

The Debt of Sin and the Sacrifice in Charity A Thomistic Echo to Gary Anderson's *Sin: A History*

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FOR A FORMER Lutheran theologian, who by divine providence and by way of a not altogether easy theological journey, found his way into the full communion of the Catholic Church, Gary Anderson's *Sin: A History*¹ is as salient as it is salutary. Though I frankly admit, the remnants of old Lutheran theological habits and reflexes, very hard to jettison by unlearning, still stirred when confronted with the idea—characterized by Anderson as profoundly biblical—that almsgiving is one if not the principal means by which the debt of sin may be repaid. Did not, after all, the Reformation unmask this idea as the most pernicious, sinful attempt at “self-redemption” (*Selbsterlösung*) and was not the important Lutheran Reformer Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), a close friend of and co-operator with Martin Luther, acclaimed as social reformer precisely for the invention and broad implementation of the “common chest” that was meant in one fell stroke to get rid simultaneously of beggars and of almsgiving?² To put it in different and more conciliatory terms, Anderson's book is of significant ecumenical

¹ Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). For two discussions and engagements of the book, as informative as instructive, see Paul J. Griffiths's review, “In the Red,” *Commonweal* 137, no. 2 (January 29, 2010): 25–26, and Bruce D. Marshall's review essay, “Treasures in Heaven,” *First Things* 199 (January 2010): 23–26.

² The Bugenhagen scholar Kurt K. Hendel puts the matter as succinctly as one can wish: “The poor chest, envisioned as the community's chief means of caring for its poor, was a centralized, carefully administered, accountable system. Its focus was carefully defined. For the sake of efficiency and control, Bugenhagen expected all

relevance, and that for at least two reasons: first, the book—in light of its argument for an undeniable grammar of sin as debt and of almsgiving as the first and foremost means of repaying this debt—invites Protestants to reconsider whether one of their most cherished polemics against the Catholic faith might indeed be biblically unfounded. And second—in light of some rather peculiar developments, to say the least, in Catholic life and piety since the 1960s—Anderson's book invites contemporary Catholics to rediscover the biblical warrants for not a few traditional Catholic practices of piety and their concomitant beliefs. In order to contribute directly to the latter—the Catholic rediscovery—and indirectly to the former—the Protestant reconsideration—I take *Sin: A History* as the welcome occasion for a *ressourcement* in Thomas Aquinas's theology of sin and redemption, a theology equally relevant, I would like to submit, for contemporary Catholics and Protestants.³ That sin is first and foremost a debt in need of being repaid is, indeed, central to Thomas's way of understanding the Incarnation and the Passion of Christ. And realizing this is tantamount to realizing that Thomas is a profoundly biblical theologian who synthesized a tradition of patristic and medieval exegesis and theology, and that his synthesis to a surprising degree anticipates and confirms Anderson's important exegetical rediscovery.

In the following, I would like to prepare the ground for bringing Thomas's theology of sin and redemption into a constructive dialogue with Anderson's book. However, in this brief essay, I shall be able to act merely

resources designated for the care of the poor to be deposited in and disbursed from the poor chest. *Begging was strictly opposed, and private almsgiving was discouraged.* The Reformer also suggested that the poor be identified and evaluated, and that only the worthy poor receive regular support" ("The Care of the Poor: An Evangelical Perspective," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15 [1988]: 526–32, at 532; my emphasis). "Although love for neighbor and the service of God were obviously not new concepts, they were now promoted as the sole impetus for the care of the poor since the good works piety of the medieval church was rejected by the evangelical reformers. Bugenhagen also recognized that the decentralized, voluntary almsgiving of the Middle Ages had to be reformed both for theological and practical reasons. He maintained, therefore, that caring for the poor was not a matter of free choice but a responsibility of the individual Christian and of the Christian community, and he proposed the organized, centralized, and regulated system of the poor chest as a corrective for the decentralized practice of begging and almsgiving. Indeed, begging was repeatedly forbidden in the church orders" ("Johannes Bugenhagen: A Retrospect on His 500th Birthday," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12 [1985]: 277–89, at 285f.).

³ For a comprehensive study of this topic, see Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Godly Image: Christ and Salvation in Catholic Thought from Anselm to Aquinas* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1990), and more recently, idem, "Sonship, Sacrifice, and Satisfaction: The Divine Friendship in Aquinas and the Renewal of Christian Anthropology," *Letter & Spirit* 3 (2007): 71–93.

as a tour-guide who will take the reader on one particular path through Thomas's mature *opus magnum*, his *Summa theologiae*, a path rarely taken in recent years; it is to be hoped that now, emboldened by Anderson's exegetical argument, other readers will take the path more frequently.

