

“Partnership with God”: Thomas Aquinas on Human Desire and God’s Grace

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Introduction: Natural Desire for the Supernatural?

THIS ESSAY IS MEANT to contribute to the still continuing debate within contemporary Thomism on the theme of the natural desire for the vision of God, which was set off in 1946 with the publication of Henri de Lubac’s influential book *Surnaturel*.¹ Recently, we witnessed a remarkable resurgence of the controversy about de Lubac with the publication of Lawrence Feingold’s *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* and the vehement attack on Feingold’s book by John Milbank in his *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural*, which, in turn, evoked the informed defense of Feingold’s critical approach to de Lubac by Reinhard Hütter in his “*Thomist Ressourcement*”: *A Rereading of Thomas on the Natural Desire for the Vision of God*.² These

¹ Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Etudes historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946).

² Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Rome: Apollinare Studi, 2001); John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); Reinhard Hütter, “*Desiderium Naturale Visionis Dei—Est autem duplex hominis beatitudo sive felicitas*: Some Observations about Lawrence Feingold’s and John Milbank’s Recent Interventions in the Debate over the Natural Desire to See God,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 5 (2007): 81–131. See also Hütter, “‘Thomist Ressourcement’—A Rereading of Thomas on the Natural Desire for the Vision of God,” in *Dust Bound for Heaven: Explorations in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). For a useful overview of the debate and more literature, see

discussions prove that the position of de Lubac with regard to the natural desire still evokes controversy after more than a half century and that a reasonable consensus on this important issue within Thomism, and in Catholic theology at large, is lacking. Most Thomist interpreters would agree, I suppose, with attributing to Aquinas the notion of a natural desire of human creatures for God, specifically for knowing or seeing God in his essence.³ At the same time, we find in Aquinas the view that the vision of God is granted only by way of a supernatural gift; seeing God is something that exceeds the natural power (*facultas naturae*) of human beings. De Lubac apparently felt that this could be formulated only by way of a paradox: the soul is *naturally* open to the vision of God that, nevertheless, can be granted only *supernaturally*. In *Surnatural*, he states his position in the short formula “Natural desire for the supernatural,” and he adds to this the ominous statement that “most theologians who reject this formula, reject together with it the very doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas.”⁴

I am inclined to reject this formula, not so much because I think it is unmistakably false, but because it tends to conceal the aspect of discontinuity in the relationship between nature and grace (supernatural). There is a sense in which the natural desire (for the vision of God) is precisely *not* directed to the supernatural communion with God. The dimension of the “supernatural” refers to a promise of fulfillment nature could not have dreamt of. In other words, it is by reason of the “natural desire” that one is open (Aquinas would say *capax*) to something one can receive only as a (supernatural) gift; but this does not mean that the natural desire already “knows” of or expects such a gift. The natural desire does not function as a horizon of expectation. Aquinas typically stresses the novelty and the unexpectedness of what the gift of grace discloses for human longing.⁵ What one cannot find in Aquinas, in my opinion, is the suggestion

Nicholas Healy, “Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace: A Note on Some Recent Contributions to the Debate,” *Communio* 35 (Winter 2008): 535–64.

³ Cf. the remark made by Fergus Kerr: “Few now doubt that when Thomas taught that human beings have a natural desire for the vision of God he meant what he said” (“Quarrels about Grace,” in *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2002], 137).

⁴ De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 431: “‘Désir naturel du surnaturel’: la plupart des théologiens qui repoussent cette formule, repoussent avec elle la doctrine même de saint Thomas d’Aquin.”

⁵ Cf. the classic passage in Isa 64:4, cited in the very first article of the *Summa*: “The eye hath not seen, O God, besides Thee, what things Thou hast prepared for them that wait for Thee.”

that the world, as it were, is naturally waiting for the Gospel,⁶ as if the message of the Gospel is the true fulfillment of the common search of mankind through history for meaning and truth. In the debate surrounding de Lubac, the idea of the natural desire often functions in an apologetic way, as if nature is implicitly and unconsciously Christian in its deepest desires.

What I want to do in this article is to look anew and with a fresh eye to Aquinas's thoughts on the beatifying vision—the Christian answer to the question of human happiness—and what it means to say that such a vision is possible only by *grace*. In what follows, I will focus on the concept of grace, since it is important to see that grace is something more than merely an additional means to an end to which the ability of (human) nature does not reach; it also inaugurates the intersubjective relationship between God and the human being, their “partnership” in faith and love. Therefore, I will begin with the definition of grace in terms of a “participation in the divine nature.” The use of the term participation with respect to grace brings us, in the next section (“Grace as ‘Participation in the Divine Nature’”), to reflect on the essential difference between creation (participation in being) and the additional gift of divinization (*deificatio*). In a third section (“Some Aspects of the Relationship between Nature and Grace”), I will discuss some essential features of the relationship between nature and grace—not exhaustively, only insofar as required by the interpretation of Aquinas's view concerning the twofold human happiness: on the one hand, the ultimate perfection that is proportionate to human nature, and on the other hand, the supernatural happiness of the promise of salvation and eternal bliss in God beyond the limits of human earthly existence. Finally, in the concluding section (“Natural Desire for God and the Twofold Happiness”), I will try to reconstruct the problem that Aquinas intends to solve by his doctrine of grace as participation in the divine nature.

Grace as “Participation in the Divine Nature”

In line with the patristic doctrine of deification, Aquinas assumes that grace confers to the human soul a divine-like (*deiformis*) character by which she is raised to a close kinship with God himself. Through grace, God effects a divinization of the human person, who becomes thereby a “partaker of the divine nature by way of a participated likeness.” In support of the thesis of grace as divinization, Aquinas often cites the

⁶ This phrase is borrowed from Kerr, “Quarrels about Grace,” 135.

well-known text from the second letter of Peter (1:4): “[God] has given us most great and precious promises, that by these you may be made partakers of the divine nature.”⁷ The “partakers” in this text is read by Aquinas in the sense of “participation.” The gift of grace is “nothing else than a certain participation of the divine nature”; through grace man becomes “god-like,” a “god through participation” (*Deus per participationem*).⁸ According to this view of deification, grace entails a radical transformation of the soul into a new God-like mode of being.

