

The Consummation of the World: St. Thomas Aquinas on the Risen Saints' Beatitude and the Corporeal Universe

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IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION, the object of human hope is offered as bodily resurrection from death, and “the life of the world to come.” Implicit in that short phrase from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is that this “life” is understood to be life in communion with God, knowing and loving him without end, for “this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Pope Benedict XII’s encyclical *Benedictus Deus* (1336) states dogmatically that the souls of the saints enter immediately into beatitude—perfect beatitude—constituted essentially by the vision of God “face to face.”¹ God, as the Source of all being, all truth, all goodness, all beauty, perfectly, more than satisfies every human longing.²

Such a conception of the object of our hope may leave one wondering: since God is, indeed, all that one could ever want—which we have no inten-

¹ Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Helmut Hoping (43rd Latin ed. [DH]), English ed. Robert L. Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), nos. 1000–1002, esp. 1000.

² Reinhard Hütter, *Bound for Beatitude: A Thomistic Study in Eschatology and Ethics*, Thomistic Ressourcement 12 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), has recently offered a thoroughly documented, penetrating treatment on God as final end of humanity. The present essay is intended to complement that project, albeit modestly, by fleshing out one aspect related to human finality that is not considered extensively in it.

tion of denying here—what will the rest of creation be for the blessed who partake of the vision? If we are blessed to be counted among those resurrected to glory, what will it matter to us (1) that we will be risen bodily, (2) that others will be there with us, including (3) the angels, and (4) that there is also to be a renewed world, a “new heavens and a new earth”? The first two parts of this question have received a fair amount of attention, including discussions over the relation of bodily resurrection to beatitude, as well as reflections on the eschatological nature of the Church.³ Here, we will limit ourselves to considering the fourth of those parts, namely, how and why we are to look forward to the life of the *world* to come. In this regard, we can ask: is the “world” of the creed merely a shorthand for “the way things will be” after the resurrection? Does it instead mean that the new heavens and new earth are also, in some way, to be awaited, hoped for, by humanity?

Our study will consider the respects in which this latter question can be answered positively, particularly according to the teaching of St. Thomas.⁴ We will consider what precisely the role of non-human material creation may be—that is, of the non-human animal, vegetable, and mineral world—for human beatitude and eternal life, for St Thomas.⁵ In doing so, we will first briefly consider those other questions, particularly regarding the role, in the post-resurrection world, of the body and of other risen human persons, by way of comparison and contrast, in order the

³ How communion with the blessed angels in praising the eternal God might relate to human beatitude may deserve more attention than it has received of late, but that will not be our task here.

⁴ The Latin texts of the works of St. Thomas Aquinas cited in this article are as follows: *Summa theologiae* [ST] is taken from the edition by the Institutum Studiorum Medievalium Ottaviensis (Ottawa: Studium Generale O.P., 1945); *In sententiarum* is taken from vol. 7.2 of the Parma edition (1858); *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG], *De veritate*, *De potentia*, *Super Iob*, and *Compendium theologiae* [CT] all are taken from the Leonine edition; *Super Eph*, *Super Ioan*, and *Super Matt* are all taken from the Marietti edition. English translations of ST, SCG, and CT (modified, in some cases) come from, respectively: the ST translation by the Dominican Fathers of the English Province; *Summa contra Gentiles: Book Four: Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O’Neil with introduction and notes (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012 [orig. 1957]); and *The Compendium of Theology*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1947). All other English translation, unless otherwise attributed, is original to this article.

⁵ The scope of the present study allows us to explicate only cursorily the role of heavenly bodies relative to final human beatitude. On the celestial bodies in St. Thomas’s work, see Thomas Litt, *Les corps célestes dans l’univers de saint Thomas d’Aquin*, *Philosophes médiévaux* 7 (Louvain: Publications Universitaires; Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1963).

better to illuminate Thomas's teaching. What I intend to argue is that Thomas teaches that the eschatologically transformed, non-human material creation does not contribute to the beatitude of the saints, although it does offer them something, namely, the conditions of their existence, as well as an enjoyment of that creation as a kind of expression of the glory of God. I will also argue that—perhaps surprisingly—this does not derogate from the dignity of material creation but should instead further our appreciation to God for providing it.

It is evident why such questions should be worthy of attention, for anyone interested in the faith—whether because they share that faith or because they want to know how those sharing it might address them. After all, the world that God created is believed to be “very good” (Gen 1), the very place in which God has placed us, upon whose creatures we depend for life itself. Furthermore, the creatures in the world provide us innumerable indications of him and his goodness constantly. That there will be a “new heavens and new earth” (2 Pet 3:10–13, Rev 21:1) is a matter of faith and also an indication of God's regard for his own creation—it will not be left behind in the world to come, but will come to its own perfection. This perfection or finality of the world, with its nearly endless and wondrous variety of creatures, and its relation to our own finality, should always be of at least some interest to us.