This tour will comprise three stations. It will commence in the *prima secundae* with Thomas's discussion of the debt of punishment consequent upon sin. From there I will turn to Thomas's interpretation of Christ's priesthood and Passion in the *tertia pars*. Finally, at the third station, I will attend to the all-important but often misunderstood human participation in Christ's satisfactory sacrifice. Here I will turn briefly to Baptism, the Eucharist, and alms deeds. It will become clear that the debt of punishment on account of sin is not simply cancelled through Christ's expiation for the sins of the whole world. Rather, the debt of punishment becomes, in and through Christ's expiatory sacrifice in charity, the occasion for the sinner to be restored to the order of charity, a restoration in which the sinner's participation is indispensable, indeed, crucial. To put the matter in simple conceptual terms: the debt of punishment—an indispensable entailment of divine justice—is transformed by the order of divine charity into an instrument that restores the sinner to the very order of charity itself.

The Stain of Sin and the Debt of Punishment: Violating the Order of Charity

Allow me first to recall briefly Thomas's fundamentally Augustinian concept of evil and sin. Evil is a partial privation of good and, more specifically, the absence of a specific good that is due. Sin is either the absence of a due act, interior or exterior, in reference to God or an act contrary to what is due to God. Consequent upon original sin, all powers of the human soul are left destitute of their proper order whereby they are naturally directed to virtue. Thomas has in mind this destitution of the proper order of intellect, will, and the sense appetites when he considers the four wounds of human nature consequent upon sin: ignorance, malice, weakness, and concupiscence.⁴ Moreover, and more importantly for our concerns, sin causes a stain

⁴ *Summa theologiae* (ST) I-II, q. 85, a. 3: "As a result of original justice, the reason had perfect hold over the lower parts of the soul, while reason itself was perfected by God, and was subject to Him. Now this same original justice was forfeited through the sin of our first parent, as already stated [q. 81, a. 2]; so that all the powers of the soul are left, as it were, destitute of their proper order, whereby they are naturally directed to virtue; which destitution is called a wounding of nature.

"Again, there are four of the soul's powers that can be the subject of virtue, as stated above [q. 61, a. 2], viz. the reason, where prudence resides, the will,

on the soul (“macula peccati”) and furthermore incurs a liability of punishment (“reatus poenae”), which is to be understood as a debt of punishment (“debitum poenae”).

Hence, besides contributing its part to the four wounds of human nature, every sinful act leaves two things, a stain on the sinner’s soul and the sinner’s guilt. What does Thomas mean by “stain on the sinner’s soul” and why should it matter? Thomas explains in *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 86, a. 1: The human soul has a twofold splendor (“nitor”): one from the natural light of reason whereby human beings are directed to their actions; the other from the illumination of the divine light, that is, the wisdom and grace whereby humans are perfected in order to do good and fitting actions. “Now, when the soul cleaves to things by love, there is a kind of contact in the soul.”⁵ Consequently, when human beings sin, they cleave to certain things contrary to the light of reason and contrary to the divine law. The loss of the splendor of the human soul is occasioned by such contact, which “is metaphorically called a stain on the soul.” Thomas holds that “the stain of sin remains in the soul even when the act of sin is past.”⁶ For the stain “denotes a blemish in the brightness of the soul, on account of its withdrawing from the light of reason or of the divine law.”⁷

The second thing each actual sin leaves after the act is the sinner’s liability for punishment, the “reatus poenae.”⁸ Significantly, Thomas interprets this liability for punishment, this “reatus poenae” as a debt of

where justice is, the irascible, the subject of fortitude, and the concupiscible, the subject of temperance. Therefore in so far as the reason is deprived of its order to the true, there is the wound of ignorance; in so far as the will is deprived of its order to the good, there is the wound of malice; in so far as the irascible is deprived of its order to the arduous, there is the wound of weakness; and in so far as the concupiscible is deprived of its order to the delectable, moderated by reason, there is the wound of concupiscence.

“Accordingly these are the four wounds inflicted on the whole of human nature as a result of our first parent’s sin. But since the inclination to the good of virtue is diminished in each individual on account of actual sin, as was explained above [aa. 1, 2], these four wounds are also the result of other sins, in so far as, through sin, the reason is obscured, especially in practical matters, the will hardened to evil, good actions become more difficult and concupiscence more impetuous.” (All English translations of the *Summa theologiae* are taken from the 1920 English Dominican Province translation, *Summa Theologica* [New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947].)

⁵ *ST* I–II, q. 86, a. 1.

⁶ *ST* I–II, q. 86, a. 2.

⁷ This stain of sin remains as long as the human being remains out of this light, that is, until the human being repents and returns to the light of reason and the Divine law.

