

Incarnational “Intrinsicism”: Matthias Scheeben’s Biblical Theology of Grace

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THROUGHOUT THE TWENTIETH CENTURY and into the current century, one of the central debates in the controversy over the relationship between nature and grace has concerned “intrinsicism” and “extrinsicism.” These somewhat inelegant terms encapsulate the theological question as to whether human beings have a “natural desire” for the vision of God, and if so, in what sense. Do human beings have an intrinsic desire to see God, such that the (supernatural) beatific vision is the one and only true end for human beings?¹ Or, is the desire to see God a conditional, elicited desire, that is, a desire not inherent to human nature, but rather one that arises through reflection on the order of the world?² Recently, two scholars have proposed the nineteenth-century German theologian Matthias Scheeben as someone who can make a fruitful contribution to this debate. In a 2013 article in *Nova et Vetera*, Thomas Joseph White presents Scheeben’s early work *Natur und Gnade* as an example of “good extrinsicism.”³ For White, Scheeben’s account of the nature–grace relation

¹ Perhaps the most influential exposition of this position is found in Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder & Herder, 1998).

² One of the most recent defenses of this position, explicitly challenging de Lubac’s reading, is Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters*, 2nd ed. (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2010).

³ Thomas Joseph White, O.P., “Good Extrinsicism: Matthias Scheeben and the Ideal Paradigm of Nature–Grace Orthodoxy,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11 (2013): 537–63. White limits his discussion of Scheeben to this early work. Throughout

rightly affirms the existence of a purely natural end for human beings. At the same time, although the natural desire to see God in the beatific vision is not intrinsic to human nature as such, there is nevertheless a fitting correspondence between grace and nature. White further argues that Scheeben's Scholastic method equips him well to parse out the distinctions necessary to rightly understand the complex relation between nature and grace.

In a study published a year after White's article, Andrew Swafford proposes Scheeben as a theologian who can reconcile the two camps in the Catholic nature–grace controversy.⁴ With the “pure nature” camp, Scheeben maintains the gratuity of grace and the integrity of a purely natural end for human beings. With Henri de Lubac, Scheeben provides for a kind of intrinsicism by “securing an inherent connection between human nature and the supernatural order of grace.”⁵ Swafford's argument is that, although de Lubac and Scheeben approach the question from different angles, they arrive at similar conclusions with respect to the creation of the human race for communion with God.

Both White and Swafford point to significant contributions made by Scheeben, but each of them also misses or underplays an important aspect of his treatment, either in itself (in the case of White) or vis-à-vis de Lubac (in the case of Swafford). While White is correct to underscore the Scholastic elements of Scheeben's position, he says little about the equally important biblical and patristic aspects of his treatment.⁶ These emphases in Scheeben's account shift the discussion away from the philosophical question of natural desire to a more biblical register focusing on divine adoption and the Incarnation. Such a biblical-patristic approach provides a better foundation from which to consider the nature–grace relationship. Swafford, by contrast, underestimates (or at least underplays) the important difference between Scheeben's account of the question of “intrinsicism” and that of de Lubac. Indeed, one could argue that Swafford's continued use of the term “intrinsicism” to describe certain aspects of Scheeben's

this paper, translations of Scheeben's *Natur und Gnade* are taken from Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, trans. Cyril O. Vollert (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

⁴ Andrew Dean Swafford, *Nature and Grace: A New Approach to Thomistic Ressourcement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014); see also Edward T. Oakes, *A Theology of Grace in Six Controversies*, Interventions (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 33–46. Oakes acknowledges his debt to Swafford, whose dissertation he directed.

⁵ Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, 186.

⁶ In this regard, Swafford is correct in describing Scheeben as an example of “Ressourcement Thomism” (*Nature and Grace*, 196).

position obfuscates rather than clarifies matters.⁷ Rather than calling it "intrinsic," I would describe Scheeben's account of the nature–grace relation as "incarnational." Such a distinction underscores the advantage of Scheeben's position vis-à-vis de Lubac's. Whereas de Lubac leaves himself open to the criticism that his argument calls into question the gratuity of grace by seeming to insist that human nature *qua nature* is already supernaturally oriented, Scheeben's incarnational account of how human beings are made for grace preserves this gratuity, while at the same time acknowledging that God has created human beings with the ultimate intention of elevating them by grace.⁸ Scheeben's approach thus presents the inherent connection between nature and grace not as a constitutive element of human nature (a charge frequently leveled at de Lubac, though he would deny it), but rather as a part of the divine plan in the Incarnation.⁹ In order to illustrate the advantages of Scheeben's position, I will first present the Scholastic elements of his argument, showing how Scheeben preserves the gratuity of grace while, at the same time, maintaining that there is a fitting connection between nature and grace. This connection is not, however, a *necessity* based on human nature, as de Lubac's account might seem to suggest.¹⁰ Rather, the connection depends on the divine economy and God's plan for human beings in the Incarnation. In the second and third parts of the essay, I will offer an exposition of the biblical-patristic aspects of Scheeben's position, looking first at divine adoption and the way it provides a basis for the gratuity of grace in divine revelation, and subsequently at the role the Incarnation plays in his account of the sense in which human beings are made for supernatural communion with God.

⁷ See Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, esp. 186–94. To be fair, Swafford does not refer to Scheeben as a strict "intrinsicist." Rather, he sees in Scheeben a fruitful reconciliation of extrinsicism and intrinsicism.

