature or presented for my free acceptance under any guise, except that of "seeing God."⁸

Since the tradition against which de Lubac was reacting went back at least four centuries, and was built on papal condemnations of Baius and Jansenius (who seemed, said de Lubac's critics, to rely on the same arguments *he* was now using), his book set off quite a controversy, which only died down after Vatican II ringingly validated his point in *Gaudium et Spes*, its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, which solemnly taught: "For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and that divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery."⁹

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, the postconciliar consensus bequeathed by de Lubac has come under attack for its alleged excessive "intrinsicism," that is, for its positing a too-close connection between the exigencies of unsaved man and the free bestowal of divine grace. For once grace becomes too tied to nature, then everything seems a grace and all our aspirations are interpreted as antecedently validated by grace. The effect of that assumption then makes the sacraments seem like mere ritual validations of what is already a graced state.¹⁰

⁸ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, translated by Rosemary Sheed, introduction by David L. Schindler (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 54–55. With this principle in mind, and considering how well it was established in Scripture (including, by the way, the Prologue to John's Gospel), de Lubac could look back on the previous history of the pure-nature tradition with considerable sarcasm: "When St. Augustine uttered his famous declaration 'You have made us for yourself, O God . . .,' he never anticipated that one day in the twentieth century this would be taken in a purely natural sense. When St. Thomas Aquinas said 'grace perfects nature,' he did not foresee that what he said about the completion or perfecting of nature would be retained, while the grace which effects that completion would be left aside. . . . When St. Thomas further said 'This immediate vision of God is guaranteed to us in Scripture' (ScG III, chapter 51), he could not have supposed that one day people would attribute to him the idea of another vision of God, equally 'direct,' which could be obtained without reference to anything promised in scripture" (ibid., 38–39).

⁹ *Gaudium et Spes* §22; cited from *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: America House Press, 1966), 221–22.

¹⁰ Recall the last line from George Bernanos's lovely novel, *The Diary of a Country Priest*: "Grace is everywhere." While in a certain sense true (since God is ubiquitous to his creation), when it is used as a dogmatic principle, problems quickly arise, not least how to establish the sheer transcendence of grace, its utterly unexpected boon to miserable creatures such as ourselves, its awesome reversal of a

It is widely recognized that Vatican II did not bring about the fruits expected of it. Cannot the doldrums of the postconciliar Church be traced, at least in part, to the hegemonic *sententia communis* of theologians, nearly all of whom after the council held that extrinsicism was dead and that intrinsicism had won out? If the concerns of those redoubtable opponents of *nouvelle théologie* are not adequately addressed, what happens to the transcendence and gratuity of grace? No wonder, then, they say, the Bible is treated solely as an artifact of the ancient world to be studied using methods drawn from the study of other ancient texts. No wonder the folksy style in liturgy took over, with its translations of the Mass into a Montessori vernacular and its insistence that “active participation” be judged by levels of camaraderie achieved during worship.¹¹

While these realities are hard to gainsay, there still remains the theoretical issue to resolve: how to keep grace both gratuitous and yet also meaningful to the human condition, a genuine response on God’s part to a genuine plight on man’s. The reopening of this part of the debate is largely due (at least in the United States) to two theologians and their recent books, Lawrence Feingold’s *The Natural Desire to See God* and Steven Long’s *Natura Pura*.¹² Both books are, in effect, saying: “Hold on a minute, let’s not be too hasty here now.” Besides noting the pastoral woes attendant upon a too-easy intrinsicism, they highlight some important historical and theological considerations that militate against de Lubac’s thesis.¹³

past life of sin and persecution (Paul and Augustine serving as the models here), its sheer splendor in contrast to our miserable, grubby lives.

¹¹ If this historical connection seems implausible, given the arcane nature of the debate (how many church musicians or high school catechists, after all, would have read *Surnaturel*?), recall that de Lubac attributed the growth of secularism to the advocates of a pure-nature theology, as if Enlightenment *philosophes* spent their time pouring over Renaissance commentators on pure nature—an arcane debate if there ever was one!