Among modern biblical scholars, the text of 2 Peter 1:4 is controversial because of its putative Hellenistic tone. For instance, Ernst Käsemann (a Lutheran theologian) has said of this text: “It would be hard to find in the whole New Testament a sentence which, in its expression, its individual motifs and its whole trend, more clearly marks the relapse of Christianity into Hellenistic dualism.”⁹ For him, “dualism” is clearly meant as a negative qualification that suggests a non-biblical view of salvation by escaping from this corruptible world to gain access to a higher incorruptible divine reality. Several attempts are being made to read 2 Peter 1:4 differently, not so much from “Greek” presuppositions, but rather in line with the relational thought of the Old Testament. For instance, looking for an alternative to the dualistic “Greek” reading, A. Wolters has proposed to read the passage in Peter from the perspective of the idea of “covenant” (see note 9). The phrase “partakers (*koinonoi*) in the divine nature” should be taken, then, in the sense of “partners of God.” In the new covenant founded by Christ, people are invited to become partners of God. Instead of the model of participation and its ontological dualism, a personal and relational way of interpreting grace within the relationship between God and man is proposed.

⁷ According to the Vulgate version: “maxima et pretiosa nobis promissa donavit: ut per haec efficiamini divinae consortes naturae.” Cited in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter, *ST*] I-II, q. 110, a. 3. Cites also other places: *Summa contra gentiles* [hereafter, *SCG*] IV, ch.4; *ST* I, q. 13, a. 9, ad 1; I-II, q. 50, a. 2; II-II, q. 85, a. 2, ad 1; *Questiones disputate de anima*, a. 7, ad 9.

⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 112, a.1: “Donum gratiae . . . nihil aliud sit quam quaedam participatione divinae naturae.” See also I-II, q. 62, a. 1; q. 110, a. 3; a. 4; *Questiones disputate de anima*, q. un., a. 7, ad 9. For the expression *deus per participationem*, see *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 1, ad 1, and I, q. 13, a. 9.

⁹ Ernst Käsemann, “An Apologia for Primitive Christian Eschatology,” cited by A. Wolters, “‘Partners of the Deity’: A Covenantal Reading of 2 Peter 1:4,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 (1990): 28–44. For the debate around “divinization” in modern theology, see Fergus Kerr, “Deified Creaturehood,” in *After Aquinas*, 149–61.

I mention this controversy about the Hellenistic background of 2 Peter 1:4 because I think that, from Aquinas's perspective, a relational reading is not necessarily opposed to the ontological concept of grace as "participation in the divine nature." When he refers to the passage in 2 Peter 1:4 in developing the theological concept of grace, his intention is not exegetical; he is not trying to reconstruct the biblical understanding of grace on the basis of a meticulous exegesis of all the relevant texts. His definition of grace is a speculative concept in his own right and with an intelligible necessity of its own that does not stand in need of an independent biblical justification. Nevertheless, it finds a fitting confirmation in 2 Peter 1:4 in the same manner, for example, as the passage on the name of God in Exodus 3:15 confirms the metaphysical thesis of the identity of essence and existence in God.¹⁰ A speculative concept does not describe in a direct and concrete way the human experience of religious attitudes and relationships. There exists always a certain distance between the speculative language of theology (the "language of understanding") and the experimental/confessional language of the Bible. So, if one wants to characterize the biblical view of grace in covenantal terms as a human–divine "partnership," then the speculative approach of Aquinas consists in a reflective inquiry into the conditions under which the human being can be truly called "partner" of God. Now, for Aquinas, these conditions are not yet fulfilled by the fact alone that humans are "creatures" of God. The human being, considered precisely as a creature, is not yet in the position that it can be understood to be a "partner" of God. Under the heading of grace, Aquinas reflects on the conditions under which a personal community (*convivium*) between the human being (creature) and God (creator) is conceivable. Such a personal relationship with God is not yet implied in creation. Creation may be the necessary condition of the free revelatory communication of God according to his grace in the sense that grace requires a rational creature ordered to God as its end, but creation is not the sufficient condition of the realization of the full intersubjective sense of the man–God relationship. Grace is, therefore, something extra to (created) nature.

Grace is thus added to nature, to what a creature essentially is in its ontological constitution. This means that the act of creation is presupposed to grace and that creation itself is not a matter of grace

¹⁰ Cf. SCG I, ch. 22: 'Hanc autem sublimem veritatem Moyses a Domino est edoctus . . . etc.'

(unless in the weakened sense that creation is not necessary but an act of divine generosity). On the part of God, therefore, one has to distinguish between two levels of activity, two ways in which God is active in relation to something else. The first is the act of creation through which God shares his Being with others (by way of participation), and the second is the act of grace through which God shares "Himself," that is, to let others enter into the divine sphere. Grace is essentially an act of "sharing oneself," an act of self-communication that constitutes a relation of friendship and of communion between the human being and God. It is through grace that God reveals himself to the human creature so that we may be led to the vision of God and may find our happiness in this most intimate union with God. Grace is a free initiative on the part of God by means of which the human being is established in a relationship with God. Grace has to do with God disclosing himself freely and letting himself to be known by the human creature. Aquinas expresses this in a precise and formal language: "No created intellect can see God through His essence except insofar as God conjoins Himself to the created intellect through His grace in order to be intelligible to it."¹¹ God can be known in himself only when he lets himself be known through grace, opens himself to the human intellect. Thus, grace means the free initiative of God to bring the human creature into a direct relationship with himself wherein he will show himself, according to the hope connected with faith, as he is.¹²

A structural similarity can be noticed in the way these two acts of God *ad extra*,¹³ creation and grace, are conceptualized by Aquinas. Both acts are conceived in terms of *communicatio*, which is the Neoplatonic term for the way a cause expresses itself in something else. Its basic meaning is not so much linguistic (personal) communication between human beings, but ontological: by causing something else, the cause may be said to share or to communicate its proper perfection to its effect, which bears, consequently, a likeness (*similitudo*) of the cause. The effect may be said to share a likeness of its cause, or to "participate" a likeness of that perfection that is origi-

¹¹ ST I, q. 12, a. 4: "Non igitur potest intellectus creatus Deum per essentiam videre, nisi inquantum Deus per suam gratiam se intellectui creato coniungit, ut intelligibile ab ipso."

¹² Cf. 1 John 3:2: "Videbimus eum sicuti est."

¹³ The operation of grace is, formally speaking, not *ad extra*, since it does not result in an effect distinguished from God.

nally and essentially present in the cause. The terms *communicatio* and *participatio* belong together, as they describe the one and same causal relationship, each from a different point of view.