⁸ Oakes also sees the importance of this incarnational perspective: "In other words . . . 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" (*Theology of Grace*, 43; emphasis original).

⁹ In this emphasis on the Incarnation one can see a similarity between Scheeben and de Lubac. The difference lies in the former's affirmation of the theoretical usefulness of the concepts of "pure nature" and "obediential potency."

¹⁰ One should note that de Lubac would (and did) strenuously deny this characterization of his position. Rather, he would present his position as a "paradox." See especially de Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 53–74. Nevertheless, it is a conclusion that several of his interpreters (especially his opponents) have drawn, whether rightly or wrongly.

Scheeben's Scholasticism

The Scholastic nature of Scheeben's approach to the question is evident from the first pages of *Nature and Grace*, as he begins by defining the crucial terms "nature" and "supernature."¹¹ The distinction between these two orders, a commonplace in the commentatorial tradition, plays a central role in his account.¹² As Edward Oakes notes, however, in Scheeben we see a quintessential example of the principle of "distinguish in order to unite."¹³ The distinction between nature and supernature (or grace) serves to show forth the "nuptial union" between the two orders.¹⁴

Scheeben begins his analysis of "nature" with a discussion of the word's etymology, noting that both the Latin and the Greek words come from verbs associated with birth or begetting.¹⁵ On this basis, he argues that nature most fundamentally refers to the essence of living things, that is, things that are begotten. Nature "signifies the essence and substance, not simply as such, but with reference to life and activity, as the principle of motion, as the root and basis of the entire life."¹⁶ Properly speaking, then, nature applies only to living things. Analogously, the word can be applied to inanimate material things, but this is a secondary definition.¹⁷

The corresponding adjective "natural" also can have a multiplicity of connotations. Scheeben offers four definitions. First, "the natural" can refer to what "pertains to nature, arises from nature, or is conformable to nature."¹⁸ Second, the adjective can describe qualities or faculties that arise from a thing's essence or that are not opposed to its essence and conform to it.¹⁹ Third, "natural" can designate a good corresponding to a thing, either as something it can attain by its own powers or as something that will bring about the thing's highest perfection, even if it cannot be attained by

¹¹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 19–32.

¹² For an extensive discussion of the commentatorial tradition, see Feingold, *Natural Desire*.

¹³ See the foreword of Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, xi.

¹⁴ For the marital imagery of the union between nature and grace, see Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 296. For further discussion of this imagery, see Aidan Nichols, *Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Joseph Scheeben*, Nova et Vetera Book Series (Denver, CO: Augustine Institute, 2010), 74–76; Oakes, *Theology of Grace*, 33–43.

¹⁵ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 19–20.

¹⁶ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 20–21.

¹⁷ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 21–22. Scheeben also notes that the definition can be extended to spiritual beings, but only by analogy because of their simplicity.

¹⁸ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 23.

¹⁹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 23–24.

its own powers.²⁰ Finally, the word can refer to "the orientation of a being to its end and to the totality of everything pertaining to the end."²¹ The purpose of this extensive discussion of nature and the natural is to set in relief the meaning and significance of the supernatural.

Like "nature" and "natural," the words "supernature" and "supernatural" admit of various definitions for Scheeben. Despite this variety, he makes clear from the outset that the "supernatural" is not the opposite of the "natural": "Contradictorily opposed to the natural is not, strictly speaking, the supernatural, but the non-natural, that is, that which does not pertain to nature, or does not proceed from nature or correspond to it."²² While the adjective "supernatural" can apply to a number of features of reality, for Scheeben the most important definition refers to that which goes beyond the natural powers of a creature. Whereas "the natural" describes those things that are part of a thing's essence, "those qualities and adornments that do not constitute the essence of a thing, but are so exalted that they greatly surpass what the thing is equipped by its origin to have, are supernatural."²³ One of Scheeben's primary concerns, then, is with how the supernatural elevates our natural powers.²⁴ But, relatedly, the supernatural also concerns the final end of a creature: "Finally, the last end (and in the case of rational creatures, full consummation in beatitude) which a being is meant to attain is supernatural, if the destiny is such that the being can neither make itself capable and worthy of it by its own dignity or its preparatory activity, nor reach it by its own powers."²⁵ Supernaturally elevated powers, then, inhere in nature. Their supernatural ordering arises, however, not from a creature's own essence, but rather from divine grace.²⁶

Although supernaturally elevated powers can, in theory, be implanted

²⁰ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 24. It is worth noting that the last part of this definition leaves open the possibility of speaking of grace or the supernatural as in some sense "natural" to human beings, as Scheeben does in a subsequent chapter and in his later work *The Mysteries of Christianity*.

²¹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 24.

²² Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 25.

²³ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 27.

²⁴ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 27: "Those powers which in no way emanate from a thing's essence and substance but transcend its level are supernatural."

²⁵ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 27.