Beyond such a general and perennial interest, there are also certain recent developments in reflection upon the faith and matters allied to it that indicate that these questions are particularly timely. One of them would be (1) the increasing attention paid globally toward care for the environment, and the need for persons of faith and the Church as a body to contribute to that care in way consistent with and even animated by that faith. This can be seen in the relatively recent development of more extensive teachings by the magisterium on the question of the eschatological fate of material creatures. While the official teaching office of the Church had not pronounced much of moment on the topic before the Second Vatican Council, certain teachings from two of the four most prominent documents from the Council itself, in addressing matters of the end, briefly consider the final renewal of the heavens and the earth.⁶

⁶ See Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, §§5–112, esp. §48, and *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, §§1025–120, esp. §§38–39; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§1042–44, 1046–50, and 1060, and Nathan W. O'Halloran, “‘Each Creature, Resplendently Transfigured’: Development of Teaching in *Laudato Si'*,” *Theological Studies* 79, no. 2 (2018): 376–98, esp. 379–91.

Even more recently, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical on care for creation, offered certain reflections on the final end of non-human material creation, suggesting possibilities for further theological consideration and development. While a cursory reading of the document might suggest that it has little to say about creation's final end, there are a few passages that are readily construed as eschatological (§§83, 99–100, 237–44). And parts of those few passages are suggestive for a theological consideration of the ultimate fate of animal, plant, and mineral beings. One states that “all creatures are moving forward with us and through us” towards God (§83), while another notes that “the Son will deliver all things to the Father” at the end of time, even mentioning in that context the very flowers and birds that Christ saw while on earth (§100; citing Col 1:19–20 and 1 Cor 15:28).⁷ While these teachings are not presented as dogmatic definitions, they nevertheless invite theologians to consider the final fate of material creatures more deeply.⁸

Another set of relevant discussions would be (2) efforts to re-think what constitutes human eschatological fulfillment, with some proposals leaving aside the possibility of any beatific vision and suggesting that it would rather be an endless passing from one fulfillment of desire to another, one action to another, each surpassing the last in an ever-increasing passage from glory to glory, forever. Others question whether such construals of the ultimate end of human persons really allow for the attainment of an eternal life that can properly be considered ontologically perfective, final, and deifying—as truly uniting the blessed with the one God.⁹ Clarifying

⁷ See O'Halloran, “Each Creature, Resplendently Transfigured,” 392–98, who considers Pope Francis's encyclical “an important new development in the teaching on New Creation,” representing “a significant development in the church's eschatological teaching” (377–78). See also: Anthony J. Kelly, “Eschatology and Hope for Nature,” *Pacifica* 28, no. 3 (2015): 256–71; Stephen N. Williams, “*Laudato Si'* and the Environmental Imperative: A Compelling Theology for our Times?,” *European Journal of Theology* 28, no. 2 (2019): 144–53, esp. 149.

⁸ For some recent theological speculation on the ultimate destiny of non-human creatures, barely predating *Laudato Si'*, see Paul J. Griffiths, *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

⁹ It would be outside the scope of the present paper to enter into an evaluation of such efforts or their reception. Briefly, we will mention in particular Hütter, *Bound for Beatitude*, 416–25, which discusses and critiques (apty, in my opinion) the proposal of Germain Grisez that the final end of humanity should be considered the Kingdom of God, rather than God himself; see Grisez, “The True Ultimate End of Human Beings: The Kingdom, Not God,” *Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (2008): 38–61. Hütter notes briefly that such proposals are not unique to Grisez but are “encountered widely in contemporary Protestant, and especially Evangeli-

Thomas's position on the role of created material things in human beatitude can contribute in an ancillary way to such considerations, showing where Aquinas's teachings give a proper place to some kind of human participation in a renewed creation without denying the primacy of man's close relation to God for his happiness. Thus, the present article is relevant to at least these two sets of discussions and reflections of current interest.¹⁰

Our work will proceed as follows. Having introduced our topic, we will offer in the next section a brief overview of some relevant texts by the Common Doctor on our theme of how material creatures can or cannot contribute to the final beatitude of risen human persons. We will note his rather consistent position that such creatures will not contribute to human beatitude in the new heavens and earth, after the resurrection, but that they will nevertheless have a role in the eternal life of those raised to glory. The section will conclude with a consideration of how to interpret Thomas's teaching in a way that allows it to be rightly received in the face of our antecedent expectations and academic habituations—emphases in previous considerations of the question that may help us see some things and miss others. In our conclusion, we will discuss how these interpretations might offer some resources for the discussions we just mentioned above.

cal theology" (*Bound for Beatitude*, 422n54), mentioning N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). See also J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