Now, how should we describe the difference between the *communicatio* of creation and that other form of *communicatio* according to grace? What is the reason of the difference in the twofold communication on the part of God? We may describe the gift of grace in a yet informal way as the free act of self-communication of God to the human creature. However, the act of creation can also be characterized as a form of “self-communication.” By creating beings of all kinds, God makes others to participate in the perfection he himself essentially is—namely, being (*esse*)—and in this way, things are created in a likeness of God. “Being” is the proper effect of God’s operation, and since the proper effect is the expression of the very nature of the cause, one must say that God’s nature consists in being: God is *Ipsium Esse* and, as such, the cause of the being of all things. Creation, therefore, can be regarded as a form of “self-communication,” since the creature has received everything it has from God and is, as a being, immediately related to God as its cause.

Creation, however, is certainly not a form of “self-communication” if one understands thereby that the creature has received a part of the divine “self,” such that the creature is at least semi-divine in character. The creature is not divine; it is, as a being, really distinct from the divine being itself. Thus, one must say that, in creation, God does not communicate himself *as himself*, in its proper divinity, but as distinguished from God himself, thus in such a way that, in each creature, the identity of essence and being that defines God is negated in a determined manner. Because of this distinction between essence and being, each creature is precisely as a creature distinguished from God. This also means that God “in the singularity of his substance” remains hidden from the perspective of creation. The created world does not offer a transparent access to God himself.

Now, characteristic for grace is that God communicates himself in his divinity and lets himself to be known to man *as God*. Under the formal denominator of grace, Aquinas takes into account the conditions under which a personal “communion” (*convivium*) between God and man is possible. Such a communion is, as such, not yet included in the relationship of creation. Although creation is an essential precondition of God’s free self-communication, God himself, in his essence, remains hidden behind his *similitudo* in creatures. Creation

opens the realm in which an encounter and communion between God and man can take place. At the same time, that such an event of God disclosing himself to man actually takes place—thus opening the history of salvation in which mankind is drawn towards God—is, from the perspective of nature, a wholly unforeseeable and unexpected gift.

Some Aspects of the Relationship between Nature and Grace

Perhaps it is unnecessary to mention the fact that, in the case of grace, what is meant is always specifically Christian grace, the grace that comes to us by Christ's work of salvation.¹⁴ Human beings find access to the saving grace of God through the life and deeds of Jesus Christ. This makes it the more remarkable that, in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas treats the subject of grace apart from and prior to the Christology in the *tertia pars*. The subject of grace is treated in the *secunda secundae* (I-II, qq.109–14), which is devoted to the practical-ethical life of man in the light of his movement toward God. The notion of grace is introduced here, in the systematic context of the *secunda secundae*, as one of the principles, next to law, by means of which God helps the human person in moving himself towards the good that is God.¹⁵ Grace is, thus, introduced as a form of divine assistance, enabling us to live a good life, informed by the divine love of charity. In this context the concrete and effective form of God's grace in Christ's work of salvation is set aside methodically. The focus here is on the essential idea of grace as enabling a relationship of the human being with God. From the perspective of this relationship, one must say, first, that only God is the effective principle of grace, and second, that the effect of grace consists in a union with God. As Aquinas says: "For just as it is impossible for anything to set fire but fire, so it has to be God alone to divinize, by sharing communion in the divine nature by means of a participative assimilation."¹⁶ The gift of grace intends a divinization of the human creature by being elevated by God to a participation in God's own life.

The systematic place of "grace" is determined by its difference from "nature." Their relationship is established by two axioms: first, grace presupposes nature ("gratio praesupponit naturam"), and

¹⁴ Cf. *ST* III, q.22, a.1

¹⁵ Cf. the prologue of q. 90 of *ST* II-II: "Principium exterius movens ad bonum est Deus, qui et nos instruit per legem, et iuvat per gratiam."

¹⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 112, a. 1: "Sic enim necesse est quod solus Deus deificet, communicando consortium divinae naturae per quamdam similitudinis participationem, sicut impossibile est quod aliquid igniat nisi solus ignis."

second, grace perfects nature, not destroys it (“*gratia perficit naturam, non tollit*”). As regards the first axiom, one must keep in mind that nature here means *created* nature, of which God is the principle and the end. Nature is not a neutral domain of things existing in their own right. Although nature is characterized by immanence, it is open to transcendence insofar as it has received its being from God. Nature is, therefore, essentially ordered to God as its end. As a correlate of grace, nature has, moreover, the restricted meaning of *rational* nature—thus human (or angelic) nature, which has the capacity to reflect upon itself and can become conscious of the origin of its being.

As was said above, nature (creation) is the work of God, and it differs, however, from the work of grace. There is a discontinuity between nature and grace, in the sense that grace is something that is “superadded” to nature.¹⁷ Only in relation to created nature already existing in its own domain can God be a *supernatural* principle that orders (human) nature to an end beyond its natural competence.

The question now arises of why the addition of “grace” is thought to be necessary if (human) nature is already a good work of God. Why the *supplement* of a grace by which man is enabled to do something beyond his natural means? One possible motive of grace consists in the restoration of what has been lost as a consequence of original sin. The good creation is damaged by sin and needs, therefore, the medicine of grace. It needs to be stressed, however, that, for Aquinas, the systematic meaning of grace does not consist primarily in being God’s answer to human sin. Even without sin, thus in supposition of the integrity of nature, grace is still needed to attain salvation. Why is that?

The ultimate good of the *visio Dei* requires that God unites himself as knowable object with the human intellect (see note 11). Human beatitude is founded in a union with God (*coniunctio ad Deum*), and this union cannot be part of nature, part of a thing’s essential endowment (*debitum naturae*). The gift of grace consists in a certain divinization of man, which cannot, as such, be an effect of creation. This is not a defect of creation. The work of grace is not a supplement to creation in the sense that the work of creation would otherwise remain incom-

¹⁷ Compare the following text from *In Boetii De trinitate*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2: “Deus in prima rerum conditione hominem perfectum instituit perfectione naturae, quae quidem in hoc consistit, ut homo habeat omnia quae sunt naturae debita. Sed supra debitum naturae adduntur postmodum humano generi aliquae perfectiones ex sola divina gratia, inter quas est fides, quae est ‘dei donum.’”