¹² Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas and His Interpreters*, 2d ed. (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010); cited henceforth as *Natural Desire*. The dissertation carries the same title (Rome: Apollinare Studi, 2001). Besides being more accessible, the second edition has translated all the texts that the dissertation had cited in the original language; and many of the arguments have been made clearer and more cohesive. This will be the edition quoted throughout this article.

Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); cited henceforth as *Natura Pura*.

¹³ The rest of this section will represent a summary of my account of these two books, which was recently published in this journal. See Edward T. Oakes, S.J., “The *Surnaturel* Controversy: A Survey and a Response,” *Nova et Vetera* 9, no. 3 (2011): 625–56.

Feingold's case against de Lubac is primarily historical and exegetical: he claims that de Lubac chose his texts from the Thomist corpus too one-sidedly and that a proper survey of Thomas's extensive writings will show him to be, at the least, more nuanced than appears from de Lubac's own tendentious selection of texts. Just a few examples will suffice for our purposes here, such as this key text from *De veritate*:

Man by his nature is proportioned to a certain end for which he has a natural appetite, and which he can work to achieve by his natural powers. This end is a certain contemplation of the divine attributes, *in the measure in which this is possible for man through his natural powers*; and in this end even the philosophers placed the final happiness of man. But God has prepared man *for another end*, one that exceeds the proportionality of human nature. This end is eternal life, which consists in the vision of God in his essence, an end which exceeds the proportionality of any created nature, being connatural to God alone.¹⁴

At the very least, this passage (and many others cited by Feingold) shows that a tension lurks within the Thomist corpus. Long accepts the reality of that tension and builds upon it to come to a more "analytic" solution, that is, one that does not depend so much on exegesis as it does on some new thinking via Thomas's views on natural law. First, though, he makes this concession:

It helps to put to rest the exegetic difficulty. It is without doubt true that there is a problem in the very texts of Aquinas, and a problem which seemingly does not allow much room for maneuver with respect to its solution: because the doctrinal points which constitute the elements of the problem—one is almost tempted to say "constitute the contradiction"—are starkly and clearly stated in St. Thomas's text. Yet the realization that there are indeed *two* sets of texts, one of which was not merely an interposed corruption, itself marks a decisive advance toward correct interpretation of Thomas's teaching. . . . The second set of texts hedges about, and delimits, the possible signification of the first set, and vice versa. That is, on the supposition that we do not wish to suppose St. Thomas's texts to exhibit raw incoherence, then we need to read these texts in relation one to another.¹⁵

¹⁴ *De veritate* q. 27, a. 2; emphases added.

¹⁵ Long, *Natura Pura*, 13, 15; emphasis in the original. He gives samples here: "On the one hand, we have St. Thomas's argument that to know God is the end of every intelligent substance (*Summa contra Gentiles* III, 25), that there is indeed a natural desire for God (*ScG* III, c. 25; and *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 3, a. 8); and that no natural desire may be in vain (*ST* I, q. 75, a. 6; *Compendium* 104). On the other hand, we have his clear affirmation that human and angelic natures are

But these tensions can be resolved, Long claims, by an attention to the Thomist approach to natural law. Consider this passage from the *prima secundae*:

If man were ordained to no other end than that which is proportionate to his natural faculty, there would be no need for man to have any further direction on the part of his reason besides the natural law and human [positive] law, the latter of which is derived from the former. But since man is ordained to an end of eternal happiness, which exceeds the proportion of man's natural faculty, as stated above, it was therefore necessary that, besides the natural and the human law, man should be directed to his end by a law given by God. . . . But to his supernatural end man needs to be directed in a yet higher way. Hence, the additional law given by God, whereby man shares more perfectly in the eternal law.¹⁶