¹⁰ Of relevance also is a third current area of inquiry—albeit more tangentially related—which concerns the nature of Christ's causality of the beatific vision, including how Thomas considered it, or might consider it, in view of the overall structure and content of his thought. Essentially, the question concerns whether, in Aquinas's account, Christ has any ongoing role in any given saint's beatific vision. For Thomas, is Christ merely a kind of "means" for the saints to arrive at the end of seeing God himself, after which the humanity of Christ (at least) is no longer needed? See Hans Boersma, "Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision: A Christological Deficit," *TheoLogica* 2, no. 2 (2018): 129–47; Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018); Simon Gaine, "Thomas Aquinas, the Beatific Vision and the Role of Christ: A Reply to Hans Boersma," *TheoLogica* 2, no. 2 (2018): 148–67; Gaine, "Thomas Aquinas and John Owen on the Beatific Vision: A Reply to Suzanne McDonald," *New Blackfriars* 97, no. 1070 (2016): 432–46; Gaine, "The Beatific Vision and the Heavenly Mediation of Christ," *TheoLogica* 2, no. 2 (2018): 116–28; and Michael Root, "The Christological Character of the Beatific Vision: Hans Boersma's *Seeing God*," *The Thomist* 84 (2020): 127–51.

Thomas's Teaching

We will look first at the section of St. Thomas's writing that is best known, and rightly so, for its consideration of human beatitude: the first five questions of the *prima secundae* of the *Summa theologiae* [ST], his mature work of (and on) *sacra doctrina*, a work both systematic and unfinished (lacking, alas, a section planned on the end, including general resurrection, judgment, and the like). In that section on beatitude, Thomas states that ultimate human beatitude, which comes to those who love God, consists solely in the intellectual vision of the divine essence (not by bodily eyes), which is an operation of the intellect, resulting in delight in the will. The souls of the saints are introduced to this beatific vision immediately upon death, and it continues after the common resurrection at the end of the world, at which time the renewal of the world will also occur.

Now, as we mentioned in our introduction, it will be instructive for our purposes to consider also what Thomas says about the potential contribution to a risen saint's happiness by the saint's own risen body and by interaction/communion with other blessed, risen human persons. Regarding the risen body, we may wonder what it might contribute to a beatitude that the human soul has already reached, because Thomas clearly states that souls need not await the resurrection for perfect beatitude.¹¹ Citing St. Paul (2 Cor 5:6–8; Phil 1:21–23), he states that “the souls of the saints, separated from their bodies, are in God's presence.”¹² He also claims this is evident also by appeal to reason, since “the intellect does not need the body for its operation except on account of the phantasms, wherein it looks on the intelligible truth,” and that “the Divine Essence cannot be seen by means of phantasms.” Thus “since man's perfect Happiness consists in the vision of the Divine Essence, it does not depend on the body.” Nevertheless, the body does contribute to beatitude, in a certain way:

Something may belong to a thing's perfection in two ways. First, as constituting the essence thereof; thus the soul is necessary for man's perfection. Secondly, as necessary for its well-being: thus, beauty of body and keenness of perception belong to man's perfection. Wherefore though the body does not belong in the first way to the perfection of human Happiness, yet it does in the second way.¹³

¹¹ When we speak of final human beatitude as perfect, we are not suggesting a beatitude perfect in itself (which would be proper to God), but perfect for man. See: *In II sent.*, d. 1, q. 2, a. 2, ad 4; *ST I*, q. 26, aa. 1 and 4.

¹² *ST I-II*, q. 4, a. 5, corp.

¹³ *ST I-II*, q. 4, a. 5, corp.: “Ad perfectionem alicuius rei dupliciter aliquid pertinet.

The body is not necessary to the essence of beatitude, but to its well-being or *bene esse*, the way, as Thomas says, a horse is needed for a journey: not absolutely needed, but needed according to some consideration:

Something is said to be necessary with respect to an end in two senses. In one sense, as that without which an end cannot exist, as food is necessary for human life. And this is unqualifiedly necessary for the end. In the other sense, that without which the end is not so fittingly attained is called something necessary, as is a horse for a journey. But this is not, simply speaking, necessary for the end.¹⁴

Thus, for a resurrected saint, that saint's own risen and glorified body belongs in some way to his or her beatitude, but not as an essential element of it (although the body is an essential element of the risen saint's humanity)—in Thomas's mature view, as seen here.¹⁵ Thomas says something similar about the fellowship of friends in this beatitude, this state of glory. He states that "the fellowship of friends is not essential" to this ultimate happiness, since "man has the entire fullness of his perfection in God. But the fellowship of friends conduces to the well-being of Happiness."¹⁶ Notice that this fellowship of friends makes a real contribution to this ultimate human happiness, being positively part of it, but not necessary to it.

Uno modo, ad constituendam essentiam rei, sicut anima requiritur ad perfectionem hominis. Alio modo requiritur ad perfectionem rei quod pertinet ad bene esse eius, sicut pulchritudo corporis, et velocitas ingenii pertinet ad perfectionem hominis. Quamvis ergo corpus primo modo ad perfectionem beatitudinis humanae non pertineat, pertinet tamen secundo modo."

