

Creation *ad imaginem Dei*: The Obediential Potency of the Human Person to Grace and Glory

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Introduction

THIS ESSAY ATTEMPTS TO SHOW that three things often thought to be opposed—the dynamism, relationality, and teleology of the image of God in man toward grace and glory; a strict distinction between nature and grace; and the doctrine that man has an obediential potency to friendship with God and supernatural beatitude—are not only not opposed but are actually necessarily related elements of a coherent and true theological synthesis.

To do this requires, first, a few words about the immateriality of the rational soul. Second, I will consider St. Thomas's teaching that the *imago dei* in man principally consists in the intellectual nature, describing and responding to criticism of this view as insufficiently relational and separated from grace. Third, I will argue that what constitutes the obediential potency for grace and glory in man is in fact what principally constitutes the *imago dei*—namely, the intellectual nature itself. Here too, I will offer brief responses to criticisms reducing obediential potency merely to miraculous transformation or asserting that intrinsically supernatural beatitude is already the natural end, that man has a strongly unconditional natural desire for supernatural beatitude and, so, there is no need for an obediential potency for grace and glory. Finally, I will conclude by observing that St. Thomas's theological synthesis of nature and grace provides the strongest possible foundation for the relational dynamism of the *imago dei* in man and that this synthesis establishes simultaneously the initial dignity of man as capable of natural and supernatural good and

the greater perfection of acquired dignity that consists in achieving such good.

This is a quick march through a vast territory, rather than a complete account of any one point, and so it is more like a cavalry ride around the field of battle than like a complete campaign. But I hope my remarks may at least indicate the elements that enter into Thomas's account and how they are generally interrelated.

The Positive Immateriality of the Rational Soul

It has always been true that materialism as such constitutes one of the errors simply incompatible with Roman Catholic faith. It is defined Catholic teaching that the soul is spiritual and immortal and that God is pure spirit.

Likewise, it is progressively clearer throughout the modern epoch that the metaphysical reliance on material evolution as sufficient to explain the differentiated forms of being—and in particular to explain the cognitive and volitional aspects of human life—is incoherent. The argument against any type of thoroughgoing materialism certainly has a foundation in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, but it traces back to classical Greek philosophy and has been articulated in varied forms by modern authors such as C. S. Lewis (e.g., in *Miracles*) or contemporaries such as Thomas Nagel (in *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*).

Were intellectual objectivity to be considered merely a material accident of evolution, we could have no sufficient warrant for holding the adequation of mind and reality that is required even for the truth of evolutionary theory. This is manifest in many ways. First, for example, is the commonplace argument that intellectual activity proceeds through universal concepts and applies to being as such universally, such that a wholly physicalist account must, by its very nature, somehow square the circle and reduce universality to physical particularity. What is at stake here is not only the universal mode of conceptual knowledge—already something irreducible to physical particularity and, so, irreducible to neurophysiology—but also, and even more critically, the adequation or conformability of mind to being.

As St. Thomas puts it, “as sound is the first audible, being is the first intelligible.”¹ Thus, any denial that being is universally intelligi-

¹ *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I, q. 5, a. 2, resp. Unless otherwise noted, all English translation from the works of Aquinas is my own work done from the Navarre edition of the Latin, from which all Latin quotes are also taken.

ble leaves precisely nothing intelligible, since there is nothing outside of being. The very principle of non-contradiction in its chief and metaphysical formulation—that being is not nonbeing—is, according to St. Thomas, the basis for the logical principle of non-contradiction that one does not speak meaningfully in simultaneously affirming and denying the same of the same (*Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 94, a. 2). In referring to the logical principle of non-contradiction, he adds “quod fundatur supra rationem entis et non entis” (“which is based on the nature of being and non-being”). This is a universal principle pertaining to being as such, and if it were not, then fundamentally there could be no such thing as objectivity because the mind would have no root capacity to conform to what is the case. But the capacity to conform to any physical structure or state of affairs is not itself merely a physical structure or state of affairs. The capacity universally to conform to what is the case cannot be reduced to a particular or set of particulars in space and time. As Thomas argues, the perfection of intellectual knowledge exists in inverse *ratio* to materiality.²