⁸ *De malo*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 14.

punishment, a “debitum poenae.”⁹ The sinner stands in the position of debtor in relationship to divine justice. What is actually due to the sinner is punishment. Consequently, the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, in their translation of the *Summa theologiae*, render the liability for punishment, the “reatus poenae” itself as “debt of punishment,” a felicitous decision I will make my own in the following. Sin, being either the absence of a due act in reference to God or an act contrary to what is due to God, disturbs the universal order of divine governance. And because God delights in the order of divine justice, punishment is due as the payment that balances out the equality of justice.

It is admittedly rather strange for and even offensive to modern sensibilities that, according to Thomas, God is both merciful *and* just, that justice is as much a divine perfection as is mercy, and that in the absolute simplicity of the divine essence, mercy and justice are one.¹⁰ Hence, even when love and mercy rule, the requirements of divine justice must be met lest God act against justice. Unsurprisingly, when in *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 86, a. 6, Thomas addresses the question whether the debt of punishment remains after sin, he insists in the *sed contra* (with reference to 2 Kings 12:13–14, the prophet Nathan communicating God’s message to David regarding his crimes of adultery and murder) that “a man is punished by God even after his sin is forgiven: and so the debt of punishment remains, when the sin has been removed.”¹¹ In unfolding his own answer to the question, Thomas considers two aspects of the sin: the guilty act and the subsequent stain on the soul.

Since by the guilty act, the sinner has transgressed the order of divine justice, only an act of penal compensation (“recompensatio poenae”) will restore him or her to the equality of justice. According to the order of divine justice, the one who has too much indulged his or her own will and has consequently transgressed God’s commandments suffers, either willingly or unwillingly, something contrary to what he or she would wish. “This restoration of the equality of justice by penal compensation

⁹ “Ad secundam quaestionem dicendum, quod quicumque est debitor alicujus, per hoc a debito absolvitur quod debitum solvit; et quia reatus nihil est aliud quam debitum poenae; per hoc quod aliquis poenam sustinet quam debebat, a reatu absolvitur” (*In IV Sent.*, d. 21, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 2).

¹⁰ Cf. *ST* I, q. 3 and *ST* I, q. 21, esp. a. 4: “Whether in Every Work of God There Are Mercy and Justice?” In the response to the first objection, Thomas anticipates in a nutshell the way he conceives divine mercy and justice to be one in God, but to be ordered in God’s works by way of love such that justice is always grounded in mercy: “In the justification of the ungodly, justice is seen, when God remits sins on account of love, though He Himself has mercifully infused that love.”

¹¹ *ST* I–II, q. 87, a. 6 *sed contra*.

is also to be observed in injuries done to one's fellow [humans]. Consequently it is evident that when the sinful or injurious act has ceased there still remains the debt of punishment."¹² And what removes this debt of punishment is satisfaction.

Nota bene: the order of divine justice could surely have been accommodated differently by God. If God had somehow willed to liberate human beings from sin without satisfaction, God could have done so, of course, without acting against justice. In the *tertia pars*, where Thomas considers Christ's Passion, he advances an important argument why it is most suitable for the healing of the human soul that God does not simply forgive without satisfaction. Thomas states, "A judge, while preserving justice, cannot pardon fault without penalty, if he must visit fault committed against another. . . . But God has no one higher than Himself, for He is the sovereign and common good of the whole universe. Consequently, if [God] forgive sin, which has the formality of fault in that it is committed against Himself, [God] wrongs no one: just as anyone else, overlooking a personal trespass, without satisfaction, acts mercifully and not unjustly."¹³ Thomas grants that it is not absolutely necessary for God that satisfaction be made for human sins, but he insists that satisfaction is indeed most suitable for the healing of the human soul. What Thomas has in mind here has, of course, all to do with Christ who "by His Passion made satisfaction for the sin of the human race."¹⁴ But we do not understand Christ's act of satisfaction fully, if we do not appreciate first in what way the removal of the debt of punishment by way of satisfaction is indeed most suitable for the healing of the human soul. In order to understand this point in greater fullness, we need to return to the stain of sin on the human soul and ask, how is the stain of sin removed? It is evident, Thomas holds, "that the stain of sin cannot be removed from the soul, without the soul being united to God."¹⁵ For, after all, it was through being separated from God that the soul suffered the loss of its splendor.

Now, how does Thomas think this removal of the stain and this union of the soul with God is to come about? First and foremost, the will is the faculty of the human soul by way of which the human is united to God—in this life, I should add. And therefore the stain of sin can be removed only if the will accepts the order of divine justice. That means for Thomas one of two things: either the human being on her or his *own accord* takes upon her- or himself the punishment of past sins, or the

¹² *ST* I-II, q. 87, a. 6c.

¹³ *ST* III, q. 46, a. 2, ad 3.

¹⁴ *ST* III, q. 46, a. 1, ad 3, echoing 2 John 2:2.