¹⁴ *ST* III, q. 65, a. 4, corp.: "Necessarium respectu finis . . . dicitur aliquid dupliciter. Uno modo, sine quo non potest esse finis, sicut cibus est necessarius vitae humanae. Et hoc est simpliciter necessarium ad finem. Alio modo dicitur esse necessarium id sine quo non habetur finis ita convenienter, sicut equus necessarius est ad iter. Hoc autem non est simpliciter necessarium ad finem."

¹⁵ It is well known that Thomas's teaching on this point seems to have undergone a development. In one of his earliest works, he taught that the separated soul's beatitude would increase both extensively and intensively after the addition of the body (at the glorious resurrection). See: *In IV sent.*, d. 49, q. 1, a. 4, qa. 1, corp. and ad 4, esp. in contrast with *ST* I-II, q. 4, a. 5, ad 5. See also Bryan Kromholtz, *On the Last Day: The Time of the Resurrection of the Dead according to Thomas Aquinas*, Studia Friburgensia 110 (Fribourg, Switzerland: Academic Press Fribourg, 2010), 472–82.

¹⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 4, a. 8, corp.: "Si loquamur de perfecta beatitudine quae erit in patria, non requiritur societas amicorum de necessitate ad beatitudinem, quia homo habet totam plenitudinem suae perfectionis in Deo. Sed ad bene esse beatitudinis facit societas amicorum."

There is a notable contrast when Thomas takes up the question as to whether “external goods,” such as “food and drink, wealth and a kingdom” (*ST* I-II, q. 4, a. 7, obj. 1), are necessary for perfect happiness:

Such goods as these are in no way [*nullo modo huiusmodi*] necessary for perfect Happiness, which consists in the vision of God. The reason for this is that all such external goods are required either for the support of the animal body, or for certain operations that belong to human life, which we perform by means of the animal body: whereas that perfect happiness which consists in seeing God, will be either in the soul separated from the body, or in the soul united to the body then no longer animal but spiritual. Consequently, these external goods are in no way [*nullo modo huiusmodi*] necessary for that Happiness, since they are ordained to the animal life.¹⁷

We ought to take note when Thomas makes a strong denial. Such does not happen so often, but here it is—twice. Unlike the fellowship of friends, and unlike the perfection of one’s own body, which is part of one’s own nature, external goods are not to be necessary in any way to beatitude, because they are necessary only for animal-level operations. They are not needed in any way for helping one participate in knowing God, whether as a separated soul or as a risen human person, along with other risen persons.

However, let us notice also what St. Thomas does *not* say. He does *not* say that the risen man *cannot* look at, or consider, or do something with such external goods. And he does not say that there will be no positive relation between risen man and the new heavens and new earth. So, we will now consider some texts where Thomas says that the risen man may look upon the transformed world, and some where he states that there is a close relation between the two. To do this, it is helpful to review, all too briefly, how Thomas sees the relation between man and the non-human material world.

Thomas holds that all bodily creatures, including heavenly bodies, were

¹⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 4, a. 7, corp.: “Ad beatitudinem perfectam, quae in visione Dei consistit, nullo modo huiusmodi bona requiruntur. Cuius ratio est quia omnia huiusmodi bona exteriora vel requiruntur ad sustentationem animalis corporis; vel requiruntur ad aliquas operationes quas per animale corpus exercemus, quae humanae vitae conveniunt. Illa autem perfecta beatitudo quae in visione Dei consistit, vel erit in anima sine corpore; vel erit in anima corpori unita non iam animali, sed spirituali. Et ideo nullo modo huiusmodi exteriora bona requiruntur ad illam beatitudinem, cum ordinentur ad vitam animalem.”

made for the sake of man.¹⁸ This anthropocentric aspect of his cosmology is found within an even more fundamental theo-centrism, since it is God who orders “lower things through higher ones,” including ordering “bodily things through spiritual ones.”¹⁹ Yet even as human persons are subject in a bodily way to the heavenly bodies (which themselves are believed to be of a higher kind of material), they share in governance due to their intellectual nature.²⁰ Though they are subject to heavenly motion, that motion is for the sake of humanity, a motion that is ultimately directed by God.²¹

In this light, Thomas considers, then, in his commentary on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, what corporeal beings, which were made for human beings, can do for risen and *glorified* human persons:

All bodily things are believed to have been made for man; hence all things are said to be subject to him. Now they perform services of two kinds for him. One is for the sustenance of his bodily life; the other is for the advancement of his knowledge of God, inasmuch as man perceives the invisible things of God through the things that are made, as is said in Romans 1. Now glorified man will not need the first of these services of creatures in any way, since his future body will be incorruptible in every way, because the divine power will make it that way through the soul, which it glorifies immedi-

¹⁸ See: *In II sent.*, d. 1, q. 2, a. 3; *In IV sent.*, d. 47, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 1, corp.; d. 48, q. 2, a. 2, ad 8; a. 3, ad 3 ad 6; a. 4, corp.; *SCG IV*, ch. 97, no. 1; *De veritate*, q. 5, a. 9, obj. 13; *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 9, corp.; *CT I*, ch. 148; *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 5 (no. 940); on John 6:44b); *Super Eph* 1, lec. 3 (no. 29; on Eph 1:10); *ST I-II*, q. 2, a. 1, corp. See also *ST I*, q. 73, a. 1, corp., which says that the perfect beatitude of the saints is the purpose of the entire universe; and Kromholtz, *On the Last Day*, 152–64. See also Emmanuel Cazanave, “L’Église et le bien de l’univers: une lecture de la *Summa contra Gentiles*,” *Revue Thomiste* 120 (2020): 309–30.