²⁶ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 28. Although Scheeben refers to these powers as "supernatural powers" (*die übernatürlichen Kräfte*), this language is imprecise and does not seem to correspond to his actual position. Grace/supernature does not give human nature new faculties, but rather elevates the natural faculties of intellect and will to a new capacity. I am grateful to Matthew Levering for pointing this out to me.

without changing the nature of the one who receives them, Scheeben argues that grace extends deeper than simply the level of the powers. Grace actually elevates nature to a higher plane, a plane he calls “supernature”: “If . . . the entire being of the soul is altered in its deepest recesses and in all its ramifications to the very last, not by annihilation but by exaltation and transfiguration, then we can affirm that a sort of new, higher nature has come to the lower nature, because it has been granted a participation in the essence of Him to whom the higher nature properly belongs.”²⁷ This definition shows that, for Scheeben, grace consists in nothing less than divinization, “a participation in the essence of Him to whom the higher nature properly belongs.” He insists on the term “supernature” to show that the effect of grace is not simply occasional, but rather actually generates a substructure (rooted in the graced essence of the soul) out of which arise supernatural acts in a manner that corresponds to how the natural essence of the soul grounds natural acts.²⁸

Scheeben’s careful delineation of the differences between nature and supernature lays the groundwork for an account of the nature–grace relationship that can be labeled “extrinsicist” yet sees a close correspondence between nature and grace. His description of the manner of grace’s effects on nature and of the integrity of nature point to the extrinsic character of grace. At the same time, for Scheeben grace is not alien to nature—supernature is not, strictly speaking, the opposite of nature. One could call this aspect of Scheeben’s account a “soft” intrinsicism, insofar as—like the neo-Scholastics themselves—he shares the goal of affirming that grace profoundly fulfills nature while transforming it.²⁹

Scheeben repeatedly insists that grace imparts to nature powers that it would not have from its own essence. Indeed, he refers to this as its “most notable feature”: “The most notable feature of the elevation of nature I call supernature is that it imparts to nature new capacities and powers, and hence opens up a new and permanent field of activity in a higher sphere.”³⁰ Supernature resembles the natural virtues in that it becomes “second nature” to the one who receives it. It differs from the virtues

²⁷ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 30–31. As Scheeben’s phrase “not by annihilation” implies, this new higher nature neither negates nor replaces the lower nature that it modifies.

²⁸ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 31–32.

²⁹ By “soft” intrinsicism, I mean that grace presupposes the integrity of nature and elevates it in a fitting way, but is in no sense required by nature. This seems to be the “good intrinsicism” to which White refers in his essay (“Good Extrinsicism,” 547, 555), though, again, this use of the term “intrinsicism” could be confusing.

³⁰ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 34.

in that it cannot be acquired by natural power.³¹ Supernature comes to human beings "from outside and above," but without violating the essence of nature.³² Moreover, Scheeben maintains that nature has its own natural end, distinct from the end made possible by supernature:

Therefore we must unconditionally hold fast to the simpler proposition that every being has a nature which as such is good under all circumstances and relations (human nature in particular remains good even after falling into sin, by which it lost its original goodness), and preserves its active powers *and its aspiration toward a good which it can and ought to attain by the development of those powers*.³³

Part of the reason for this insistence on a natural end is to avoid the error of Jansenism, which denies the goodness of human nature.³⁴ At the same time, this affirmation of a purely natural end also makes clear the extrinsic nature of grace.

Despite this extrinsic character, however, for Scheeben grace is not alien to nature. Rather, grace fittingly corresponds to nature, but is not demanded by nature per se, as though nature's inbuilt exigencies were already ordered supernaturally without the aid of grace. Scheeben adopts the Scholastic concept of "obediential potency" to elaborate the fittingness of the relation between nature and grace. Grace does not destroy or change the essence of human nature: "For supernature is not a substitution or change of essences; the essence of nature remains, it is only elevated and transformed. Therefore *it must have a capacity for such elevation and transformation*; and, as was said above, fundamental powers must already be present in it to form the substructure of the new powers."³⁵ Not only is supernature not contrary to nature; human nature is suited to receive supernature in a way that other creatures are not. Thus, Scheeben goes on to note that stones and animals are not capable of receiving supernature, because they lack intelligence.³⁶ Scheeben even argues that supernature can be called "natural" in a certain sense: "This is the reason why supernature is not contrary to nature (and hence

³¹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 35.

³² Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 38–39. The phrase "from outside and above" shows why "intrinsicism" is not the best label for Scheeben's understanding.

³³ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 55 (emphasis added).

³⁴ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 55.

³⁵ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 39 (emphasis added).

³⁶ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 39.

unnatural) but is quite in harmony with nature, and can even be called natural, in the sense that it is conformable with nature and is not unnatural.”³⁷ Supernature does no violence to nature, but rather perfects it and brings it to its highest end.³⁸ Nevertheless, supernature is not something owed to nature as such. Scheeben describes supernature as “a good which nature may not demand as belonging to it by right, but lovingly, gladly, and thankfully receives as a welcome gift that has been offered.”³⁹ Despite the gratuity of supernature, there is a fitting, even natural, union between the two: “Therefore, although the two orders are not so connected that the lower encloses the higher, they are united in such a way that the higher encompasses the lower and presupposes it as its substructure and prerequisite condition.”⁴⁰

Scheeben’s Scholasticism thus enables him to strike a proper balance between gratuitousness and fittingness. Grace is completely distinct from nature, and so is in this sense extrinsic: “Because this principle presupposes that nature exists and is complete in its species, *it does not belong to nature as a necessary element*.”⁴¹ At the same time, grace is not alien to nature, but rather perfects it: “By elevating nature, this principle [grace] gives to nature the highest perfection it is capable or susceptible of.”⁴²

Two passages toward the end of *Nature and Grace* beautifully capture the heart of Scheeben’s account, underscoring both the gratuity of grace and the fittingness of its union with nature. First, he writes: “Grace alone, coming as it does to man from outside, cannot give him the first capacity for the spiritual life or for union with God. It necessarily presupposes that such a capacity is already found in man’s nature.”⁴³ In other words, in order for grace to be effective, there has to be a point of contact with human nature. As already noted, rocks and even animals are incapable of receiving grace. For this reason, Scheeben goes on, one can speak in a certain sense of a natural desire for grace: “All the wants of nature are fully met through grace; and *to that extent nature has a natural desire for union with grace*. But this desire merely makes nature capable of receiving grace; that it may lead nature to grace, it must, as we said above, be enkindled by the first

³⁷ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 39–40.