Without the immaterial capacity of human intention to extend

² As Thomas puts it in *ST* I, q. 84, a. 2, resp.: “Relinquitur ergo quod oportet materialia cognita in cognoscente existere non materialiter, sed magis immaterialiter. Et huius ratio est, quia actus cognitionis se extendit ad ea quae sunt extra cognoscentem, cognoscimus enim etiam ea quae extra nos sunt. Per materiam autem determinatur forma rei ad aliquid unum. Unde manifestum est quod ratio cognitionis ex opposito se habet ad rationem materialitatis. Et ideo quae non recipiunt formas nisi materialiter, nullo modo sunt cognoscitiva, sicut plantae; ut dicitur in II libro de anima. Quanto autem aliquid immaterialius habet formam rei cognitae, tanto perfectius cognoscit. Unde et intellectus, qui abstrahit speciem non solum a materia, sed etiam a materialibus conditionibus individuantes, perfectius cognoscit quam sensus, qui accipit formam rei cognitae sine materia quidem, sed cum materialibus conditionibus”; “It follows, therefore, that material things known must exist in the knower, not materially, but rather immaterially. And the reason of this is because the act of knowledge extends to things which are outside the knower: for we know even things that are external to us. Now by matter the form of a thing is determined to some one thing. Thus it is clear that knowledge is in inverse ratio of materiality (that the ratio of knowledge of itself is opposed to the ratio of materiality). And consequently things that are not receptive of forms save materially, have no power of knowledge whatever—such as plants, as the Philosopher says (*De anima* 2.12). But the more immaterially a thing has the form of the thing known, the more perfect is its knowledge. Therefore the intellect which abstracts the species not only from matter, but also from the individuating conditions of matter, has more perfect knowledge than the senses, which receive the form of the thing known, without matter indeed, but with material conditions.”

universally to being, to conform to whatever is the case, particular physical states and conditions are mute. Even if the neural activity of the human brain were known by God himself to constitute in itself a perfect map of the universe, this would not constitute human knowledge, since we would never have direct contact with the thing known, only with our own brain states, which accordingly could never adequately be judged as to their capacity to conform to anything beyond—or even including—themselves. Only if man possesses the immaterial capacity intentionally to be what he is not—to conform understanding and judgment directly to real nature—is the problem escaped.

The situation with materialism is as if one were locked from birth in a room whose floor was a topographic map of the state where one lived, but one had no contact of any kind with the outside world: one would be in no position to confirm that the floor really *were* a topographic map or to know its accuracy if it were thought to be one. We are in no position to say that brain states are simply equivalent to knowledge of reality unless we are capable of comparing brain states with reality, which would permit us to judge of the relation between our understanding and the real evidence. This requires a universal capacity transcending brain states and any particular physical nature. In the absence of such a capacity, it is impossible to know adequately even that there *is* such a thing as a state of the brain or that brain states are adequate to model themselves.

The extensive project to reduce intellectual and volitional power and act to neurophysiology is often spoken of as a vast and gradual effort whose outcome in vindicating the fundamentally physical nature of intellectual knowledge as a foregone conclusion. But this appears similar to the likewise vast and gradual project of reducing human moral experience to astrological influence because both projects offer us mere correlations in the place of explanations. But were brain states simply *identical* with the reality of intellectual knowledge, no labor of correlation would be necessary. Things are really identical only when everything true of one is true of the other. But the property of a universal concept is not identical with a physical particular, and more importantly, the power of the mind to conform to universal being, a power that must be universal on pain of implying the impossibility of objectivity, cannot be identical with any neural function. Thoroughgoing materialism or physicalism cannot give a sense to its correlations that is so much as intelligible on its own premises, let

alone adequate to the requirements of theoretical explanation. The immateriality of intellect and will, whose formal objects are universal truth and universal good, is the chief indication of the spirituality of the rational soul.

Imago Dei and Obediential Potency

I have spent so much time on relatively introductory aspects of philosophic anthropology because, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, the *imago dei* in man consists principally in the intellectual nature. It is not accidental that those who deny what is essential to the *imago dei* are poorly situated to appreciate Christian revelation.

Imago Dei and Relationality

Thomas writes (*ST* I, q. 93, a. 8, resp.): “Thus the image of God is found in the soul according as the soul turns to God, or possesses a nature that enables it to turn to God.” He refers to “that in which the image chiefly consists, *that is, the intellectual nature* [my emphasis]” (*ibid.*, a. 3, resp.) and teaches that: “So we find in man a likeness to God by way of an ‘image’ in his mind; but in the other parts of his being by way of a ‘trace’” (*ibid.*, a. 6, resp.). As he puts it more fully:

While in all creatures there is some kind of likeness to God, only in the rational creature is found a likeness of God in the mode of an “image” as is explained above; whereas in other creatures we find a likeness in the mode of a “trace.” But that whereby the rational creature excels other creatures is the intellect or mind. Thus it remains that neither in the rational creature is the image of God to be found except in the mind. But in the other parts the rational creature may possess, we find the likeness of a “trace,” as in other creatures to which, according to such parts, the rational creature can in this way be likened.³

³ *ST* I, q. 93, a. 6, resp.: “Respondeo dicendum quod, cum in omnibus creaturis sit aliquis Dei similitudo, in sola creatura rationali invenitur similitudo Dei per modum imaginis, ut supra dictum est, in aliis autem creaturis per modum vestigii. Id autem in quo creatura rationalis excedit alias creaturas, est intellectus sive mens. Unde relinquitur quod nec in ipsa rationali creatura invenitur Dei imago, nisi secundum mentem. In aliis vero partibus, si quas habet rationalis creatura, invenitur similitudo vestigii; sicut et in ceteris rebus quibus secundum partes huiusmodi assimilatur.”