¹⁹ *SCG III*, ch. 83, nos. 2–3. For Thomas, the end of all things (including man) is the divine goodness; see *In II sent.*, d. 1, q. 2, a. 2; *ST I*, q. 65, a. 2. See also: *In IV sent.*, d. 48, q. 2, a. 3, ad 6; *SCG III*, ch. 17, no. 2; *De veritate*, q. 5, a. 9, ad 13; *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 4, corp.; *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 8, corp.

²⁰ *SCG III*, ch. 78, nos. 1 and 5.

²¹ See *De veritate*, q. 5, a. 9. For Thomas, there is a more fundamental theo-centrism that goes beyond the anthropocentric aspect present in his understanding of creation. All creatures are ordered *by* God, *to* God. It has been noted that in this way, Thomas (like Bonaventure) attenuated an exaggerated anthropocentrism found in Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*. See Richard Schenk, “Der Mensch—die Dornenkrone der Schöpfung? Umweltzerstörung aus theologischer Sicht,” in *Nachhaltigkeit in der Ökologie: Wege in eine zukunftsfähige Welt*, ed. Luca Di Blasi, Bernd Goebel, and Vittorio Hösle (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2001), 151–74, 276–82 (notes), esp. 165–68.

ately. Man does not need the second service either, so far as his intellectual knowledge is concerned, because the saints will see God with such knowledge immediately according to his essence. But the eye of the body will not be able to attain this vision of essence; and thus, so that it may be provided with the comfort of the vision of God that is fitting to it, it will observe the Godhead in its corporeal effects, in which indications of the divine majesty will appear clearly, primarily in the flesh of Christ, and then also in the bodies of the blessed, and finally in all other bodies. Thus even these other bodies ought to receive a greater influx from the divine goodness, not changing their species but adding the perfection of a certain glory; and this will be the renewal of the world. Thus, at the same time, the world will be renewed and man will be glorified.²²

Somehow, in this text, we see how corporeal things—renewed by God—can serve risen, glorified human persons: comforting the bodily eye, in a way proportioned to it, so that they may participate in perceiving God, not only through seeing Christ and the saints bodily, but also by seeing the world.²³ In the same article, the final objection effectively asserts that since non-sensate creatures will not have merited anything, they ought not be

²² *In IV sent.*, d. 48, q. 2, a. 1, corp.: “Omnia corporalia propter hominem facta esse creduntur; unde et omnia dicuntur ei esse subjecta. Serviunt autem ei dupliciter. Uno modo ad sustentationem vitae corporalis; alio modo ad profectum divinae cognitionis, inquantum homo per ea quae facta sunt, invisibilia Dei conspicit, ut dicitur Rom. I [Rom 1:20]. Primo ergo ministerio creaturarum, homo glorificatus nullo modo indigebit, cum eius corpus omnino incorruptibile sit futurum, virtute divina id faciente per animam, quam immediate glorificat. Secundo etiam ministerio non indigebit homo quantum ad cognitionem intellectivam; quia tali cognitione Deum sancti videbunt immediate per essentiam. Sed ad hanc visionem essentiae oculus carnis attingere non poterit; et ideo, ut ei solatium congruens sibi de visione Divinitatis praebeatur, inspiciet Divinitatem in suis effectibus corporalibus, in quibus manifeste indicia divinae majestatis apparebunt, et praecipue in carne Christi; et post hoc in corporibus beatorum; et deinceps in omnibus aliis corporibus; et ideo oportebit ut etiam alia corpora maiorem influentiam a divina bonitate suscipiant; non tamen speciem variantem, sed addentem cujusdam gloriae perfectionem; et haec erit mundi innovatio; unde simul mundus innovabitur, et homo glorificabitur.”