plete. One must even say that God cannot make a creature that is united with him by nature, since, Aquinas argues, to become united with God in knowledge requires a *divine* power on the part of the creature. A creature cannot be *deiformis* other than by being raised by God beyond its creaturely condition to the level of God himself. Seeing God through his essence is properly a divine act, and as such, it exceeds the competence of any *created* (finite) nature (*excedit facultatem naturae*). It now becomes clear that there exists an essential difference between, on the one hand, the constitution of nature in its own order, of a creature in its natural being and operation, and, on the other hand, the elevation of the human being to the level of God himself, as being called to share the divine life of eternal bliss. It is a difference with respect to the *communicatio Dei*, God's self-communication to others. An illuminating statement about this difference is to be found in the *Commentary on the Liber de causis*, where, in a Dionysian fashion, Aquinas distinguishes between the many gifts of creation (such as "being," "life," and "intelligence") and the ultimate gift of divinization. The highest perfection of becoming God-like cannot be bestowed on rational creatures according to the "universal influence" of God's power in the created effect, since it consists in being united with God himself (*coniunctionem ad Deum*). "But he [Dionysius] understands divinity only in virtue of the connection to God, not in virtue of the universal influence upon created things. For the former is more properly divine, because, in God himself what he himself is is greater than what he causes in other things."¹⁸

As we see, the work of creation is itself not an effect of grace, but something that is presupposed to grace. If grace should be the absolutely free self-communication of God to man, then what is presupposed to this is human nature as something non-divine and not in itself already connected with God in faith and love. Grace cannot, therefore, be reduced in any way to the work of creation; it is a necessary supplement, not part of a thing's nature. Now, if this is the case, one must apparently distinguish between God's will with respect to creation and his will of grace. Aquinas indeed makes this distinction, right in the beginning of his treatise on grace in the *Summa*. God's love, he says, is creative, and that means it is not a response to an already existing goodness, but produces the goodness of the object

¹⁸ *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, trans. Vincent A. Guagliardo, O.P., Charles R. Hess, O.P., and Richard C. Taylor (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1996), 27.

of love. Well, one must say that God's creative love is twofold: "One sort of love is a general love [*dilectio communis*] in accord with which God 'loves all things that exist' (Wis 11:25) and in accord with which he grants natural being on all things. The other sort of love is a special love [*dilectio specialis*] in accord with which God draws the rational creature beyond the status of his nature to a participation in the divine good."¹⁹ Here "love" is used in its proper and full meaning, since with this love of grace, God wills for the human creature an eternal good, himself. Thus grace is first and foremost a sort of love or personal favor: God is said to love man beyond the condition of his nature and wants for him a supernatural good, *himself*; he wants him to share in his own divine life of eternal bliss.

The fact of this twofold love of God raises, again, the question of the why of grace. What is grace good for? Why is it needed? Why can the natural desire of the human creature—which is a desire caused by God's common love—not be the sufficient ground of its fulfillment in the beatifying encounter with God himself? Apparently nature has a limitation included. This limitation concerns its finiteness, not a defect of nature caused by sin or a shortcoming of God's creative power, which should be then repaired by grace. The limitation of nature is nothing else than its finiteness, the fact that, in each creature, "being" is limited to a nature determined by species and genus. The consequence of this finiteness is that the human being cannot reach to God's infinity through its natural powers. And this is why the rational nature of man is not the sufficient ground of the act of faith, which has as its object God himself. The conclusion must be that we have here an essential discontinuity between the orders of nature and of grace. From the perspective of nature, God is desired and loved, not "in person," but as the common ground of the (natural) being of all things.

The other principle says that nature is perfected by grace, not destroyed. Here the accent lies on the continuity between nature and grace. Thomas often speaks of grace in terms of an assistance (*auxilium*) whereby God helps the human creature in its movement toward

¹⁹ ST I-II, q. 110, a. 1: "... differens consideratur dilectio Dei ad creaturam. Una quidem communis, secundum quam *diligit omnia quae sunt*, ut dicitur *Sapientia* 11, 25; secundum quam esse naturale rebus largitur. Alia autem est dilectio specialis, secundum quam trahit creaturam rationale supra conditionem naturae, ad participationem divini boni. Et secundum hanc dilectionem dicitur aliquem diligere simpliciter: quia secundum hanc dilectionem vult Deus simpliciter creaturae bonum aeternum, quod est ipse."

the good and the end. The concept of grace presupposes a teleological interpretation of nature, an intrinsic finality that is systematically conceptualized under the heading of providence. The exercise of divine providence has two modalities, first by way of God working immanently in the operations of all things, and second in a special way with regard to the rational creature, which is not only passively moved but moves itself through reason and free will to its end. In the case of human *rational* creatures, the providential governance of God takes up a special form adapted to the natural perfection of their rationality, as well as to the dignity of their end.²⁰ As regards the dignity of their end, human creatures reach the ultimate end, which is God, through their own operation of knowing and loving God, while other non-rational creatures move to their end by way of assimilation.

The special governance with respect to man consists in law and grace: in order to enable us to direct our lives to the good, God instructs us by the law and helps us by grace. Through grace, God strengthens the human will with the virtues of charity and hope, and his intellect with the virtue of faith, so that man actually can attain the good of “eternal life” to which he is “predestined.”²¹ It is clear that grace must be understood as an instrument of God’s predestining providence.

The complex relationship between nature and grace is marked by an aspect of continuity, as well as of discontinuity. In view of the ongoing controversy on the natural desire for God, it appears to be difficult to find the right balance between continuity and discontinuity. The emphasis on the aspect of continuity leads, for instance, to de Lubac’s position of the “natural desire for the supernatural.” It is as if human nature is imprinted with a fundamental desire that is already ordered (predestined?) to the end of the vision of God.²² In

²⁰ See SCG III, ch. 111.

²¹ “Predestination” falls under the general category of providence (*pars providentiae*), but as applied in the order of grace. By predestination, God orders the rational creature to the (supernatural) end of eternal life (see ST I, q. 23, a. 1).