The *imago* in man is not perfect—for the perfect image is found only in the Divine Word—but rather it is analogical.⁴ As Thomas says, it is like the image of the king stamped in the alien medium of a coin.⁵ For Aquinas, the image of God in man principally consists in the intellectual nature. Although the *imago* of conformity involves the intellect as turning to God and conforming to him, prior to this and foundationally, there is what has come to be called an *imago* of representation (possessed by saint and sinner alike) that is the foundation in human nature rendering such spiritual conformity to be possible—the essentially spiritual nature of the soul: “that in which the image chiefly consists.”

This, however, is only equivocally the direction in which much recent thought about the *imago* has developed. Precisely because of its relational dynamism and teleological ordering to grace and glory, there has been a tendency to consider the image of God in the human person to be first and fundamentally relational, precisely for fear that rooting it in human nature, substance, and being will ineluctably distort and render impossible the genuine further ordering in grace. Such a view of the *imago dei* as foundationally constituted by the intellectual nature—understood in terms of the philosophic analysis of being and substance—has come to be thought of as a distortion of the nature of the person. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in particular has encouraged more focus on the human person as inherently and constitutively relational, in accordance with the understanding of the purely relational character of the divine persons in the Trinity. This view suggests that philosophic conceptions of the person—insofar as they are not rooted in the Trinitarian mystery—are distortive.

Then-Cardinal Ratzinger, in his famous essay “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,”⁶ describes the concept of person as “a product of Christian theology” deriving from two questions: “What is God?” and “Who is Christ?” In this famed essay, he describes the early struggle to avoid depicting Christ as suffering defect inasmuch as he lacked human personhood while possessing human nature and being a divine person. He identifies the great Christological heresies all as modes of implying that Christ *must* have lacked something essentially human. He then writes:

⁴ ST I, q. 93, a. 1, ad 3.

⁵ ST I, q. 93, a. 1, ad 2; a. 6, ad 1.

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, “Zum Personenverständnis in der Theologie,” in *Dogma und Verkündigung* (Munich: Erich Wewel Verlag, 1973); trans. as “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” *Communio* 17.3 (Fall, 1990): 439–54.

I believe that if one follows this struggle in which human reality had to be brought in, as it were, and affirmed for Jesus, one sees what tremendous effort and intellectual transformation lay behind the working out of this concept of person, which was quite foreign in its inner disposition to the Greek and the Latin mind. It is not conceived in substantialist, but as we shall soon see, in existential terms. In this light, Boethius's concept of person, which prevailed in Western philosophy, must be criticized as entirely insufficient. Remaining on the level of the Greek mind, Boethius defined "person" as *naturae rationalis individua substantia*, as the individual substance of a rational nature. One sees that the concept of person stands entirely on the level of substance. This cannot clarify anything about the Trinity or about Christology; it is an affirmation that remains on the level of the Greek mind which thinks in substantialist terms.⁷

The editors of *Communio*, glossing the decided emphasis of then-Cardinal Ratzinger on transferring the relational language of the Trinity to the human person, added to the start of his essay the small descriptive line, "Relativity toward the other constitutes the human person. The human person is the event or being of relativity."⁸

Years ago, I had a very interesting exchanges with Dr. Kenneth Schmitz,⁹ who, perhaps inspired by this tendency of thought articulated by then-Cardinal Ratzinger, undertook to propose an account of the human person framed in language that he admitted St. Thomas reserved exclusively to the divine persons, the language of "subsistent relation."

⁷ Ibid., 448.

⁸ Ibid., 439.

⁹ Cf. my "Reply" in *The Thomist* 61.3 (July 1997), which is my response to Kenneth Schmitz's "Created Receptivity," which in turn had responded to my "Personal Receptivity and Act: A Thomistic Critique," from January of 1997, which had criticized his "The First Principle of Personal Becoming," *The Review of Metaphysics* 47.4 (June, 1994), and also referred to earlier discussion amongst Fr. Norris Clarke, S.J., Dr. David Schindler, and myself in *Communio*. One sees this anthropological thesis (that the human person ought be deemed a "subsistent relation") in Schmitz's *The Texture of Being: Essays in First Philosophy*, ed. Paul O'Herron (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), in the section titled "The Person as Subsistent Relation" (123–26, within chapter 7, "Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete"), in which he admits, "I recognize that this term is privileged by St. Thomas for the divine persons of the Trinity" (ibid., 123n59).