Now, since no one has ever claimed that St. Thomas considered the natural law to be a mere "hypothesis," meant only to guarantee the gratuity of the divine law, Long is able to draw this inexorable conclusion: "The proportionate capacity of human nature is not a fiction, it is not a limit concept, it is not merely ideational; rather, it is something created by God."¹⁷ In other words: "*Created nature in all its ontological density is not the theologian's posit; it is God's effect.*"¹⁸

So we seem to have reached an impasse, one perhaps bequeathed to us by Thomas himself and made more complex by the denial of pure nature in Baius and Jansenius. As it happens, Scheeben too uses natural law in his argument but in ways that differ notably from Long's reading, as we will see in the next section. Yet he also insists time and again on the need to

distinguished based upon their differing natural and proximate ends whereas their supernatural beatific end is the same (*ST* I, q. 75, a. 7 ad 1; *Quaestiones de anima* a. 7 ad 10)." Long, *Natura Pura*, 13.

¹⁶ *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 4, resp. and ad 1.

¹⁷ Long, *Natura Pura*, 201. Further: "Human nature is a real principle in the human person, and its species is derived, not from the ultimate supernatural end of beatific vision, but from its proportionate natural end" (*ibid.*, 200). But far from cordoning off the natural law into a separate realm independent of the drama of salvation history, Long fully admits their mutual interpenetration: "Nothing in this, however, is to suggest that the natural end in its proper integrity and completeness may be attained apart from grace in the actually existing providential order. Nor can the ultimate supernatural end be attained by one who rejects the impress of the divine wisdom in the natural law and its dominion over his actions. For both natural law and the *lex nova* are participations in the eternal law" (*ibid.*, 200–201).

¹⁸ Long, *Natura Pura*, 64; emphasis in the original. This paragraph repeats what was said in Oakes, "The *Supernatural* Controversy," 646.

draw a radical distinction between nature and grace lest grace's gratuity be lost and the supernatural reality of the Church get absorbed into some quasi-Hegelian world-process. In doing so, however, he equally insists that we must "distinguish in order to unite" (to borrow Jacques Maritain's motto for his own work); and so to Scheeben we now turn.

II

One reason the influence of a neglected theologian can return is because later generations come to realize that this unfairly ignored theologian has already solved a controverted problem *even before the controversy arose*. Such, I maintain, is the case with Matthias Joseph Scheeben on the issue now before us. For what he has managed to do, at least in my estimation, is to concede all the distinctions necessary for keeping grace gratuitous and nature as a correlative reality independent of grace (thus validating Feingold's and Long's concerns); but he made all those distinctions for the purpose of showing how nature and grace exist and live in an intimate union, made more intimate precisely *because* they are distinct realities (thereby addressing de Lubac's concern that grace not get so cordoned off from the reality of nature that it becomes irrelevant).¹⁹

Scheeben scholars have long noticed his insistence that grace must be defined over against nature, which cannot be done unless nature is granted its own self-subsistent reality independent of grace. For example, Aidan Nichols makes bold to put it this way:

Right from his earliest work, *Natur und Gnade* of 1861, Scheeben has insisted on an extremely sharp distinction between nature and supernature, nature and grace. Indeed, were one [to go] looking for texts to illustrate what early twentieth-century critics of neo-Scholasticism called "extrinsicism" and mid-twentieth-century theologians of the *nouvelle théologie* movement "a two-storey model" of the nature/grace relationship, one could do a lot worse than quarry some texts from Scheeben's writings.²⁰

¹⁹ I owe this insight to Andrew Swafford of Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. Mr. Swafford and I are of course hardly alone in our estimation of "Scheeben the Reconciler": "The sympathetic citation of his work by twentieth-century theologians as different as Hans Urs von Balthasar, a child of the so-called 'new theology' of the 1940s and 1950s, and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, champion, in the years immediately preceding the Second Vatican Council, of 'strict observance' Thomism, attests to his mediating role." Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Denver, CO: Augustine Institute Press, 2010), 19. Feingold also speaks highly of Scheeben: see Feingold, *Natural Desire*, 118–19.