³⁸ The capacity of nature to be elevated in this manner is how Scheeben defines “obediential potency” (Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 40).

³⁹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 40.

⁴⁰ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 40.

⁴¹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 109 (emphasis added).

⁴² Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 111.

⁴³ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 322.

rays of grace itself."⁴⁴ This natural desire, then, is not constitutive of human nature, but rather is aroused by grace in a way fitting to human nature.

Divine Adoption and the Gratuity of Grace

While Scholastic analysis plays an important part in Scheeben's account of nature and grace, by no means does it play the only part. One could argue that his attention to Scripture and to the Church fathers shapes his approach at least as much as his Scholasticism, if not more. Moreover, his appropriation of Scripture and the fathers actually sharpens his twofold description of the nature–grace relation, underscoring the extrinsic character of grace, while at the same time affirming its fundamental role in God's plan for human beings. Describing grace in terms of divine adoption brings out grace's utter gratuity—no human being has a right to be adopted by God. At the same time, the connection Scheeben draws between divine adoption and the Incarnation results in a more robust account of grace in the divine plan, one that goes deeper than mere "fittingness" and maintains some of the merits of de Lubac's approach without its seeming drawbacks. In this section, we will consider Scheeben's account of divine adoption. The third and final section will address the role the Incarnation plays in his approach.

The gift of divine sonship plays a crucial role in Scheeben's theology of grace. Indeed, he sees in this divine adoption the pinnacle and summation of the glory given to believers:

We come now to a property of grace which contains the sum of all its aforementioned glories and reveals them in their nature and importance with very great clarity. Since grace makes us partakers of the divine nature, we are taken into the very family of God. God becomes our Father, His only-begotten Son our brother, and we ourselves children of God.⁴⁵

Scheeben bases his understanding of divine adoption on several biblical texts drawn from the Pauline epistles (Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians), as well as 1 John 3:1. Shortly after the passage cited above, he reiterates the grandeur of what we receive by grace: "Indeed, we can say that nothing shows so well the glory of divine grace than the fact that, according to its

⁴⁴ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 325 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Glories of Divine Grace: A Fervent Exhortation to All to Preserve and to Grow in Sanctifying Grace*, trans. Patrick Shaughnessy (Rockford, IL: Tan, 2000), 91.

very nature and activity, it makes us children of God.”⁴⁶ What makes this aspect of grace so spectacular is that it is in no way earned or deserved—that is, it is extrinsic to us.⁴⁷

In his earlier work *Nature and Grace*, Scheeben elaborates on the gratuity of this divine adoption by discussing the various kinds of sonship. One can see in this discussion a biblical analogue to his Scholastic account of the relationship between nature and grace. That is to say, in the realm of sonship, there is an utter gratuity to the gift, but there is also a certain fittingness to this adoption by grace. At times, he notes, Scripture refers to God as the father of all creatures, especially living things, in a figurative sense, insofar as he created them and provides for their needs.⁴⁸ In a more fitting way, God may be considered the father of spiritual and rational creatures: “For they have personality, are capable of reaching beatitude, and receive a higher, spiritual life from God. In their existence and life they resemble God in a special way, *even by their nature*.”⁴⁹ Valid though this likeness to God may be, however, it does not come close to the dignity given through divine adoption by grace: “This [natural likeness to God] is a true relationship, but not the highest and noblest; it is not the relationship that Christianity sets before us as the reality; it does not exhaust the full wealth and meaning contained in the idea of sonship.”⁵⁰ By nature, human beings are not, strictly speaking, sons of God. Nevertheless, because of their likeness to God with respect to the capacities for a spiritual life, there is a fittingness to the union of nature and grace that does not obtain in lower creatures.

For Scheeben, the sonship entailed in divine grace establishes a much deeper relationship between God and the believer. True sonship includes a closer resemblance between a father and his son: “The child is like the father not only in a vague way, but in all the features and traits that distinguish the father. . . In a word, the son is completely one with the father in

⁴⁶ Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 91.

⁴⁷ See also Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis, MO: Herder & Herder, 1946), 489: “We could never, in all eternity, attain to such an intimate, spiritual union with God even by the most perfect development of our natural spiritual powers, and by the conformity of our natural life with the divine will. This union is contained only in the supernatural grace of divine sonship, which makes us, as children of God, partakers of His nature and His life.” I owe this reference to Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, 170.

⁴⁸ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 116.

⁴⁹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 116 (emphasis added).