tent relation.” This notion of *person* as a purely relational reality is not unconnected with the related but distinct view that nature as such is so thoroughly related to grace as to be a mere limit concept or dialectical notion providing no normative content for theology distinguishable from grace. Thus, the idea of a natural preamble to faith—the *praeambula fidei*—is often transformed to a knowledge that is intrinsically *postfactum* (“after the fact”) of revelation and grace. We move from the natural order as bearing the impress of the divine wisdom in the eternal law—primordial revelation—to a view of nature as if it were something purely conceptual, designating a possible “space” to be filled with grace but lacking normative content, what elsewhere I have called elsewhere a “vacuole for grace.”¹⁰

Of course, one sees this emptying of the *ens creatum* in the work of Karl Rahner and—at least in his book *The Theology of Karl Barth*—in Hans Urs Von Balthasar, who expressly indicates his approval of Rahner’s idea of nature as merely a residual or limit concept.¹¹ The proposition that nature is not a residual or limit concept, not merely a placeholder for grace, lacking all ontological density, but rather a momentous reality, and moreover a reality manifesting primordial revelation and the eternal law—a *theonomic* or divinely ordered reality—is a philosophic and theological affirmation strongly in tension with this “relationalist” tendency of thought. Either nature, substance, and being are presupposed by grace and revelation or they are not, and either they are to some degree intelligible (even after the Fall) in terms of their proportionate ends in precision from revelation, or they are not. This is *not* to say that revelation cannot cast light upon nature, but only that nature is intelligible. When *Gaudeum*

¹⁰ A “vacuole,” by the way, is not merely a biological term: it is an English term taken in from the French and means a “small vacuum,” although this usage is no longer included in our dictionaries, which are losing thousands of words as our culture reduces its cognitive repertoire and minimalizes its sense of “literacy” (a fit subject for another day).

¹¹ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 299: “Here a few critical comments on Rahner’s position come to mind. Of course, the concept of pure nature as a ‘residual concept’ is both possible and even unavoidable in theology if we want to maintain a real correlative counterpoint to grace and the order of grace. We ourselves have attempted the same thing earlier by fashioning a ‘formal concept of nature’ in the same sense by a kind of subtraction process.” But the idea that nature is an invisible unknown reachable only by “subtracting” grace or through treating nature as a “residual concept” does not rise to the level of the observation that human nature is not sanctifying grace.

et Spes famously describes Christ as revealing man to himself, this is clearly not meant to suggest that, prior to revelation, men confused themselves with porcupines. Rather, Christ the Incarnate Word reveals to man the profundity of which human nature is capable in relation to God, a profundity in divine friendship of which we would be unaware lacking revelation.

Doubtless the philosophic account of the human person is incomplete, precisely insofar as it abstracts from the supernatural destiny of man. Yet, for Thomas, the understanding of man's supernatural destiny presupposes, incorporates, and preserves the truth of the created natural order with its proportionate and proximate ends as distinct from the ultimate and supernatural end.¹² With the overwhelming preponderance of Fathers and Doctors, St. Thomas holds that man is created in grace from the beginning. Yet, he also holds that this creation in grace *presupposes* the ontological subjectivity of the *ens creatum* as specified by proportionate ends, so that within this initial moment of creation, there is, in one specific respect, a priority of created nature.

In any case, the idea that the *imago dei* is constituted in man by his relation to God appears to be demonstrably false. It suggests something that is true—namely, that the *imago dei* is relational and dynamic and that it is providentially ordered to blossom in grace and in glory. But however important relationality is to our understanding of *spirit*, there is something else that is most evidently prior to relationality—namely, *being* and *substance*. Real relation presupposes the realities related. If there is no creature, then there is no real relation of the creature to God. Nonexistent, nonsubstantial creatures do not and cannot have real relations of any kind, much less a real relation to God. If they are to have such real relation to God, they must first be: they must exist and be subjects of being possessed of a certain ontological density. It follows that, whatever relationality the *imago dei* in man has, this relationality is founded upon being and substance and thus can be no substitute for them.

God has no real relation to the creature, inasmuch as God is infinitely perfect and stands in no relation of dependence upon his creation: he is not essentially changed through creation. St. Thomas writes that, considered as *active*, creation designates only the divine nature in itself with a *conceptual* relation to the creature; but consid-

¹² See, e.g., *ST* I, q. 75, a. 7, ad 1. There is a very long list of references one might site.

ered as *passive*, the relation of createdness is a quasi-accident *in* the creature, founded upon the being of the creature as received from God.¹³

Manifestly, something cannot be really in a creature if the creature really does not exist. To have being from another is necessarily to have being. It follows that, since nonexistent beings do not have real relations, it is impossible for the creature to be constituted by its relation to God. Being, substance, and nature are not constituted by their relation to God; they are constituted—caused—*by* God. Without a real created subject of being, there is simply nothing to be related. The being, substantiality, and nature of the creature is thus absolutely presupposed by the creature's relation to God.