²⁰ Nichols, *Romance and System*, 288. Cyril Vollert, Scheeben's Jesuit translator, agrees: "His most notable contribution to Neo-Scholasticism is his service in

What is more, Scheeben clearly held to a theory of man's twofold end, an idea that de Lubac found especially repugnant but which Scheeben seems to have taken for granted, based on the irrefragably obvious anthropological data in front of him (and us) of stunted human ambitions terminating in death. In his words: "Rational creatures, with the nature they have, cannot improve indefinitely. Their progress lasts just so long as the development of their natural faculties will last. But since their natural faculties are finite, the development of rational creatures must also have a determined and *limited* end."²¹

Similarly, Scheeben anticipates the teaching of Pope Pius XII in his 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis* when he frankly asserts the possibility that God could have given man—had he so chosen—a purely natural end: "In addition to the supernatural order of human development established, revealed, and inaugurated by Christ, man has a natural order, based on his nature. This would be the permanent order destined for man if God had not decreed something better. . . . This means that a purely natural state would be possible, that is, a state without any genuine supernatural elements."²²

So important for Scheeben is this rigid distinction between nature and grace that he finds it not just in the Thomist commentary-tradition (where all agree it is to be found), and not just in Thomas himself; he also traces the distinction back to the early Fathers of the Church (which de Lubac presumably would have found preposterous). These Fathers, he claims, "insisted that grace does not merge with nature and that it even possesses a certain autonomy."²³ To add to the anti-de Lubac side of the

bringing the supernatural, in its full purity and beauty, back to the center of theological thought." Cyril Vollert, S.J., "Introduction," Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co.: 1954), xiii.

²¹ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Glories of Divine Grace*, trans. by a monk of St. Meinrad's Abbey (New York: Benziger, 1886), 46; emphasis added. Further: "The Church necessarily supposes that there is a natural goal and end; for it teaches that the end now appointed for nature, consisting as it does in the beatific vision of God, is absolutely supernatural, and is to be communicated to us by a special grace. And yet there must be a necessary end for nature." Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 93. I thank Andrew Swafford for drawing my attention to these two quotations.

²² Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 86–87.

²³ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, xix: "The Greek Fathers . . . considered grace in its supernatural and divine excellence, as a perfection that surpassed even what was true in the created world of nature. They saw grace in its relations with the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Eucharist. Against rationalistic Nestorianism they pointed out that grace, like the Incarnation, has a supernatural, mysterious connection with the Godhead; against the Manichaeans, Gnostics, and Eutychians they brought to light the difference and opposition between

ledger, other passages imply that Scheeben would have been quite flabbergasted by de Lubac's claim that the pure-nature thesis *led* to secularism. For him quite the opposite is true:

[T]he crisis [of secularism] has not yet been completely settled, and it will not be settled until the supernatural order is frankly, adequately, and radically distinguished from the natural order. . . . Whenever these truths are not assigned their own exclusive sphere and are intermingled with truths of the natural order, they are necessarily confused with the latter, and therefore not only lose their organic union with truths of their own kind but suffer a dimming of their own light.²⁴

In other words, without a resolute distinction between nature and grace, apologetics becomes impossible, which was also a principle of neo-Thomist attacks on de Lubac.

Astute observers will notice, however, a decided shift in accent that has taken place here from the standard neo-Thomist approach to apologetics. As Gerald McCool points out, standard manual apologetics, based on Thomas's treatment of the so-called *praeambula fidei* (truths of natural theology that could be proved by reason alone), started with purely *rational* arguments (for the existence of God and the like) and only then proceeded to those truths that could be known solely by faith. According to these Roman Thomists: "By preserving that distinction [between faith and reason], scholastic philosophy could mount strong philosophical arguments for the credibility of revelation without compromising the transcendence of Christianity's revealed mysteries."²⁵ But then—at least in McCool's analysis—that style of apologetics had completely lost its ability to address the operative assumptions of the "cultured despisers" of Christianity living in the nineteenth century:

Late nineteenth-century idealists considered the historical "facts of Christian revelation" proclaimed by its authentic witnesses as matters of no significance to them. Since man's interior life of consciousness required no knowledge of such external facts either for its intellectual or for its moral development, historical Revelation could be simply

nature and grace. . . . With remarkable penetration and incisiveness these Fathers, notably Cyril of Alexandria, triumphantly combated the naturalist and rationalist tendency that marked Nestorius and that had earlier appeared among the Arians. They remain the best allies in our conflict with modern rationalism. Yet they have been hardly studied at all" (ibid., xviii–xix).

²⁴ Ibid., 13, 15.

²⁵ Gerald A. McCool, *The Neo-Thomists* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1994), 34.

dismissed out of hand. Even if Christ had lived, and [even] if the alleged witnesses of Revelation had told the truth, these were just external facts of history. They were no different from thousands of other singular facts which ancient historians could verify. Brute, singular facts like these were completely “extraneous” to the vital needs of a consciousness whose immanent development must be directed by its own universal laws. On principle then, extrinsic historical facts, like the life of Christ or the preaching of St. Paul, could not be matters of concern either to the philosopher or to the philosophically enlightened intellectual. He had no need to know them. In fact, since they were useless distractions which might impede the progress of his inner life, he would be well advised to ignore them. The current Catholic apologetics had been devised to answer the arguments of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers who were willing to debate the claims of Christian Revelation. But late nineteenth-century idealists had no intention of debating with Christian apologists. As a matter of principle, apologists were to be denied a hearing.²⁶

For all these reasons—so effectively described by McCool—Scheeben realized that apologetics could only be, in the last analysis, simply *good theology*, that is, a theology that displayed the strictly supernatural character of Christianity *from the outset*. Such a move of course did not mean for Scheeben any concession to liberalism, which the Modernists took as their starting point in order to make the Christian message plausible to their skeptical contemporaries. Quite the contrary, Scheeben was intensely anti-liberal.²⁷ But his stress on the supernatural as the key locus for apologetics does come close to de Lubac’s concern that the Church’s supernaturally validated message must be seen to address the *real* concerns of the age. Both Scheeben and de Lubac agree that apologetics will be chasing after a mirage if it vainly tries to address putatively self-sufficient

²⁶ Ibid., 47.

²⁷ John Courtney Murray even goes so far as to speak of Scheeben’s “hatred” of liberalism: “One might perhaps best characterize these [early] years by calling them the period in which the one great theological hate of Scheeben’s life was kindled to flaming intensity—his hate of rationalistic and naturalistic religious Liberalism. It may seem strange to speak of hate in connection with a man of Scheeben’s quiet temper; however, the passion does show itself in the texts in which he attacks this particular error.” John Courtney Murray, S.J., “The Root of Faith,” 24. Nichols expresses the same point, albeit without Murray’s psychologizing attribution of “hate” to Scheeben: “Ultramontane Scheeben certainly was. . . . However, Scheeben’s articles in defense of [Vatican I] were essentially occasional pieces, unrepresentative of the general tenor of his theological work.” Aidan Nichols, O.P., “Homage to Scheeben,” in *Scribe of the Kingdom: Essays on Theology and Culture*, Vol. I (London: Sheed & Ward, 1994): 205–13; here 205–6.

secularists using arguments drawn from their own self-justifying and closed-off rationalism.