²² Nicholas Healy has formulated this question as follows: “Is there a supernatural finality imprinted on our nature, prior to grace?” (“Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace,” 548). What is meant may be more or less clear, but one should realize that this formulation is completely unintelligible from the perspective of Aquinas. What is called ‘supernatural’ cannot be, by definition, included in our nature; and we cannot have something supernatural *prior* to grace, because grace consists precisely in the gift of a supernatural principle. As happens often,

this case, nature is understood as, by itself, already ordered to an end that can be attained only through supernatural grace. Nature, then, seems to be equipped with a finality that, paradoxically, exceeds the active power of that nature. This is problematic because of the consequence that supernatural grace will become a requirement of nature, since, without grace, the finality of nature would fail. The opponents of de Lubac are unified in their fear that his position jeopardizes the gratuity of God's grace. By saying A (creation, natural desire for beatitude), God would be obliged, as it were, to say B (grace, supernatural fulfillment of human desire for God). But putting the emphasis on the aspect of discontinuity will not help to find the right balance. It can easily be a return to the unsatisfying traditional two-story model of nature and grace, treating grace in relation to nature as essentially extrinsic and adventitious. The story is well-known: while Thomas writes, quite innocently and without problem, that there is a natural desire to see God, the Thomists of the sixteenth century, following Cajetan, argued that this natural desire to see God presupposes already the effect of grace on the finality of nature. So they assumed an already supernaturally graced desire. The underlying (Aristotelian) principle is that a strictly natural desire, according to Cajetan, does not extend beyond the capacity of nature ("naturale desiderium non se extendit ultra naturae facultatem").²³ Nature must be sufficient to itself as regards its natural finality.

There is no doubt that Thomas taught that human beings have a natural desire for the vision of God. Knowing the essence of God in itself is what fulfills the desire of the human *rational* nature, since the desire concerns the full perfection of the intellect according to its proper object, "truth" (or "being"). In other words, only the

many problems in the debate on grace are created by ill-conceived and sloppy formulations.

²³ Compare Robert Spaemann's excellent summary of the consequences of Cajetan's principle that the desire of human nature must be proportionate to nature: "The thought of a '*desiderium naturale*,' which points *in nature beyond nature*, would, according to the theologians of the sixteenth century, make salvation a right, and grace would cease to be a gift. The consequence of this was that one superimposed a hypothetical purely natural destiny of man, a '*finis naturalis*,' onto the actual destiny given in salvation history; and thus the fateful construction of a '*natura pura*' came into being. God, so the theory goes, could have created man also "*in puris naturalibus*." The destiny of salvation is purely accidental in relation to human nature" (*Philosophische Essays* [Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983], 26–27; English translation in Healy, "Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace," 543).

vision of the absolute essence can fulfill adequately the openness of the human intellect for truth and being. But, from this, one cannot conclude—and this is essential—that human beings are, in a concrete and factual sense striving, moved by their natural desire to reach the vision of God from the formal perspective as beatifying object (*ut obiectum beatitudinis*), knowingly or not. The thesis of the natural desire abstracts from the issue of how the ultimate end of the vision of God may be in fact attained. This is the reason why the formula “natural desire for the supernatural” is ill-conceived and not sufficiently thought through.

Natural Desire for God and the Twofold Happiness

Consistently and throughout all his writings, Aquinas distinguishes between two forms of human happiness. The ultimate good of human beings is twofold, he says. On the one hand, there is the “happiness” the (non-Christian) philosophers have in view—that is, the ultimate good of man as proportioned to his nature and to which his natural powers correspond (*fines connaturalis*). This happiness consists, according to Aristotle, in the contemplation of the truth as far as it is possible in this life. On the other hand, we have the happiness about which the Christian religion speaks—that is, the promise of salvation and eternal bliss in God beyond the limits of human earthly existence. The happiness as understood by Christians consists in the beatifying vision of God himself, according to the 1 John: “We shall see God as he is” (3:2). For man, to attain this ultimate good exceeds his natural powers, and thus, an additional principle (grace) is required by which he is ordered to the supernatural end (*finis supernaturalis*). Perfect human happiness consists in being united with God in knowledge and love. This happiness is not merely something of the eschatological future; already in this life, through the theological virtues of hope, faith, and love, man is united with God in an anticipatory way (*inchoative*).

The distinction of a twofold “ultimate good,” one of which apparently is not wholly “ultimate,” is not easy to understand and raises several questions. What Aquinas certainly does not mean is to distinguish between two factual forms of life, a Christian form of life versus a non-Christian form of life based exclusively on (human) nature and its intrinsic possibilities. It seems to me that he is not really interested in the alternative of a secular way of life apart from the Christian revelation. His starting point is not so much “nature” taken as prior to historical revelation in order to show its possible receptivity to the event of the “supernatural.” Thomas starts, rather, with the doctrine

of Christian faith stating that perfect human happiness consists in the vision of God. The essential question to be asked is then not so much *whether* human happiness in fact consists in the vision of God's essence, but rather, *how* to argue for its truth. The approach can be described as follows: given the fact that, as we (Christians) hold in faith, the ultimate end of man consists in the vision of God (still independently of the question of whether grace is required in order to attain this end), how can we understand this truth? In other words, how can we *deduce* from the dynamism of human (intellectual) nature that the ultimate perfection of such an intellectual nature must be understood to consist in the perfect knowledge of the absolute essence? This, what I call "intellectual dynamism," is what the phrase "natural desire" refers to.²⁴ In the beginning of the *prima secundae*, we see Aquinas arguing, step by step, that human happiness must be understood to consist essentially in the vision of the divine essence (q. 3), and this prior to the issue of how this happiness may be in fact attained, *per naturalia* or by supernatural grace (q. 5, a. 5).²⁵ Given human nature, and given the teleological drive of that nature (its *appetitus* for knowledge), the ultimate perfection of the human being cannot consist in something other than in the perfect knowledge of the absolute (divine) essence. This deduction of the human perfect good is, in its essential structure, based on Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* in book 10 of the *Nicomachean ethics*.

According to Aristotle in book 10, perfect happiness consists in the *bios theoretikos*, the philosophical life of contemplation. The best way of living for man, Aristotle says, is the philosophical life dedicated to the best part of man, his intellect (*nous*), which is something divine in man. For, if the proper and best part of the human soul is the thinking part, the intellect, then it follows that the human perfect good is to be found in the excellent activity of the intellect: knowing the truth about reality.

The philosophical life of the intellect is a way of life that transcends, to a certain extent, the body and bodily needs. It is as if the

²⁴ Cf. the opening sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "All men by nature desire to know."

²⁵ Although Aquinas acknowledges a natural desire for the vision of the divine essence, this should not be understood as a "natural desire for the supernatural" (de Lubac). This whole formula is ill-conceived. If one speaks of the "vision of the divine essence" as being the highest form of knowledge that adequately fulfills the openness of the human mind (see *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8), the requirement of grace is not yet part of it.

philosopher seeks to become pure intellect, undisturbed by the vicissitudes and necessities of bodily life. The so-called self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*), which is a defining feature of *eudaimonia*, is most of all found in the contemplative activity of the intellect. The wise man, more than any other, transcends the needy and dependent condition of mankind; contemplating the truth is he perfectly satisfied and sufficient unto himself.