Accordingly, we see that mere Greek substantialism has rather more to offer than might at first have met the eye. It is precisely the understanding of being, substance, and nature that is the foundation for the doctrine of the *imago dei* and that renders possible its relational, dynamic, and teleological character. The spiritual nature of the soul, understood as constituting a certain deficient but real analogical image of God in man, is ordered in grace to become the *imago Christi*, and finally the *imago gloriae*, the image of God in the glory of the beatific vision. But does not the natural foundational character of the *imago dei* seal it off from its dynamism and teleology in grace toward

¹³ *In II sent.* d. 1, q. 1, a. 2, ad 4: “Si autem sumatur passive, sic est quoddam accidens in creatura, et sic significat quamdam rem, non quae sit in praedicamento passionis, proprie loquendo, sed quae est in genere relationis, et est quaedam habitudo habentis esse ab alio consequens operationem divinam: et sic non est inconveniens quod sit in ipso creato quod educitur per creationem, sicut in subjecto; sicut filiatio in Petro, inquantum recipit naturam humanam a patre suo, non est prior ipso Petro; sed sequitur actionem et motum, quae sunt priora. Habitudo autem creationis non sequitur motum, sed actionem divinam tantum, quae est prior quam creatura”; “If, however, it is taken passively, then it is a certain accident in the creature and it signifies a certain reality which is not in the category of being passive properly speaking, but is in the category of relation. Creation is a certain relation of having being from another following upon the divine operation. It is, thus, not inappropriate that it be in the created thing, which is brought into being through creation, as in a subject. In the same way, sonship is in Peter insofar as he receives human nature from his father, but [sonship] is not prior to Peter himself, but rather follows upon the action and motion which are prior. The relation of creation, however, does not follow upon motion, but only upon the divine action, which is prior to the creature”; English translation from *Aquinas on Creation*, trans. Stephen Baldner and William Carroll (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1997), 77.

the supernatural end of the beatific vision? The answer is no, because this foundational sense of the *imago dei* is the obediential potency of the human creature for grace and glory.

Imago Dei and Obediential Potency

The doctrine that man has an obediential potency for grace and glory has been severely criticized, and of course complete response to such criticism would require wider scope than this present consideration affords. One may, however, point out the character of the doctrine, its importance within theology, and the evidence that seems to confuse certain principal criticisms.

First, there is the nature of obediential potency. In ad 13 of article 10 of *De virtutibus in communi*, St. Thomas addresses an objection to the effect that acts are of the same genus as their potencies but that creatures, by definition, lack potency for divine acts. However, inasmuch as creatures have different passive potencies in relation to different active agencies, a purely passive obediential potency for acts achievable only with divine aid is intelligible. As St. Thomas writes, “accordingly we say that the whole creation is in a certain potency of obedience, according as the whole creation obeys God to be able to receive in itself whatever God wills.”¹⁴

St. Thomas argues that water and earth have diverse passive potencies in respect of the diverse active agencies of fire, the heavenly bodies, and God.¹⁵ These diverse passive potencies vis-à-vis different active agencies are *partially* rooted in the natures involved. It is important to note that Thomas argues that obediential potency applies to infused virtue:

For just as something is able to be done by water or earth by the power of the heavenly bodies, which cannot be done by the power of fire; something can be done by the active supernatural power that cannot be done by the active natural power; and in this sense we say that in the whole of creation is a kind of obediential power, insofar as every creature obeys God in receiving whatever God wills. Thus from them something is

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 13: “et secundum hoc dicimus quod in tota creatura est quaedam obedientialis potentia, prout tota creatura obedit Deo ad suscipiendum in se quicquid Deus voluerit.”

¹⁵ See *ibid.*

able to be done by the supernatural active power that cannot be done by some active natural power. And according to this, we say, that in every creature there is some potency of obedience, such that every creature obeys God in receiving in itself whatever God wills. Thus then in the soul something is in potency, which is produced and reduced to act by a connatural agent, and in this way the acquired virtues are in potency. In another way something is in potency in the soul that is not produced through being brought forth in act unless through divine power; and in this way are there potencies for infused virtues in the soul.¹⁶

Contrary to Etienne Gilson (in his later work¹⁷) and historically many others (e.g., the Franciscan school), obediential potency is not merely the susceptibility of the creature to miraculous transformation—not merely the capacity of water, under divine agency, to become wine—although this is the lowest type of obediential potency. Were the lowest type of obediential potency the only type, obediential potency could not pertain to the relation of nature to grace. However, *specific* obediential potency is different from mere susceptibility to miraculous transformation because it refers to a specific range of actuation that the active agency of God can bring forth from a nature. One sees this specific obediential potency in *Summa theologiae* III (q. 1, a. 3, ad 3), where Thomas expressly answers an objection regarding the capacity of human nature for the “greatest grace” of union: “It should be said that a double capacity may be

¹⁶ Ibid.: “Sicut enim ex aqua vel terra potest aliquid fieri virtute corporis caelestis, quod non potest fieri virtute ignis; ita ex eis potest aliquid fieri virtute supernaturalis agentis quod non potest fieri virtute alicuius naturalis agentis; et secundum hoc dicimus, quod in tota creatura est quaedam obedientialis potentia, prout tota creatura obedit Deo ad suscipiendum in se quidquid Deus voluerit. Sic igitur et in anima est aliquid in potentia, quod natum est reduci in actum ab agente connaturali; et hoc modo sunt in potentia in ipsa virtutes acquisitae. Alio modo aliquid est in potentia in anima quod non est natum educi in actum nisi per virtutem divinam; et sic sunt in potentia in anima virtutes infusae.”