But where Scheeben shows his greatest divergence from the manual school, a divergence best represented recently by Feingold and Long, is in his next step: his insistence that nature and grace must be kept conceptually distinct in order to make their “nuptial” union more effective: “When grace is transformed into the light of glory, the union will become an indissoluble spiritual marriage, a *matrimonium spirituale ratum et consummatum*. The freedom of nature at the side of grace will cease, because it will be thoroughly pervaded by grace and taken up into grace.”²⁸

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said that we are bewitched by language. Metaphors are our fate. Under that rubric, Scheeben’s change of imagery has a way of blocking the worst implications of the notorious two-tier model of the nature–grace relationship, with a “supernature” sitting atop nature, like a penthouse atop a skyscraper. As Nichols explains:

Scheeben’s *principal* organizing metaphor for the nature/grace relation is very different. It is drawn not from architecture but from marriage. It is nuptiality. Yes, he makes a sharp ontological distinction between nature and grace. But he treats nature and grace as intimately conjoined in a matrimonial bond, co-inhabiting, according to the divine covenant, in a connubial relationship, inter-penetrating in life and love. Scheeben is not only a theologian of the difference between the natural and the supernatural, he is *the* theologian of their *connubium* as well.²⁹

Of course a mere change of imagery won’t accomplish much without an argument demonstrating *why* nature and grace belong together in married bliss. For that we must turn to what is perhaps Scheeben’s most radical move: his grounding of the nature–grace relation in the bond between the human and divine natures of Christ in the hypostatic union. What Scheeben points out is that Christ’s human nature is (of course) a part of creation, but not his divine nature—which is, well, divine. While this sounds obvious (and is), its implications are vast. For one thing, it means that God’s power to create and sustain the universe in being is not the same as his power to become incarnate; and since the whole point of the Incarnation is to restore man to friendship with God, this means that the union between man and God effected by grace requires far more than “topping off” nature with a superadded gift:

²⁸ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 337.

²⁹ Nichols, *Romance and System*, 289; all italics in the original text.

In the ordinary created thing, God is present only as its maker and conserver. Without His presence in this way, things could not exist. But in the soul having grace He is present as sanctifier, giving Himself to the creature and sharing with him the holiness of His own being. *This recalls the way in which God the Father is in His only-begotten Son.* . . . Thus, as the presence of the Father in His Son is different from His presence in creatures, *similarly* the presence of the Holy Ghost in the souls of the just is different from His ordinary manner of dwelling in creatures.³⁰

That Scheeben means the word “similarly” as no mere rhetorical flourish or as a kind of vague resemblance becomes apparent when he goes on to establish what the grounding of the nature-grace relationship in the Incarnation actually entails: now we should no longer speak of mere adoption but of something *between* “adoptive” and “natural” sonship, something that, in his words, “closely interlaces the adoptive sonship with natural sonship.”³¹ Elsewhere, he radicalizes the Johannine concept that believers are “born of God” (John 1:13c) in this way:

Every child that is born receives its nature from its father. Therefore, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity is called Son and the First is called Father, because the Latter [that is, the Father] has shared His own Divine Nature of being with the Former [the Son]. . . . When through grace we receive a sharing of the Divine Nature and of the divine life, it is then true *in a strict sense* [*im eigentlichen Sinne*] that we are born of God.³²

Especially in his later book *The Mysteries of Christianity*, Scheeben hammers away at this point: just as the hypostatic union means the *substantial* union of God and man in Christ (“hypo-static” being the Greek-rooted equivalent to the Latin-rooted word “sub-stantial”), so too the union of God with the Christian is “similarly” *substantial*. Indeed, as substantial, this union means that grace can no longer be conceived as coming to man from without:

Thus the incarnation of the Son of God is the real basis for the adoption of the human race, and likewise conducts that adoption to a consummation that is unique in its sublimity. . . . This fatherhood is not merely *imitated* in God’s relationship to man, out of sheer grace, but *is joined to man substantially*. . . . The Incarnation raises the human race to the bosom of the eternal Father, that it may receive the grace of sonship

³⁰ Scheeben, *The Glories of Divine Grace*, 74; emphases added.

³¹ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1946), 385.