²³ See also: *In IV sent.*, d. 44, q. 2, a. 3, qa. 2, corp.; d. 49, q. 2, a. 2, corp. and ad 6; *Super Matt* 5, lec. 2 (no. 434; on Matt 5:8). In *Super Iob* 19. Thomas gives the end of Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* as a source for this notion (Leonine ed., 26:117, lns. 302–34, esp. 327–31; on Job 19:26–27). See Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 22.29, in *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1171–78.

renewed. The response is particularly relevant, helping show how the world can serve humanity in the next life:

Although non-sensate bodies will not have merited that glory, properly speaking, man will have merited in such a way that this glory will be bestowed on the whole universe, insofar as this results in an increase of man's glory, just as a man merits being clothed with more richly adorned clothing, whereas the clothing in no way merits the adornment.²⁴

We can notice how closely this places the renewed world in association with risen humans. Of the many possessions that might have been discussed, clothing in particular is the possession in this life that is most closely identified with humans and is literally closest to the body. Accordingly, the type and appearance of clothing worn symbolizes the identity of the wearer. Thomas is saying that the transformed world is like transformed clothing for a glorified humanity. For risen persons, the world ought to "suit" them; it ought to "fit" them, like good clothing does. And notice that it is men that may *merit* (through Christ) the renewal of the world, which shows in yet another way the close relation of humans to the world: the very effects of their salvation and glorification are to extend beyond their persons to the world.²⁵ The glorification of the world happens in response to the glorification of humanity and for the sake of humanity. We can see something similar in a passage from the end of the *Summa contra gentiles*, which notes that "because the bodily creation will in the end be ordered to be in harmony with the state of man, since men, of course, will not only be freed from corruption, but also clothed with glory . . . it must be that even the bodily creation will achieve a kind of radiance of glory in its own way."²⁶ Because of the change that happens to humanity, the world is to be

²⁴ *In IV sent.*, d. 48, q. 2, a. 1, ad 5: "Quamvis corpora insensibilia non meruerint illam gloriam, proprie loquendo; homo tamen meruit ut illa gloria toti universo conferretur, inquantum hoc cedit in augmentum gloriae hominis; sicut aliquis homo meretur ut ornatoribus vestibus induatur, quem tamen ornatum nullo modo ipsa vestis meretur."

²⁵ Elsewhere, Thomas says that the elements of the world will be given "radiance" (*claritas*) when they are renewed at the end of the world, because the elements composing the human body will be glorified (*In IV sent.*, d. 48, q. 2, a. 4, sc 3).

²⁶ *SCG IV*, ch. 97, no. 7: "Quia igitur creatura corporalis finaliter disponetur per congruentiam ad hominis statum; homines autem non solum a corruptione liberabuntur, sed etiam gloria induentur, . . . oportebit quod etiam creatura corporalis quandam claritatis gloriam suo modo consequatur."

changed also, in order to be “in harmony with the state of man.” Similarly, in the *Compendium theologiae*, we have a text indicating the ordering of things to man:

But the four elements—namely, fire, air, water and earth—are ordered toward man not only regarding the utility of corruptible life, but also regarding the composition of his body, for the human body is made up of these elements. Thus, the elements have an essential ordination to the human body. Hence when man reaches his consummation in body and soul, it is fitting that the elements remain also, but changed to a better disposition.²⁷

Here, Thomas says that it is fitting that the elements remain because they will be included in the composition of humans. It is not asserted that they must remain *only* within human bodies, but that it is fitting, appropriate that those elements themselves be renewed. Of course, Thomas holds that the elements will indeed compose the risen human body.²⁸ Yet their renewal is to occur for both the parts that compose human bodies and those that do not. In the same chapter of the *Compendium*, then, the Angelic Doctor goes on to consider whether, in the renewed world when man is in the state of perfection, the material world can offer indications of God, or will need to do so:

In that state of perfection man is not led to the knowledge of God by a consideration of sensible creatures, since he sees God in himself; it is nevertheless enjoyable and pleasant for one who knows the cause to consider how its likeness shines forth in the effect. Thus, it will give joy to the saints to consider the refulgence of the divine goodness reflected in bodies, and particularly the celestial bodies, which appear to have a preeminence over other bodies. Heavenly bodies also have an essential ordination in a certain manner toward the human body under the aspect of efficient causality, just as the

²⁷ CTI, ch. 170: “Quatuor vero elementa, scilicet ignis, aer, aqua et terra, ordinantur ad hominem non solum quantum ad usum corruptibilis vitae, sed etiam quantum ad constitutionem corporis eius: nam corpus humanum ex elementis constitutum est. Sic igitur essentialem ordinem habent elementa ad corpus humanum; unde homine consummato in corpore et anima, conveniens est ut etiam elementa remaneant, sed in meliorem dispositionem mutata.”