¹⁷ Cf. *Letters of Etienne Gilson to Henri de Lubac* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 81: “Strictly speaking, it is applicable only to miracles, where nothing in matter either prepares for, expects, or makes the phenomenon possible; in general (your excellent quotes on p. 244), all nature is in a state of potentiality to whatever it may please God to do with it, provided that this is not, in itself, contradictory or impossible.”

found in human nature. One according to the order of the power of nature which is always fulfilled, because He gives to each being according to its natural capacity; another indeed according to the order of divine power, which every creature obeys implicitly. And to this pertains this capacity.”¹⁸

The capacity he speaks of is the capacity of human nature for the grace of union with the divine Person of the Word. If even the hypostatic union is to be understood in terms of obediential potency and as not implying the miraculous transformation of human nature into a different principle, then clearly there is a strong case for the proportionate application of obediential potency with respect to all lesser instances of grace. Although the lower instances of mere miraculous transformation are “common,” the more profound way that a nature can implicitly obey divine power is clearly in regard to that which God alone can bring forth *in* and *from* the nature without changing it. Both the passages indicated above exhibit and share this *ratio*.

God’s power extends to all things, but what he can do with any nature is not merely “change” it substantially and miraculously, but bring forth some other act—to which it has no simply natural potency—from and *through* it without miraculously transforming its nature. The nature is in both the loftier and the inferior instances of obediential potency—both the case of miraculous substantial transformation and of interior elevation to a nobler act without substantial transformation—passive with respect to what is brought about, obeying the divine power. However, in the second case, we see that that to which the subject stands in a relation of obediential potency is brought about in and through it *without altering its nature*—as, for example, with respect to the infused virtues—and is most pertinent to the higher life of grace. Thus, the vastness of the divine power in relation to diverse natures specifies different ways it may operate on and in creatures.

Furthermore, the aforementioned mode of created obedience to divine power seems a deeper and more proper sense of “obedience.” To obey merely in the sense of being transformed, so that the original subject of obedience no longer exists, is clearly an inferior form of

¹⁸ ST III, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3: “Ad tertium dicendum quod duplex capacitas attendi potest in humana natura. Una quidem secundum ordinem potentiae naturalis. Quae a Deo semper impletur, qui dat unicuique rei secundum suam capacitatem naturalem. Alia vero secundum ordinem divinae potentiae, cui omnis creatura obedit ad nutum. Et ad hoc pertinet ista capacitas.”

obedience. “Obedience” is a term that a voluntarist might reduce to divine *force majeure*, but there are many reasons why one might think Thomas would be reluctant to do this even though this is a common mode in which sensible creatures may be said to obey the divine power. In fact, while the lower form of obediential potency—susceptibility to miraculous transformation—is seen throughout the visible lower creation, in the invisible higher creation, the manner in which the creature stands in a potency of obedience to the active agency of God concerns the capacity for grace, infused virtue, and glory. Thus, while the sensible examples of the lower stratum of “obediential potency” proliferate, it bears recollecting that, for Thomas, there are more species of angels than of physical things¹⁹ and that the sense of “obedience,” for Thomas, is interior motion conforming to intellectual command (command is an act of the intellect and not of the will). Thus, obedience properly speaking is not a voluntarist posit, and so it would be strange were “obediential potency” to be reducible to the lowest instance of obedience wherein things are miraculously transformed to other things (a use of “obedience” seemingly by extrinsic attribution) rather than interiorly elevated through their passive potency to activation by a nobler principle.

God can raise up sons of Abraham from the very stones, but were he to do so, they would no longer be stones, but human beings. By contrast, owing to the possession of essentially spiritual powers of intellect and will—by reason of the possession of human nature—the human person is able to be elevated in grace to friendship with God. Man does not cease to be human—as the stone would cease to be a stone—by being elevated to the divine friendship. The stone as such cannot be elevated by grace to be a friend of God—even though, in some analogical sense, all creatures desire and love God in their natural motion—because the stone lacks a rational soul. To become a friend of God, it must cease being a stone. Human persons do not lose their humanity by being elevated in grace to the divine friendship.