⁵⁰ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 117.

nature, life, possessions, and love."⁵¹ The nature of true sonship shows the exalted dignity that grace bestows on nature, because this sonship belongs by nature to Christ alone: "No created being, no created spirit is a son of God in this way by nature. The eternal Word alone is the Son of God by nature and is consequently the Only-begotten of the Father."⁵² Scheeben repeatedly underscores the uniqueness of Christ's sonship. Whereas the eternal Son proceeds from the Father by a natural generation, creatures, even the highest spiritual creatures, exist solely by the will of God.⁵³

This emphasis on the distinction between the Word's eternal, natural sonship and our status as creatures complements and closely maps onto Scheeben's Scholastic analysis of human nature and the extrinsic character of the nature–grace relation. If at its most basic level grace bestows divine adoption on human beings, and if that adoption is in no way owed to nature, then grace must be extrinsic in at least some sense. Moreover, for Scheeben the distinction between nature and grace corresponds to the more fundamental distinction between the creature and the creator: "No creature, therefore, can by his nature be a son of God in the full sense of the word, precisely because he is a creature. For the creature was not begotten of God's nature, but was called into being from nothing by God's will, and consequently has a nature that is infinitely different from the divine nature."⁵⁴ Creaturely status corresponds not to sonship, but rather to the status of a servant. Scheeben appeals to the fathers, particularly Augustine and Cyril, to show that this understanding of grace goes back to the early Church. In opposing the Manichees, who suggested that at least some souls were given a part of the divine spirit by nature, Augustine "insisted that the creature, whether man or spirit, as portrayed in Catholic teaching, was made a son of God by grace, yet was not such by nature."⁵⁵

⁵¹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 117–18.

⁵² Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 118; see also Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 94: "Only the Eternal Word—which was not created, but rather created us and all other things—only he is by nature the Son of God in the strict sense."

⁵³ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 119: "Such a relation to God is impossible for all other natures because they do not proceed from the Father's nature within the divinity by generation, but are summoned forth from nothing by God's almighty will, and exist outside God as the works of His hands."

⁵⁴ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 120; cf. Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, 173: "[Scheeben] makes this same point by distinguishing between God's 'creative' power and His 'generative' power, the latter referring to the eternal generation of the Son—a filiation in which man shares by virtue of the supernatural grace of divine adoption."

⁵⁵ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 121, citing *Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum*. In the subsequent footnote, Scheeben adds that Augustine's doctrine of sonship by

Similarly, Cyril affirms that, based merely on creation, we are no more than servants or subjects of God, not children.⁵⁶ The reason we sometimes use the language of sonship or childhood even on the natural level is not that we (or any other creature) are naturally sons of God, but rather to reflect the benevolence of God. Although we are by nature servants, God is not a tyrant, but rather the one who gives us everything we need in life.⁵⁷ Indeed, so generous is God that, by grace, he elevates creatures to a status far above what they could hope for based solely on nature: "Since we do not become God's children and sons by our own nature which we receive from God, our sonship is not natural or the product of literal generation, but is an elevation to the status of sonship imparted by God out of free and overflowing love."⁵⁸ The gratuitousness and the nature of this adoption show both the generosity of God and the sublime gift he gives us by grace.

Divine adoption by grace, on Scheeben's account, is more profound than earthly adoption. Whereas earthly adoption is juridical and does not impart a natural generation, the divine adoption received by grace brings about a relation between the redeemed and God closely analogous to the Son's relation to the Father. Grace transforms the recipient, elevating him to a higher plane: "God's love, with which He loves us in His only-begotten Son, gives us not only a new external dignity, but a new internal goodness and beauty. It is so powerful that it makes us conformable to the image of his Son, inaugurates in us a new, higher man, and, in a certain sense, establishes in us the beginning of a new substance."⁵⁹ Scheeben takes the language of conformity to the image of Christ from Romans 8:29, and he appeals to several other biblical texts to support the notion that grace

grace shows that the bishop of Hippo did have an ontological understanding of grace, analogous to Scheeben's use of the term "supernature."

⁵⁶ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 122. See also Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 94: "By reason of our nature we are not, properly speaking, children of God, but only his servants and bondsmen, and the least of these. We are far below the Angels, who themselves are by nature only servants of God. For we are, as they, only creatures of God and the works of his hands. . . . *If we had remained in this, our natural condition, God would not be, strictly speaking, our Father*" (emphasis added).

⁵⁷ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 121.

⁵⁸ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 125.

⁵⁹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 127. Elsewhere Scheeben suggests that grace elevates us to the same level as the Son himself: "What we cannot claim by right, the infinite liberality of God gives us in grace. Although we are not by nature children of God, we become such through grace, and so true is this that, as adopted children, we are put on a par with the natural Son of God. *We become by grace what He is by nature*" (*Glories of Divine Grace*, 96; emphasis added).

brings about a new birth.⁶⁰ Developing the seed imagery found in 1 John 3:9, Scheeben reiterates that, even though grace comes to human beings from without, it engenders an actual change to and elevation of nature: "Divine adoption communicates to us a new, incomparably higher life, a life for which no seed is produced by us, but has to be planted in us. As the new life is divine, the seed that is planted in us must likewise be divine."⁶¹ This seed, he suggests, is none other than the Holy Spirit dwelling within the believer.⁶² Scripture uses several images to describe this life, which Scheeben takes to be the best indication that God actually shares his own life with believers.⁶³ In particular, he points to Jesus's discourse in John about the vine and the branches, as well as Paul's notion of the Church as the body of Christ.⁶⁴ Both images suggest that the whole organism (the vine and the branches in the one case and the head and the members in the other) shares in one life flowing from Christ. It is because of this kind of unity that Paul can speak of Christ living in him and of the Spirit living in believers.⁶⁵

Scheeben's account of divine adoption thus holds two elements in tension. On the one hand, God's act of adoption is a free gift, not at all demanded by any aspect of our human nature in itself. On the other hand, the nature of that adoption differs from human adoption in that it is not only juridical: "Although the sonship we receive from God by His freely given love is not natural, as it does not come to us from our own nature, it is not a mere juridical adoption, because it communicates to us a new existence and life by an act that implies a kind of generation."⁶⁶ The divine adoption, then, has similarities with both human adoption and natural generation. The adoptive aspect of the relationship underscores that this relationship cannot be earned in any way. No one has a right to be adopted by anyone else. Nevertheless, unlike human adoption, divine adoption imparts "a vital power and tendency enabling us to lead and attain a life that in itself belongs to the divine nature alone."⁶⁷ Whereas human

⁶⁰ He cites John 3:5, 1 Pet 1:23, James 1:17, and 1 John 3:9 (Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 127).