The almost superhuman character of the happiness of theoretical life raises an objection: would such a life not be too high for man? “For it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics* 10.1177b29). To this traditional warning against human *hubris*, Aristotle responds with an appeal to go for the highest: “We must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us.” (1177b34).

This famous passage on the *bios theoretikos* demonstrates the fundamental dualism of Greek philosophy and its understanding of human nature. In many respects, man is un-free and dependent: as a bodily creature, he is not self-sufficient, but stands in need of food, shelter, and other external goods. He is a mortal creature and exists, as such, far below the immortal gods who live their happy life of undisturbed contemplation. The ideal of the *bios theoretikos* seems unattainable for the fragile and mortal beings we are. For Aristotle, however, we must go, as far as possible, for the immortal life and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us, for even if it be small in quantity, much more does it surpass everything in power and worth. For Aristotle, the happiness of theoretical life implies, thus, that we must try to transcend our bodily and needful mode of existence. Man is body and spirit: the ultimate perfection of man consists in the full actualization of this spirit—that is, of his intellect—as far as possible considering the limits imposed by the body.

This Aristotelian conception of (theoretical) happiness is discussed by Aquinas in article 6 of the *Summa* question on human beatitude, where it is asked whether “beatitudo consists in the contemplation of the speculative sciences.”²⁶ From this answer, it becomes clear that this happiness of philosophical wisdom must be understood as rela-

²⁶ ST I-II, q. 3, a. 6 (“utrum beatitudo consistat in consideratione scientiarum speculativarum”).

tive to the human being as embodied spirit, since the human search for wisdom is intrinsically restricted by the condition of the senses. This is why the happiness of wisdom cannot be the true and perfect happiness. It represents an imperfect happiness, a certain participation of the perfect happiness.²⁷ For the human being, this imperfect happiness of philosophical wisdom is something to strive after; for the angel, however, being an intellectual creature without body, this happiness is his realized possession (*aliquid naturae*). This is important because it means that the connatural happiness of human (or angelic) creatures belongs to the order of (finite) nature itself. Given the finite determinedness of nature, the difference in the twofold happiness will follow logically from it, one according to nature (*aliquid naturae*), the other beyond nature (*finis naturae*).²⁸

Aquinas's anthropology is more complex than the body–soul dualism of Greek philosophy. For him, man is not only embodied spirit, a spiritual soul that is the form of the body (*forma corporis*), but also finite spirit, created in its being by God. The human soul transcends the material body insofar as it has a spiritual/intellectual nature, but even in this respect, as an immaterial substance, it has still a cause of its being. Here we see the ontological difference between materiality and finiteness. The human spirit, in search of its perfection as an intellectual being, may try, as much as possible, to transcend its body (and bodily needs), but it still remains a finite creature, as the angel is, susceptible of a perfection in which its nature as such (*finis naturae*) finds its fulfillment in God, as a principle on which the whole of nature depends. This means that, for Aquinas, the Greek happiness of philosophical contemplation does not reach further than the finite realm of the world.

Medieval ontology allows for more degrees of reality than Aristotle's dualistic ontology. According to the latter, one must distinguish between the corporeal reality of nature, on the one hand, and the eternal reality of the divine, which is pure form, on the other. Being is composed either of matter and form or of merely form. The Aristotelian deity is, in this sense, pure form, form without matter. "Divine" is, then, a qualification of a mode of existence that tran-

²⁷ Ibid.: ". . . consideratio scientiarum speculativarum est quaedam participatio verae et perfectae beatitudinis."

²⁸ See *ST I*, q. 62, a. 1: "Sed ultimam beatitudinem, quae facultatem naturae excedit, angeli non statim in principio suae creationis habuerunt: quia haec beatitudo non est aliquid naturae, sed *naturae finis*" (emphasis added).

scends the changeability and contingency of corporeal reality. The divine is permanent, without change, and self-sufficient. In medieval ontology, however, the status of “pure form” is attributed to the angels, spiritual beings that are part of creation and, therefore, dependent for their being on God.

Aquinas follows Aristotle in his formal deduction of the nature of human happiness. For him, too, happiness must consist in the theoretical operation of the intellect with respect to that intelligible object in which the natural dynamics of the intellect finds complete fulfillment. The object capable of fulfilling completely the intellectual desire for truth must be the absolute essence itself, the essence of the first cause of the whole of reality. From the transcendental—that is, unrestricted—character of the intellectual openness for truth, we can deduce that our intellect comes to rest only in the knowledge of the absolute essence. This is the argument based on the “natural desire.”

In the recent debate on de Lubac’s legacy, the notion of “natural desire” often functions in a different sense. It is taken in the sense of a concrete active tendency of human beings in their natural condition, prior to grace—an innate desire for the beatific vision, according to some, or only a desire for God under a natural respect, according to others.²⁹ In both cases, “natural desire” is taken to mean that people in their concrete existence long and strive toward God, whether or not identified as such. Aquinas, however, does not reason from (concrete) nature to (Christian) grace. On the contrary, he goes from the fact to the intelligibility of the fact: given the fact that, according to Christian faith, perfect happiness consists in the vision of God, how then can we understand that this must be the case? We see, with Aristotle, that all men naturally desire to know. Since an effect is known through its cause, there still is a desire for knowledge as long as there remains something to know about the causes of reality. Only when we know the essence of the first cause will the desire of the intellect come to rest.³⁰

The way in which perfect happiness (of knowing the divine essence) can be achieved depends on the divine assistance of grace. This next step introduces a new theological element that is absent

²⁹ The precise point of disagreement between the party of de Lubac and his opponents such as Feingold, Hütter, and Long, is formulated by Healy as follows: “Is there a supernatural finality imprinted on our nature, prior to grace?” (“Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace,” 548).