This potency to be elevated by and in grace is not a natural potency because there is no proportionate active power of nature enabling the creature to be so elevated. Thomas is very clear that even angelic will cannot be inclined toward the supernatural apart from supernatural aid. To speak of a natural desire implies some proportionate active power in man because natural desire is for the proportionate natural good, a principle taught universally by St. Thomas (this is something

¹⁹ See *ST* I., q. 50, a. 3, resp.

denied by Henri de Lubac, but without adequate consideration of the texts). There are many instances, but one notes, for example, Thomas's words in question 4 ("on hope") of *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*: "It should be said that the proportionate good moves the appetite; for those things are not naturally desired that are not proportionate. But that eternal beatitude is a good proportionate to us, this is from the grace of God; and thus hope, which tends to this good as proportionate to man to possess, is a gift divinely infused."²⁰ In *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (q. 14, a. 10, corp.), Thomas contrasts the supernatural *finis ultimus* with natural good, writing of the supernatural good: "The other is the good which is out of all proportion with man's nature because his natural powers are not enough to attain to it either in thought or desire." One cannot, apart from grace, according to Thomas, *even desire* God as supernatural beatitude, because no finite nature is proportioned to this good,

²⁰ *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*, q. 4 [*De spe*], prooem., a. 1, ad 8: "Ad octavum dicendum, quod bonum proportionatum movet appetitum; non enim naturaliter appetuntur ea quae non sunt proportionata. Quod autem beatitudo aeterna sit bonum proportionatum nobis, hoc est ex gratia Dei; et ideo spes, quae tendit in hoc bonum sicut proportionatum homini ad habendum, est donum divinitus infusum." Cf. *ST* I, q. 62, a. 2, resp.: "Sicut enim superius dictum est, naturalis motus voluntatis est principium omnium eorum quae volumus. Naturalis autem inclinatio voluntatis est ad id quod est conveniens secundum naturam. Et ideo, si aliquid sit supra naturam, voluntas in id ferri non potest, nisi ab aliquo alio supernaturali principio adiuta"; "For as was said above, the natural motion of the will is the principle of all that we will. But the natural inclination of the will is to that which is fitting according to nature. And thus, if there be something above nature, the will is not able to be inclined toward it unless by the aid of some other supernatural principle." It is very clear here that the natural motion of the will is the principle of all that is willed, and that it cannot be *inclined* to anything higher without divine aid. Desire *is* "inclination" and "motion"—not accomplishment, but inclination. This is one reason (there are many) why, on Thomas's teaching, the natural desire for God is *not* identical with the desire for supernatural beatitude, although the natural desire for God is such that it is *more than* fulfilled in supernatural beatitude. Note *ST* I-II, q. 62, a. 2, ad 3: "Ad tertium dicendum quod ad Deum naturaliter ratio et voluntas ordinatur prout est naturae principium et finis, secundum tamen proportionem naturae. Sed ad ipsum secundum quod est obiectum beatitudinis supernaturalis, ratio et voluntas secundum suam naturam non ordinantur sufficienter"; "To the third it should be said that reason and will are ordered to God naturally as principle and end of nature, but according to the proportion of nature. But to the object of supernatural beatitude reason and will are not sufficiently ordered according to nature."

and all natural desire as such is specified *by* created realities.²¹ The natural desire for God reaches the one and only God materially, but formally it does not know what it is seeking, reaching him only under a disproportionate and deficient *incognito*. It reaches God as Cause of these effects, yet it is not even an accident in God to be the cause of these effects, inasmuch as creation does not change God, God is not dependent upon creation, and God infinitely transcends creation. Some have argued that the *voluntas ut natura*, the will as a nature, has the inner life of God for its object. But St. Thomas unmistakably teaches that no finite nature or power is naturally proportioned to God in himself—God is not universal good in the sense in which this is the formal object of the will because perfection can be added to the good in general, whereas to God’s substantial and actual universal perfection, no essential addition is possible.

It is man’s rational soul that renders him capable of elevation in grace. It is the rational soul, with its powers of intellect and will specified by universal true and good, that render the human person able to be elevated to the beatific vision. Here too, one must be careful. It is common to speak in a somewhat misleading way: man is ordered to universal true and good; but God *is* subsistent universal true and good; so therefore, it is thought that man is simply naturally ordered to God. But man is not *naturally* ordered to the beatific vision, but solely through the supernatural principle of grace. Man is naturally such that he can be elevated *by God* to the divine friendship and finally to the beatific vision.