⁶¹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 128.

⁶² Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 128.

⁶³ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 129.

⁶⁴ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 129.

⁶⁵ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 129 (citing Gal 2:20 and Rom 8).

⁶⁶ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 131; cf. Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, 176: "For Scheeben, the gift of divine sonship entails a real ontic share in the filiation of the Eternal Son."

⁶⁷ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 131. Although Scheeben at times seems to speak of

adoption changes only the status of the one adopted, the divine adoption elevates human nature to a level unattainable by natural human capacities alone.

While Scheeben repeatedly makes clear that the divine adoption is neither merited nor owed to human beings, he nevertheless at the same time maintains that this adoption necessarily stems from the effect of the Incarnation on the human race as a whole. Scheeben even goes so far as to suggest both that the Incarnation is necessary for divine adoption to be effective and that the Incarnation makes divine adoption more than simply fitting. A lengthy passage in *The Mysteries of Christianity* captures this dynamic:

[Divine adoption] is *pure grace, motivated exclusively by God's overflowing kindness*: and by itself alone this grace would not be powerful enough really to usher us into the personal relationship of the Son of God to His Father, in such wise that in Him and through Him this Father would in very truth be our Father also. *By the Incarnation, however, we are in all truth embodied in the person of God's Son and have become His members.* God looks upon us no longer as situated upon the low level proper to our own persons; He sees us in His Son, and His Son in us. He beholds us substantially united to His Son, and kin to Him. *Consequently we are perfectly worthy, and not merely worthy in some indefinite way, to be adopted as His children.*⁶⁸

Once again, Scheeben emphasizes that divine adoption is a pure gift, in no way merited. Nevertheless, because of the Incarnation—*not* by virtue of any aspect built in to human nature—human beings in a sense have a “right” to this adoption. Scheeben’s emphasis on the Incarnation thus achieves one of the primary goals of de Lubac’s account without the problems inherent to the latter’s proposal. As we will see, Scheeben’s discussion draws much of its strength from its rootedness in biblical statements about the Christological purposes of God in creating and redeeming the world.

Incarnational “Intrinsicism”

In the epilogue of his early work *Nature and Grace*, Scheeben concludes by

this adoption providing a “new nature,” elsewhere he makes clear that grace does not do away with human nature, but rather gives it a new quality (e.g., *Nature and Grace*, 130, 134).

⁶⁸ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 383 (emphasis added).

citing a portion of a homily by St. Peter Chrysologus on the close connection between the mystery of the blessed Trinity and the life of grace.⁶⁹ The passage underscores the importance of union with God for all aspects of the believer's life. In this union, Scheeben sees the key to several aspects of the Christian mystery. For the purposes of this paper, the most important point he makes concerns the role of the Incarnation in the divine economy: "Through [union with God] he [Chrysologus] explains how the Incarnation is the supernatural foundation on which the system of Christianity is erected above nature and reason. By it he helps us to grasp *the necessity as well as the absolute transcendence of grace*."⁷⁰ For Scheeben, the Incarnation is the key to reconciling "extrinsicism" and "intrinsicism" (though he, of course, does not use those terms himself). Grace is absolutely transcendent because it comes from without; at the same time, it is in a sense necessary because of the relationship the Incarnation establishes between God and human nature. If one wants to talk about "intrinsicism" with respect to grace, then, it seems that one should locate it not in some characteristic of human nature, but rather in God's plan for human beings revealed in the Incarnation. Scheeben develops this understanding at greater length in his later work, *The Mysteries of Christianity*.

For Scheeben, because of the solidarity of the human race, the Incarnation has implications not just for the human nature that the Son assumes, but also for all human beings, and even for creation as a whole. Scheeben argues that human nature is a more fitting recipient of the Incarnation than is that of pure spirits, and this for at least two reasons. First, because man contains aspects of both the material world (in his body) and the spiritual world (in his soul), he serves as a microcosm that encompasses the whole created order. Thus, by becoming Incarnate as a man, Christ points to God's purpose for all of creation.⁷¹ Additionally, though, Scheeben notes that, because of the specific unity of human nature, human beings "constitute a single great body, an immense whole."⁷² The Incarnation thus takes up the entire human race into the divine life:

This is the reason why all its individuals can assemble in a unique association under a single head. This is the reason, too, why the God-man, by entering into human nature, can closely unite the whole race in Himself to form His mystical body, and so can most

⁶⁹ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 346 (citing Chrysologus's Homily 71).

⁷⁰ Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 347 (emphasis added).

⁷¹ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 362.