³⁰ See *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8.

in Aristotle. The path of philosophical wisdom appears to be not sufficient to bring the intellectual desire to its complete fulfillment. The reason is that the fundamental distinction between the finite realm of creation and the infinite being of God cannot be bridged through the finite powers of man himself. The beatitude of “eternal life” consists in, so to say, the “lively” connection of the finite with the infinite, and this connection cannot be effected by the powers of (finite) nature itself. What is needed is a supernatural principle—that is, grace—by which the human spirit is raised beyond its natural ability to the knowledge and love of God himself. Within the realm of (human) nature, the full perfection consists in the philosophical contemplation of the truth, as conceptualized by Aristotle in his *Ethics*. But this kind of happiness is still imperfect, since it falls short of the complete fulfillment of the intellect's desire in the knowledge of the divine essence. So, there are two kinds of happiness: the natural happiness of the philosophical life and the perfect mode of happiness that connects finite human life with its infinite source in God himself and, therefore, requires a supernatural assistance on the part of God.

Grace as Participation of the Divine Nature

The debate around de Lubac and his *Surnatural* has not only to do with the problem of finding the right balance between “on the one hand” and “on the other hand,” between the intrinsic finality of human nature for God and the absolute gratuity of grace. There is something in grace itself that is responsible for what seems to be a structural tension in any sound theological account of grace. Grace is a form of love between unequal partners: it is out of love that God does want to draw man to himself, to let him share in the good of eternal life, so that he may not get lost in the finiteness of human existence, enclosed in itself by the fact of death, but without thereby jeopardizing the divinity of God and the humanity of man. It is through grace that God intends to bring the human creature into a direct and intimate relationship with himself: man is drawn into God, into the inner life of God. Can this properly be thought without in some way acknowledging the immense risk for God, as well as for man, involved in this supernatural “adventure”?

God and man are extremely unequal beings: the one creator, the other a creature. How could they become “partners”? A relationship of friendship and love requires some sort of equality between the friends, as Aristotle knew so well. They must be able to love each other and return their mutual gift of love in a free manner. God's special

love (of grace) for man is, therefore, extremely risky. In a certain sense, man is not able, by himself, to respond to his love; he must be prepared by God, by God's grace, so that he can love God (with the love of charity) through his own voluntary act and, at the same time, an act of such a love in which God can recognize himself, a love that attains to God in himself. Only a love that is really divine can be recognized by God. Can, then, a creature love God in such a manner that it attains to God himself? God must assimilate man to himself, make him "divine-like," but in such a way that the human response to God's love must be a free response.

The vision of God, it became clear, is itself something divine, something of which no other being than God alone is capable.³¹ For a human being, it cannot be a connatural goal. He only can be called for it, predestined by God's elective love causing in the human soul a dignity and perfection that transcends his status as creature. Through grace, man is granted access to the community with God, sharing the good of divine life itself, which is, as such, not a connatural good and, thus, not a desirable good from the perspective of his nature.

Here we see emerging the decisive point of Thomas's account of grace. The vision of God is connatural only to God himself, since it requires a divine nature. For it to become a "connatural" end for man, either he must receive a new nature—but then he is not human any more—or he must, while retaining his human nature, receive somehow an additional nature that makes him akin to God. Thomas formulates this as follows: "by the nature of his soul [man] participates in God's nature, in accord with a certain likeness, by being in a way generated or created again [*per quamdam regenerationem sive recreationem*]." ³² Because of this new (participated) nature, we are said to be generated again as "sons of God." Only by participating in God's nature but nevertheless remaining human is man able to exercise the divine act of the vision of God.

But why exactly does the nature of the human soul need to receive in itself a sort of additional nature? Why use these strong words of what is almost a new creation? Let us try to explain this by starting from the will. The human will, Thomas says, is not by nature sufficiently ordered to God as object of beatitude. In order to convert itself to God (in the specific sense: *ut obiectum beatitudinis*), the will

³¹ Cf. SCG III, ch. 52: 'Videre autem Deum per ipsam essentiam divinam est proprium naturae divinae.'

³² ST I-II, q. 110, a. 4.

must be converted by a supernatural principle. Only when God converts the human soul to himself can man freely convert himself toward God, because his will is now, so to say, "empowered" in a way it was not before. At issue here is the fundamental finiteness of created nature: no creature can, by its own power, rise above its creaturely condition to the level of the Creator himself. Through grace, man is raised beyond his status as a creature to the level of God himself so as to become a "child of God," a member of God's family, as it were.

Through grace, man is endowed with certain supernatural principles of operation over and above his natural powers. God "infuses" into man some forms or qualities by which he is able to perform certain acts ordered to the supernatural good of eternal life. These additional principles of operation are called "theological virtues": hope, faith, and love (charity). They are virtues: they dispose the human subject to act well in relation to a certain end and good. By infusing the intellect with faith and the will with hope and love, God enables the human person to act in relation to God himself. An act of charity, for instance, proceeds from the corresponding virtue that is an intrinsic form of the will, enabling the will to move itself to its act and, thus, to be master of its act instead of being moved by an extrinsic agent. For Thomas, it is not enough for the human will to be moved (by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the soul) to love God: it must move itself to love God. Now, by the virtue of faith, the human intellect is enlightened so that it comes to know some truths about God that lay outside the reach of the light of natural reason. By the virtues of hope and love, the human will acquires an inclination to the supernatural good to which its natural inclination is not sufficiently ordered. One may say that the theological virtues inform and empower the human intellect and will beyond their natural range; they give man an additional power of knowing and willing with regard to a good that does not lie within the reach of his nature and that, therefore, is not a desirable good in relation to his nature.

This latter point sounds quite paradoxical: the infused virtues do not dispose the faculties of intellect and will in relation to a good that suits human nature! Acting according to human virtues makes the subject a good human person. But the theological virtues are, strictly speaking, not *human* virtues:³³ they do not perfect man in relation to his human nature. Because the theological virtues are not human virtues and do not dispose man toward a good corresponding

³³ Cf. *Questiones disputate de caritate*, q. un., a. 2, ad 15.

to human nature, Thomas thinks it necessary to posit a “participated divine nature” in the human soul in addition to the essential nature, a nature in relation to which the infused virtues can be understood to be virtues, making man act in accordance with his divinely transformed nature. While the human virtues are “dispositions whereby a man is fittingly disposed with reference to the nature whereby he is a man, the infused virtues dispose man in a higher manner and towards a higher end, and consequently in relation to some higher nature—that is, in relation to a participation [in him] of the divine nature.”³⁴ This is also why Thomas thinks it is important to distinguish between the gift of grace and the virtues that proceed from grace. While the infused virtues are located in the potencies of the soul—they are habits of knowing and willing in a certain way—the (created) quality of grace itself is located in the very essence of the soul. Grace is prior to the infused virtues in the same way that the essence is prior to the potencies that flow from the essence. In the following passage, Aquinas summarizes his view concerning grace and the infused virtues characteristically in terms of participation: “For as man in his intellective power participates in the divine knowledge through the virtue of faith, and in his power of will participates in the divine love through the virtue of charity, so also in the nature of the soul does he participate in the divine nature, after the manner of a likeness.”³⁵