³² Scheeben, *The Glories of Divine Grace*, 100; emphases added.

with all of its implied dignities *and rights* by a real contact with the source, rather than by a purely gratuitous influx from without.³³

“Rights-talk” of course entails talk of obligations: If I have a right to free speech, the government has an obligation to respect that right and cannot throw me into jail for publishing a broadsheet. If I have a right to the free exercise of religion, you have an obligation not to interfere with that right. If I decide to worship Amon-Re, you’re just going to have to grit your teeth and put up with my folly. If I have a right to privacy, you have an obligation not to tap my phone or record my phone conversations without my knowledge or permission.³⁴

Given that indissoluble connection between rights and obligations, one would think that Scheeben would shy away from speaking of any claim we have on God, or any “right” we have over God, that being the surest way to undermine—indeed deny—the gratuity of grace. Of course, he would grant that nothing in the sin of Adam and Eve ever obligated God to save them and their progeny by sending his Son, which he did solely out of love (John 3: 16). But once the incarnation took place, Scheeben frankly speaks of God’s “obligations.” Notice how he uses the modal verb “must” applied to God here:

If, then, the human race . . . becomes the body of Christ, and its members become the members of God’s Son, if the divine person of the Son of God bears them in Himself as His own, then, with due proportion, must not the divine dignity of the Son of God flow over to men, since they are His members? Must not God the Father extend to these members the same love as that which He bears for His natural Son, must He not embrace them in His Son with one and the same love, inasmuch as they belong to Him?³⁵

³³ Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 384–85; emphases added.

³⁴ I am deliberately phrasing the correlation between rights and obligations in the way criticized by Mary Ann Glendon in her *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1991); she scores this formulation for the way it expels the intermediate terms of virtue and responsibility: “The American rights dialect is distinguished not only by what we say and how we say it, but also by what we leave unsaid . . . [the] habitual silences concerning responsibilities” (76). The binary logic of rights vs. obligations also neglects any standard for adjudicating rights in conflict (like the right to a free press vs. the right to a fair trial). But this very situation highlights the oddity of Scheeben’s way of speaking of human rights vis-à-vis God and of God’s (therefore correlative) “obligations” toward humans. But he does so—as will become clear in the next few paragraphs—because of the way he radicalizes the kind of “adoption” we receive from God.

³⁵ Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 377–78. Here one is reminded of a line from de Lubac: “There can be no question of anything being due to the creature. But, one may

As Scheeben continues to reflect on this analogy throughout *The Mysteries of Christianity*, the language he uses grows more radical until his formulations become very nearly eye-popping:

Because of Christ this sonship is no longer a mere adoptive sonship, since we receive it not as strangers but as kinsfolk [*als Verwandte*], as members of the only-begotten Son, and *can lay claim to it as a right* [*und sie als ein Recht beanspruchen können*]. The grace of sonship in us has something of the *natural* sonship of Christ Himself, from which it is derives. *Because we are not mere adoptive children*, because we are members of the *natural* Son, we truly enter into the personal relationship in which the Son of God stands to His Father. *In literal truth, and not by simple analogy or resemblance*, we call the Father of the Word our Father, and in actual fact He is such not by a purely analogous relationship, but by the very *same* relationship which makes Him the Father of Christ.³⁶

In this way Scheeben seems to have answered, by anticipation, the objections raised by Feingold and Long.³⁷ Yes, much is lost when the concepts of nature and grace are too quickly collapsed into each other. Yes, the existence of natural law itself testifies to ends purely natural

perhaps say, it remains true none the less that once such a desire exists in the creature, it becomes the sign not merely of a possible gift from God, but of a certain gift." Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 207.

³⁶ Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 383; emphases added. Nor are these views to be found only in *Mysteries*. In other writings, he shows himself equally comfortable with talk of "rights": "As children of God, we have a far more intimate relation with God than adopted children have to their father. . . . We are his heirs and we have a right to this inheritance. This right is based on our birth." Scheeben, *The Glories of Divine Grace*, 100–101.