⁷² Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 363.

perfectly and universally carry out the idea of His mission in this body as in His own. This objective is attained by the fact that the communication of the divine nature is extended to the entire body as to one solidary whole, and this body in turn is gathered up in its totality into the infinite oblation of the Son of God.⁷³

Through the human nature of the Son, which is common to all human beings, the whole human race is in a sense united to the Son, making him its new head.

Scheeben returns frequently to this image of the Son's headship, as it plays an essential role in his account of the relation between nature and grace. Christ's status as the head of the human race belongs to him alone because of his preeminence, a preeminence that extends to all creation. Drawing on the language of Colossians 1, Scheeben writes: "For this reason He is called the first-born of all creatures and the head of the heavenly powers, which in itself makes Him immensely superior to Adam, who is merely the head of the human race."⁷⁴ Scheeben goes on to compare the members of the human race to the branches of a tree, suggesting that, even on the level of nature, there is a close connection between all human beings.⁷⁵ On the natural level, it is Adam rather than Christ who is the head of the human race. But on a deeper, more important level, Christ himself is the head of the race by virtue of the Incarnation:

The God-man occupies a like position [to that of Adam] for the reason that, although the race did not proceed from Him, He took it to Himself by His entrance into it, united it to Himself, and made it His own. . . . This He did by making His own and assuming to His person a member of the race that is ontologically connected with all the other members. Thereby He becomes the new head of the whole race, its natural head included.⁷⁶

As we will see, Scheeben sees in Christ's headship of the human race important implications for divine adoption. The Incarnation makes divine adoption both possible and, in a qualified sense, necessary.

The reason for this qualified necessity stems from the relationship that

⁷³ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 363.

⁷⁴ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 364. Scheeben borrows the images of Christ as "firstborn" and "head" from Col 1:15–20.

⁷⁵ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 365.

⁷⁶ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 366.

the Incarnation establishes between Christ and the whole human race. Scheeben goes so far as to suggest that in a sense the whole race becomes the body of the Son through the Incarnation. Those born of Adam are sometimes referred to as one body on the natural level. For Scheeben, the union effected by the Incarnation is more profound than this natural unity:

Indeed, [the human race] becomes one body with Christ in a far higher and fuller sense than it does with Adam. This is so because it belongs to Christ more than it belongs to Adam, because Adam himself is taken up into Christ, and as the natural head of the race belongs to Christ along with all its members, and so must acknowledge Christ as his own supreme head.⁷⁷

Even before the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, then, a union exists between Christ and every human being. In this regard, Scheeben's account anticipates the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes*: "For, by his incarnation, he, the son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man."⁷⁸ The union established by the Incarnation serves as the basis for the deeper union of adoption brought about through baptism.

Before he expounds on the nature of this adoption, Scheeben addresses a potential objection to his argument. Turning to one of his favorite images for the nature–grace relation, he compares the Incarnation to the nuptial union between Adam and Eve.⁷⁹ For Scheeben there are two kinds of union with Christ. The first, which applies to all human beings, corresponds to Eve's coming from the side of Adam. This union between Adam and Eve, though real, was incomplete, only to be consummated by their marital union. Analogously, the relationship that the Incarnation establishes between Christ and the human race is ordered to its consummation through the sacraments. It is only through the sacraments that this deeper, more significant union between Christ and human beings comes about.⁸⁰

For Scheeben, then, the Incarnation serves as a crucial basis for divine

⁷⁷ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 367–68. Scheeben's claim is thus stronger than that of St. Thomas Aquinas, for whom Christ is the head of all men at least in potency (see *Summa Theologiae* [ST] III, q. 8, a. 3).

⁷⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), §22. See also Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, 192.

⁷⁹ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 374. On the importance of nuptial imagery for Scheeben, see Nichols, *Romance and System*, 289; Oakes, *Theology of Grace*, 38.

⁸⁰ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 374–75.

adoption. Without it, he suggests, this adoption would have lacked something. Although it is true that God could have adopted human beings by grace apart from the Incarnation, the divine economy has made possible a more perfect relationship between human beings and God: “But without the Incarnation this dignity [adoption] would have lacked a basis in us, and would have been less perfect in its value for us. It is too high above us; so much so that of ourselves we could not have even the slightest prospect of ever possessing or acquiring it.”⁸¹ Scheeben’s emphasis on the Incarnation shows that the “intrinsicism” of his account is rooted not in human nature as such, but rather in the change that the Incarnation brings about for human beings.

This change elevates the dignity of the entire human race, even making supernatural gifts in a sense “connatural” to human beings. At the same time, Scheeben constantly reaffirms the utter gratuity of this new dignity. It is something in no way owed to human beings because of their nature, but rather something Christ won for them:

Thus the dignity which the human race receives on account of its connection with its new, divine-human head, is so great that all supernatural goods, *which in themselves immeasurably transcend its natural dignity, become connatural and proper to it*. Because of His personal, divine dignity, the God-man merits for the race the entire series of supernatural gifts *which the race could not merit in any other way*.⁸²

By virtue of the Incarnation, the supernatural gifts that humans receive by adoption—gifts that are in no way owed to their nature—are now received in a fitting manner. Grace is “connatural” to human beings not because they have an intrinsic natural desire to see God, but rather because Christ has elevated the entire human race to a new capacity for the supernatural.

Swafford and Oakes both note the similarities between Scheeben and de Lubac with respect to what I have termed “intrinsicism.”⁸³ While it is true that Scheeben and de Lubac come to similar conclusions to the extent that both affirm that the entire human race is inherently ordered to union with God, one cannot stress enough the significance of the different ways by which each of these theologians arrives at that conclusion.⁸⁴ For de

⁸¹ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 382–83.