The natural universality of intellect and will are, in a sense, horizontal. The intellect extends to universal being, not all at once, but serially, sequentially, and distributively: it knows in a universal way (through universal concepts) and extends to universal being. But this is for the human person to be able to know created goods without any material limitation on the side of knowledge as such (that is, it may be that some evidence is not available to us, but the intellect will extend

²¹ Of course, this is also clear from Thomas’s comments in *De malo* q. 5 a. 3 resp., where he argues regarding the *limbo puerorum*: “Pertinet autem ad naturalem cognitio- nem quod anima sciat se propter beatitudinem creatam, et quod beatitudo consistit in adeptione perfecti boni; sed quod illud bonum perfectum, ad quod homo factus est, sit illa gloria quam sancti possident, est supra cognitionem naturalem”; “Now it pertains to natural knowledge that the soul knows it was created for happiness and that happiness consists in the attainment of the perfect good. But that that perfect good for which man was made is that glory which the saints possess is beyond natural knowledge.”

to any evidence that is available and we can inquire even when evidence is scant). The picture is the same with the human will, which can incline toward various goods without being commanded by any because it moves to the good under the form of reason, which is universal, as the will is *appetitus sequens formam intellectam*.²² As finite good is not universal, no finite good can simply of itself compel the will, and so the will is objectively free in choice.

However, all this is vastly different from the idea of a unique knowledge and love of the infinite God. This is literally that knowledge and love about which Thomas frequently quoted the treasured lines from 1 Corinthians 2:9 (Douay Rheims): “Eye hath not seen, neither has ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what God has prepared for those who love Him.” Even to desire this supernatural beatitude in union with the triune God requires the aid of grace.

As Thomas points out, the beatific vision exceeds every purely natural capacity, whether of man or angel (*Summa contra gentiles* III, ch. 52), exceeding all natural capacity to know. Since the desire for God is specified by natural knowledge of God in finite created effects (for the will is nothing other than *inclinatio sequens formam intellectam* [“inclination following the form understood”]; see *Quodlibet* 6, q. 2, a. 2), it follows that natural desire for God does not truly know what it desires, whereas graced desire—which truly is on the way toward knowing what it desires—is rooted in the reality of God himself.²³

²² *Quodlibet* 6, q. 2, a. 1: “motus voluntatis est inclinatio sequens formam intellectam.” Likewise *Summa contra gentiles*, III, ch. 26: “motus voluntatis est inclinatio sequens formam intellectam.” See also *ST* I-II, q. 8, a. 1, where he clearly argues that “ad hoc igitur quod voluntas in aliquid tendat, non requiritur quod sit bonum in rei veritate, sed quod apprehendatur in rationi boni”; “Thus that the will tend to something does not require that it be good in the reality of the thing, but that it may be apprehended as good.” Note that, for the will to tend toward *anything* as good, it must do so by virtue of an apprehension of the mind.

²³ One notes the words of Jacques Maritain: “But this desire to know the First Cause through its essence is a desire which does not know what it asks, like the sons of Zebedee when they asked to sit on the right and on the left of the Son of Man. ‘Ye know not what ye ask,’ Jesus replied to them. For to know the First Cause in its essence, or without the intermediary of any other thing, is to know the First Cause otherwise than as First Cause; it is to know it by ceasing to attain it by the very means by which we attain it, by ceasing to exercise the very act which bears us up to it”; in *Approaches to God*, trans. Peter O’Reilly (New York: Harper, 1954), 109–10. See also: “It is necessary that there be in

Man's obediential potency for grace, when actuated by grace, reveals the profundity of his own nature as *capax dei*, capable of divine friendship. The similitude of the stained-glass window illumined by the sun's rays well bespeaks the character of the doctrine of obediential potency applied to the relation of nature and grace. The stained-glass window, were it cognizant, could not "know what it was missing" were it never to irradiate its bright colors under the influence of the sun. It would be a window, still, and neither fail to be part of the whole structure of which it would form an integral part, nor lack its own participation in the good of the whole as a specific perfection. Yet, its nature stands properly revealed only under the extrinsic causality of the sun's illumination: seeing it so illumined, we know what stained glass truly is for. Just so does Christ reveal the profundity of man as capable of divine friendship with himself.

Conclusion

The Incarnate Word reveals man to himself. Far from rendering revelation and grace and the dynamism of the image of God in man to grace and glory impossible, it is the dignity of created human nature that it may be elevated in grace. This initial dignity, rooted in the spirituality of the human soul, is further ordered to the even more crucial acquired dignity of conformity with the divinely ordained order and with God himself, and it is adequately understood only in relation to the common good, both naturally and supernaturally. This second dignity is greater and even more crucial than the first, for we may have the first dignity in this life—that of the *imago* of representation—and nonetheless live discordant lives. And we may have this first dignity in the next life and burn with preternatural fire in alienation from, and eternal loss of, God. The initial dignity of man (the representative *imago*) is ordered to, and specified by, an order of progressively more transcendent or common goods in nature and in grace and is ordered to become for us the *imago gloriae*, the image of glory, in the celestial city of beatific vision. In this sense, we may say that only the classical account of the *imago dei* provided in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas adequately founds and defends the relational dynamism of the *imago dei* to grace and glory. N-V

man an 'obediential potency' which, answering to the divine omnipotence, renders him apt to receive a life which surpasses infinitely the capacities of his nature" (ibid., 112).