The reason for Aquinas to speak here of “participation” is that he wants grace to be an immanent principle, an inherent form or quality, a likeness of God in the creature through which God moves the human person in such a way that he moves himself—*suaviter et prompte*—toward attaining the good of eternal life.³⁶ Conceived in terms of participation, the virtues of faith and of charity by which God lets man know and love himself are not meant to be a sort of detour through which God ultimately knows and loves himself via the human soul. The human soul does not remain passive under its transformation by the grace of God. Rather, through participation, the soul receives a form by which the human person is able to perform

³⁴ ST I-II, q. 110, a. 3: “Virtutes autem infusae disponunt hominem altiori modo, et ad altiorem finem: unde etiam oportet quod in ordine ad aliquam altiorem naturam. Hoc autem est in ordine ad naturam divinam participatam.”

³⁵ ST I-II, q. 110, a. 4.

³⁶ Cf. ST I-II, q. 110, a. 2: “Illis quos movet ad consequendum bonum supernatural aeternum, infundit aliquas formas seu qualitates supernaturales, secundum quas suaviter et prompte ab ipso moveantur ad bonum aeternum consequendum.”

the (divine) act of knowing and loving God really by himself, as proceeding freely from himself. They are acts of the human self as transformed and renewed by grace.

The concrete interplay between God's gracious initiative and the free human response is very complex and difficult to analyze. There is no question of God doing one thing and man doing his part as a sort of cooperation. In this regard, Aquinas's subtle analysis of the process of conversion is telling. Conversion, in the religious sense of the word, may be described as a free response on our part to God's offer of friendship and love; it has the structure of responding to a call, of saying "yes, I come." To start a friendship among equal human partners is often difficult enough, not to mention a friendship among such unequal partners as the human being and God. The initiative must clearly come from God's side. It is his invitation, wanting to share his own divine life with others, with human beings. But how can a human person respond freely to this divine initiative of grace? If God decides to direct a human person to himself as object of beatitude, it will happen infallibly. God liberates anyone he wants to liberate in a most certain way. How then can a human person respond freely if he cannot frustrate the divine will? For Aquinas, turning toward God must be a free act of the will by which man freely chooses to abide in the good that God offers to him. It cannot be a matter of God moving the human soul toward himself apart from the free act of the will by which man moves himself towards God. But at the same time, this free response of the human will is made possible by God's grace. God is not like a creature waiting with respect for the free decision of another creature. Only God can make our will to will freely without violence or force. In other words, man cannot open himself freely toward God (as object of his beatitude) without God opening this freedom towards Him. The conditions of beginning a human-divine friendship are, thus, very complex. Without a free response by the human partner, there cannot be a mutual relationship of friendship, but the divine partner must found the conditions (that is, the communication of a likeness of his nature) under which a free human response to God's invitation can take place.

In analyzing the interaction between God's gracious initiative and the free human response, Aquinas distinguishes three subsequent stages in the conversion of the will.³⁷ First, in order to receive the

³⁷ See *ST I*, q. 62, a. 2: "Triplex est conversio in Deum."

gift of grace (*donum habituale*) the human will must convert itself to God. It must open itself so as to receive the gift of grace from God. But the will cannot convert itself to God unless it is converted by God's drawing the human will toward himself, according to the well-known text from Lamentations: "Convert us, O Lord, to Thee, and we shall convert ourselves."³⁸ Second, having received from God the gift of grace, the human person is able to convert himself by his own free act to God in virtue of the intrinsic quality of grace he has received. This voluntary act of conversion by which the human being directs himself to the (supernatural) good that is God makes him worthy of supernatural beatitude (*meritum beatitudinis*). The voluntary conversion toward God by which man merits the good of eternal life requires the gift of grace, since it is only by a free will informed by grace that a human person can perform meritorious acts, acts that make him worthy of the supernatural good of eternal life. Grace cannot consist only in God's externally moving the human soul toward himself; it must also entail a gift of God (*donum habituale*)—that is, a created quality in the soul by which the human being is able to move himself, as through an intrinsic principle, towards God. Finally, the ultimate conversion of the will is that of the perfect love whereby man fully enjoys God. "Triplex est conversio in Deum": the conversion by which man prepares himself for the gift grace, the conversion by which the will informed by grace, moves itself voluntarily towards God, and the conversion by which the will enjoys eternal life in God and becomes *beatus*, which is the reward for the meritorious acts.

This subtle analysis of the different roles the human and the divine actor play within the *conversio* of man toward God shows nicely

³⁸ See *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 6, ad 1: "Conversio hominis ad Deum fit quidem per liberum arbitrium; et secundum hoc homini praecipitur quod se ad Deum convertat. Sed liberum arbitrium ad Deum converti non potest nisi Deo ipsum ad se convertente." In confirmation of his (anti-Pelagian) claim that man cannot open himself to God unless insofar as opened by God's grace, Thomas cites two texts from the Old Testament, one from Jeremiah—31: 18; "Converte me, et convertar: quia tu Dominus Deus meus"—and the other from Lamentations (5:21): "Converte nos, Domine, a te, et convertemur." The translation of the English Dominicans misses the point; it renders the *convertemur* in a passive voice ("we shall be converted"), while Thomas reads it in a medium voice ("God lets me convert myself towards Him"). More references to the passage from Lamentations appear in *De veritate*, q. 24, a. 15, ad 1; *SCG* III, ch. 149; *ST* I, q. 62, a. 2, ad 3; q. 23, a. 5; *Quodlibet* I, q. 4, a. 2, sc 1.

how sensitive Aquinas is in describing the human–God relationship in a noncompetitive way. One almost wants to speak here of God *respecting* human freedom, only the word “respect” does not express properly the (re)creative presence of God’s grace in the human soul, enabling the will to respond freely to God. Grace enables a form of love/friendship between unequal partners. As we said above, it is out of love that God wants to draw man to himself, inviting him to the good of eternal life, but without thereby jeopardizing the divinity of God or the humanity of man. To this supernatural good of eternal life man has no natural prerogative. Thanks to his intellectual nature he is *capax* of it, but entering actually into this relationship with God requires an inner transformation through grace. N&V