²⁸ In IV sent., d. 44, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 1; d. 47, q. 2, a. 1, qa. 1; a. 2, qa. 2–3; a. 3, qa. 2, ad 3; d. 48, q. 2, a. 4, sc 3; *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 7, corp., ad 9 and ad 10; a. 8, obj. 8; a. 9, ad 9; a. 10, corp. and ad 7. See also ST III, q. 54, a. 2, ad 2.

elements have under the aspect of material causality: “for man—and the sun, also—generates man”: thus, for this reason also, it is fitting that the heavenly bodies remain in existence.²⁹

Yes, bodily creatures can and will continue to manifest their Creator, in some way, as his effects—although human persons will not need them for that service. Even though risen persons will have the direct vision of God in himself, without the help of the indications of God available through sensible creatures, it will be “delightful” and “pleasing” (*delectabile* and *iucundum*) to them to see God in his creatures. The direct vision of God, although perfect, does not exclude other possible kinds of perception of him, nor does it exclude taking a kind of joy in that lesser form of consideration of God.³⁰

That part of the *Compendium* then goes on to mention another way in which the universe relates to man, although it also offers a reason why the universe should continue in itself:

Since man is a part of the corporeal universe, it must remain when man is brought to his final consummation; for a part does not seem complete if it should exist without the whole. Now the corporeal universe cannot remain in existence unless its essential parts remain. Yet its essential parts are the heavenly bodies and the elements, such

²⁹ CT I, ch. 170: “In statu perfectionis illius homo ex creaturis sensibilibus in Dei notitiam non adducatur, cum Deum videat in se ipso, tamen delectabile est et iucundum etiam cognoscenti causam, considerare qualiter eius similitudo resplendet in effectu: unde et sanctis cedit ad gaudium considerare refulgentiam divinae bonitatis in corporibus, et praecipue caelestibus, quae aliis praeminere videntur. Habent etiam corpora caelestia essentialem quodam modo ordinem ad corpus humanum secundum rationem causae agentis, sicut elementa rationem causae materialis: ‘Homo enim generat hominem et sol’; unde et hac etiam ratione convenit etiam corpora caelestia remanere.” The quotation is from Aristotle, *Physica* 2.4.194b13.

³⁰ The “joy” that such sensible perception of God’s creatures might afford, coexisting with the beatific vision but distinct from it, would likely fall under the category of those delights that follow human reason but do not arise from nature; see *ST* I-II, q. 31, a. 3, corp. That the risen saints’ beatific vision would not interfere with certain natural human operations such as natural human reason and sensation — and vice versa—is held throughout Thomas’s work, consistent with his view that not only grace but even glory does not destroy nature, but elevates it and perfects it. See: *In IV sent.*; d. 49, q. 2, a. 3, ad 8; *ST* II-II, q. 26, a. 13, sc. On angels’ nature, see *ST* I, q. 62, a. 7, sc, corp., and ad 1. I thank Matthew Ramage for prompting me to offer some clarification on this point.

that the whole world system is made up of them; but other bodies do not appear to pertain to the integrity of the corporeal universe, but are rather for its adornment and beauty, which is fitting to its changeable state in the sense that, with a heavenly body acting as efficient cause and with the elements as material causes, animals and plants and mineral bodies are generated. But in the state of final consummation another kind of adornment will be given to the elements that suits their condition of incorruption. Accordingly, in that state, men, the elements, and the heavenly bodies will remain, but not animals or plants or mineral bodies.³¹

Since human persons are a part of the universe, the universe must remain if human persons are to be raised. Yet the completeness of the universe itself is also invoked. For the world to continue to exist, it must have all its essential parts, including the heavenly bodies and the elements.³²

We can now summarize what we have reviewed. Though the body and the fellowship of friends can each conduce to the well-being (*bene esse*) of final human happiness, external goods are in no way (*nullo modo huiusmodi*) necessary for that perfect happiness. Yet after the general resurrection, the bodily eye of the risen person will observe the Godhead in its corporeal effects. Furthermore, man will have merited in such a way that this glory will be bestowed on the whole universe, insofar as this results in an increase of man's glory. Bodily creation will in the end be ordered to achieve a kind of radiance of glory. The elements will be changed to a better disposition. It will give joy to the saints to consider the refulgence of the divine goodness reflected in bodies, and particularly the celestial bodies.³³

³¹ *CT* I, ch. 170: "Cum enim homo pars sit universi corporei, in ultima hominis consummatione necesse est universum corporeum remanere; non enim videtur esse pars perfecta si fuerit sine toto. Universum autem corporeum remanere non potest nisi partes essentielles eius remaneant. Sunt autem partes essentielles eius corpora caelestia et elementa, utpote ex quibus tota mundialis machina consistit; cetera vero ad integritatem corporei universi pertinere non videntur, sed magis ad quendam ornatum et decorem ipsius qui competit statui mutabilitatis, secundum quod ex corpore caelesti ut agente, et elementis ut materialibus, generantur animalia et plantae et corpora mineralia. In statu autem ultimae consummationis alius ornatus elementis attribuetur qui deceat incorruptionis statum. Remanebunt igitur in illo statu homines et elementa et corpora caelestia, non autem animalia et plantae et corpora mineralia."

³² One aspect of Thomas's teaching on the "new earth" that we will not be able to address here is his position that plants and non-rational animals will have no place in it.

³³ We noted above that that the *Summa theologiae* remained unfinished—notably,

Since man is a part of the corporeal universe, it must remain when man is brought to his final consummation; and the corporeal universe must remain in its essential parts: men, the elements, and the heavenly bodies.