⁸² Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 388 (emphasis added).

⁸³ Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, 186–94; Oakes, *Theology of Grace*, 37.

⁸⁴ To be fair, both Swafford and Oakes acknowledge this difference, noting the

Lubac, the intrinsic character of grace lies within human nature as such, albeit in its concrete historical reality. An instinctual desire for the vision of God, or at least a lack that can only be assuaged by the vision of God, is inscribed in human nature in such a way that to remove that end would alter human nature.⁸⁵ De Lubac frequently speaks of the desire to see God as constitutive of human nature, indeed, as the only true end of that nature: "No other finality now seems possible for men than that which is now really inscribed in the depths of my nature."⁸⁶ For de Lubac, human nature has only one end, and a failure to attain that end inevitably results in frustration and suffering.⁸⁷

Contrast de Lubac's position with this lengthy passage from Scheeben's *The Mysteries of Christianity*:

Only a complete misunderstanding of the absolutely supernatural character of the last end actually appointed for us can give occasion to such an assumption [that the possibility of the beatific vision can be known by reason]. For the fact of the beatific vision, or our actual destination to it, could be known by reason *only if it were an end physically necessary for the created spirit, an end to which God had to destine the spirit, in order to give its nature the perfection required of it.* But on that hypothesis the entire Catholic doctrine of grace would go by the board; *the beatific vision would not become our inheritance through a gratuitous adoption into the sonship of God, but we would have a true title to it by nature.*⁸⁸

If one did not know that Scheeben wrote this passage before de Lubac was even born, much less had begun his academic career, one would be tempted to see it as a direct response to the French Jesuit's position. Scheeben anticipates the primary critique commonly leveled against de Lubac: that by making the beatific vision intrinsic to our nature, he evacuates grace of its gratuitous character, making it something owed to human beings. Note also that Scheeben closely associates the desire for the beatific vision with

crucial role the Incarnation plays for Scheeben; see Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, 186, and Oakes, *Theology of Grace*, 43.

⁸⁵ De Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 54–55: "For this desire 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."

⁸⁶ De Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 55.

⁸⁷ De Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 54.

⁸⁸ Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 658 (emphasis added).

divine adoption. This confirms the point made above, that Scheeben's appeal to divine adoption underscores the gratuitous, extrinsic dimension of grace.

One might argue that de Lubac's emphasis on "concrete" human nature—that is, nature as it exists in history—corresponds to Scheeben's emphasis on humanity transformed through the Incarnation.⁸⁹ The primary difference, however, lies in the fact that Scheeben, even as he affirms the change the Incarnation has brought about for human nature, nevertheless still maintains the integrity of a purely natural end.⁹⁰ By doing so, Scheeben can more effectively avoid the danger of collapsing grace into nature, and he more clearly shows the gratuitous character of grace. The orientation of the human being toward God is a direct result of the Incarnation, not, as de Lubac seems to imply repeatedly, something that stems from human nature as such. De Lubac considers human nature as such in light of the Incarnation—in light of God's concrete plan for humanity—but he gives human nature a supernatural charge or ordering that suggests that, *qua* nature, nature is already graced. By combining Scholastic analysis with a biblical-patristic retrieval, Scheeben presents a more compelling account of what I have called the "intrinsic" character of grace in the economy of salvation. The intrinsicism of grace lies not in human nature as such, but rather in the divine purposes as described in biblical texts such as Romans 8:29 and Colossians 1:15–20. Scheeben offers an incarnational intrinsicism that holds together the possibility of understanding human nature apart from grace with the importance of seeing in Christ the ultimate destiny of the human race.⁹¹

Good "Intrinsicism"

In the epilogue of *Nature and Grace*, Scheeben writes: "The Incarnation of the Son is the mystery of the reconciliation of our nature with the divine nature. The Son of God takes our nature to Himself to make us His brothers by our participation in His divine nature."⁹² In this text one can clearly

⁸⁹ For the distinction between "concrete" and "abstract" or "generic" with respect to human nature, see de Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 54–55, 59–63.

⁹⁰ See again Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 55.

⁹¹ In this respect, Scheeben's account is also more satisfying than that of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who seems to suggest that we can understand human nature *only* in light of Christ (*The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992], 332: "Christ is especially the 'ground and measure of human existence,' so that what being human actually means can only be determined by him").

⁹² Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 340.

see the patristic influences on Scheeben's thought (God became man that man might become God). This patristic (and biblical) focus on the Incarnation shapes his approach to the nature–grace question, supplementing the Scholastic elements of his account and providing the basis for a more robust “intrinsicism” than that of a mere fittingness between nature and grace. Grace is intrinsic to concrete human nature, because the Incarnation has elevated human nature, though without altering its essence. In this regard, his Scholastic approach, combined with his emphasis on the biblical category of divine adoption, allows him to maintain the utter gratuity of grace. By locating the “intrinsicism” of grace in the Incarnation rather than in the constitution of human nature, Scheeben can hold together without contradiction what many participants in the nature–grace debates have held apart.⁹³

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⁹³ I am thus in basic agreement with the argument of Swafford, *Nature and Grace*, 195: “The theology of Matthias J. Scheeben is best able to capture the Christian mystery of nature and grace in all its fullness, both in its Christocentric dimension, as well as in regard to the necessary distinction between nature and grace.”