³⁷ Geniuses are like that: they *anticipate*. I am reminded here of what Harold Bloom said of Shakespeare: "[This is] Shakespeare's most idiosyncratic strength: he is always ahead of you, conceptually and imagistically, whoever and whenever you are. He renders you anachronistic because he *contains* you; you cannot subsume him. You cannot illuminate him with a new doctrine, be it Marxism or Freudianism or Demanian linguistic skepticism. Instead, he will illuminate the doctrine, not by prefiguration but by postfiguration, as it were: all of Freud that matters most is there in Shakespeare already, with a persuasive critique of Freud besides. The Freudian map of the mind is Shakespeare's; Freud seems only to have prosified it. Or, to vary my point, a Shakespearean reading of Freud illuminates and overwhelms the text of Freud; a Freudian reading of Shakespeare reduces Shakespeare, or would if we could bear a reduction that crosses the line into absurdities of loss. *Coriolanus* is a far more powerful reading of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* than any Marxist reading of *Coriolanus* could hope to be." Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead, 1994), 24.

(ethics being fundamentally a teleological discipline). Yes, the case of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* proves that a purely human "thriving" (*eudaimonia*) is an entirely appropriate standard for adjudicating purely intra-human ethical issues, and one for which the revelation of the biblical God of the Ten Commandments is not necessarily required. But as early as his book *Nature and Grace* we find Scheeben insisting that, for a Christian, natural law has already been subsumed into the divine "law" of discipleship, of sonship, so that for a Christian there really is no such thing as an independent natural law:

Who can fail to perceive . . . that the doctrine of supernature, which is an elevation of human nature above its own level, clarifies and specifies the transcendence of Christian morality over all philosophical, rational, and rationalistic morality. . . . *Philosophical ethics, in the sense of a system set up in opposition and defiance against theological morality, is unquestionably not a true and genuine morality.* For in the present order purely natural relationships do not exist alone and apart, and therefore cannot be made to prevail in isolated self-sufficiency.³⁸

Even more ringingly, in the Epilogue to this early book and just a few pages before its end, Scheeben calls for an end to a Christian ethics conceived as a heteronomous imposition of alienating rules. In Christian discipleship morality is *lifted up* to something greater and higher—not in the Hegelian sense of *aufgehoben* (suspended, rendered invalid), but in the sense of being raised up to make us what we have always been destined to be:

How poverty-stricken and mean Christian morality appears when it is regarded merely as the morality of man (that is, the ethics based on man's natural moral dignity as found in his reason and free will) rather than as the morality of the sons of God! . . . To grasp the truth that we really are Christ's brothers, we must go into the question of our conformity with Him in His divine no less than in His human nature. And grace may not be regarded merely as a corroborating factor in moral life; it must be apprehended and presented as the new foundation of that life, pertaining to a higher order. Then we shall develop a true moral theology, as distinct from a moral philosophy. Then we shall be able to preach from the pulpit a morality that shares in the excellence of dogmatic theology, a morality rooted in faith, grace, and the mysteries of Christianity.³⁹

³⁸ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 275; emphasis added.

³⁹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 343. In other words, Scheeben is trying to get away from Augustine's notion of grace as mere *auxilium* (aid for living the moral life) and preferring to put the stress more on the notion favored by the Eastern Fathers of grace as the agent of our *apotheosis*, divinization.

In other words, and in conclusion, the knotty and still unresolved debate over the nature-grace relationship can be resolved, but only by grounding that secondary problem in the prior and greater mystery of the incarnation. After all, the incarnation is that mystery that Thomas himself called the one that “among the divine works most especially exceeds reason; for nothing can be thought of which is more marvelous than this divine accomplishment, that the true God, the Son of God, should become true man” (*Summa contra Gentiles* IV, 27.1). And one of the most astonishing parts of that marvel is that Jesus, the very incarnate Son of God, could say to us, *iam non dico vos servos . . . vos autem dixi amicos*: “I no longer call you servants, but friends” (John 15:15). N.V