What must be noticed is the sharp denial by the mature Thomas of any contribution of external goods toward ultimate happiness. Thomas is insistent that it is not through lower things that human fulfillment can come. Yet there are ways in which there is a relation of the world to human beatitude. In fact, the relation is reversed from our original question. It is not the case that man attains or enjoys his end through material creatures, but rather that the material world somehow reaches *its* end, a higher state for itself, through man having reached his. Because the just have been raised and glorified, the creation, too, shares in that renewal and in its way shares in a radiance of glory. Human persons do not depend on mere material creatures for their beatific operation; rather, the world, in some lesser way, participates in human beatitude—or even receives its own perfection in its own way, for all things are ultimately made by God and for God.

This means that the material creation of which we are speaking, on Thomas's view, is not to be considered merely as a means by which humans reach their end, but also as having a more limited but real creaturely participation in final perfection. In places, Thomas speaks of glory as a kind of "overflowing" from the soul to the body (and not vice versa).³⁴ Similarly—extrapolating, as it were—we might say that it is consistent with Thomas's thought to suggest a kind of overflow to the material creation from man, coming down the hierarchy of being. Yet there is also on occasion room for considering material creation as having its share in final perfection in its own right, directly from God.

Implications for Some Current Discussions

It is this nuanced and potentially varied consideration of the relation between the material universe and risen and glorified man that may make some contribution to the kinds of discussions considered early in this presentation. The effort in *Laudato Si'* to bring a theological consideration of ecology to that of the common good (such that the natural moral law is extended to include ecological considerations) could be aided by a further application of the eschatological categories it suggests—aided in particular

finally lacking the planned section on eschatology. This work seems to lack any mention of the possibility of the risen saints' sight of non-human material creation as providing some indication of God or delight to them; however, it does not deny that possibility.

³⁴ *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 3, corp.

by St. Thomas's teaching on the new heavens and new earth. If, as I have said St. Thomas implies, other creatures' eschatological end is in some way dependent on that of the just, this suggests a deeper human responsibility for the world than perhaps is instinctively felt by someone in the Western world, accustomed to use and control of the world, rather than to seek a kind of solidarity with the rest of creation, at least insofar as all creatures look toward a final renewal (Rom 8:19–23). In this, there may be potential for reviving the kind of connection with the divine that a sense for natural law can help foster. Further reflection will be needed on the kind of eschatology that, on the one hand, allows for both an appreciation of creation and an appropriate stewardship of it and yet, on the other hand, opposes both an idolization of that creation and any abusive exploitation of it.

As for those seeking to reimagine the afterlife as including so much more than “merely” the beatific vision of God, they may do well to recognize that the goodness of all creatures need not require them to contribute by necessity to the end of humanity. It may even be possible that the very quality of *not* being necessary for human beatitude can make the promised eschatological renewal of creatures act as a salutary reminder that there is a higher purpose to the ontological universe than serving us—for God himself is that purpose. On the other hand, Thomas's sharp insistence that human happiness cannot be achieved through material creation points us rightly toward the One on whom our attention should be fixed even in this life, and away from any idolization of economics, acquisition, production, or consumption, or the control of goods, whether public or private—without denying the necessity of a proper ordering of worldly affairs in this life.³⁵

For St. Thomas, then, in the glorious resurrection—if, as we pray, we may be a part of it—material creatures will not contribute directly to our union with God, nor even to the fellowship we will have with others in concert with that union, nor in our own integral unity as soul-body creatures. Yet in that renewed heavens and earth, we may engage with what God has created, for all of it will continue to exhibit his wisdom,

³⁵ Discussions over whether Thomas's account of beatific vision is sufficiently Christological, as we mentioned above in note 10, may be enriched by considering how Thomas's teaching allows for the simultaneous operations of various kinds in a single human person: a risen saint can intellectually see (and voluntarily love) God in the beatific vision while also being perfected bodily and being in fellowship with other risen human persons, while perceiving the world with the bodily eye (and even choosing to do things in it), a world that itself is clothed in a radiance due to the just by their merit in and through Christ. What role, for example, would the humanity of Christ play in each of these modes of knowing (and choosing)?

goodness, and beauty. It may not be the case that the new heavens and the new earth are going to help us see the face of the living God. But they may continue to reflect the divine goodness to us, whether this be by reflecting the glory refracted through ourselves by the grace of Christ, or bestowed upon them directly by their Creator. This is something to await with eager expectation.³⁶ N.V

³⁶ A version of this essay was originally delivered as a lecture (remotely via electronic link), under the title “The Consummation of the World: The Beatitude of the Saints and the Corporeal Universe, according to St. Thomas Aquinas,” for the conference “Hope and Death: Christian Responses,” hosted by the Aquinas Center at Ave Maria University, Ave Maria, FL, held February 11–13, 2021. I am grateful to the organizers of the conference and to the editors of *Nova et Vetera* for allowing this arrangement.