¹⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 87, a. 6c.

human being bears patiently the punishment God inflicts on her or him.¹⁶ Thomas explores this satisfactory punishment with great interest. Because a satisfactory punishment is in some way voluntary, it is transferable under one specific condition. He states in *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 87, a. 7: “[S]ince those who differ as to the debt of punishment, *may be one in will by the union of love*, it happens that one who has not sinned, bears willingly the punishment for another: thus even in human affairs we see [people] take the debts of another upon themselves” (my emphasis). And so “one may bear another’s punishment, in so far as they are, in some way, one.”¹⁷ It is not surprising then that already in his treatment of the debt of punishment in the context of the wider discussion of human sin, Thomas announces the key theme that later in the *tertia pars* unites the sacraments with Christ’s Passion: “*Christ bore a satisfactory punishment*, not for His, but for our sins.”¹⁸

We need one more piece in place to understand fully why Thomas regards satisfaction to be most suitable for the healing of the human soul. And this piece pertains to the central role of charity. What belonged to the splendor of the human soul originally was charity. For in the state of original righteousness, because of the gift of sanctifying grace, humans adhered to God by charity.¹⁹ Original sin destroyed this adherence by charity to humanity’s final end, union with God. So what is at stake in satisfactory punishment is twofold: (1) satisfaction restores the order of charity by way of a satisfaction accepted voluntarily in charity for the person wronged and for the wrongdoer; (2) substitutionary satisfaction presupposes a union of charity between the wrongdoer and the person who makes satisfaction.²⁰ Remember, Thomas holds that “when a soul

¹⁶ In both ways, Thomas says, “punishment avails for satisfaction . . . and although satisfactory punishment, absolutely speaking is against the will, nevertheless in this particular case and for this particular purpose, it is voluntary.”

¹⁷ *ST* I–II, q. 87, a. 8c.

¹⁸ *ST* I–II, q. 87, a. 7, ad 3; my emphasis.

¹⁹ *ST* I–II, q. 87, a. 3c: “Now in every order there is a principle whereby one takes part in that order. Consequently if a sin destroys the principle of the order whereby man’s will is subject to God, the disorder will be such as to be considered in itself, irreparable, although it is possible to repair it by the power of God. Now the principle of this order is the last end, to which man adheres by charity.”

²⁰ Eleonore Stump put this crucial point—easily missed or misunderstood in Thomas’s theology—in a felicitously succinct way: “Because, on Aquinas’s view, the point of making satisfaction is to return the wrongdoer’s will to conformity with the will of the person wronged, rather than to inflict retributive punishment on the wrongdoer or to placate the person wronged, it is possible for the satisfaction to be made by a substitute, provided that the wrongdoer allies himself with the substitute in willing to undo as far as possible the damage he has done. So Aquinas

cleaves to things by love, there is a kind of contact in the soul.”²¹ If the wrongdoer loves the person who makes satisfaction for him or her, there is a kind of contact in the soul of the wrongdoer with this person. *And if this person is a divine person, there is a kind of contact in the soul of the wrongdoer with God.*²² Christ’s satisfaction for human sin in charity both to the Father and to the wrongdoer allows for, invites, and, by way of sanctifying grace, brings about a restoration of charity through which the human adheres again to his or her final end, union with God. And adhering to God through charity inchoately attaches the soul to God such that the soul’s splendor is restored.

This leads us to our second station, Christ as priest and Christ as victim, Christ who bore in his Passion a satisfactory punishment for our sins, a punishment borne voluntarily, and more importantly, as a supreme act of charity, which restores all humanity to the supreme divine order of charity.

Christ’s Priesthood and Passion on the Cross: Restoring Humanity to the Order of Charity

At the outset of his consideration of Christ’s priesthood, Thomas enumerates three reasons why human beings are required to offer sacrifice—“sacrifice” meaning, most broadly, everything that is offered to God in order to raise the human spirit of God: “First, for the remission of sin, by which [the human] is turned away from God. . . . Secondly, that [the human] may be preserved in a state of grace, by ever adhering to God, wherein his peace and salvation consist. . . . Thirdly, that the [human] spirit . . . be perfectly united to God: which will be most perfectly realized in glory.”²³ Now, precisely these effects were conferred on us by the humanity of Christ: first, the blotting out of our sins (Rom 4:25), second, the reception of the grace of salvation (Heb 5:9), and third, acquiring the perfection of glory (Heb 10:19). And therefore, Thomas concludes, “Christ Himself, as [human], was not only priest, but also a perfect victim, being at the same time victim for sin, victim for a peace-offering, and a holocaust.”²⁴ And so Christ’s priesthood expiates human sin, and this in two respects. For two things are required for the perfect cleansing from sins. They correspond to the two

thinks that one person can make satisfaction for another only to the extent to which they are united, or that one person can atone for another insofar as they are one in charity” (*Aquinas* [New York: Routledge, 2003], 435).

²¹ *ST* I–II, q. 86, a. 1c.

²² Thomas states: “The act of the will consists in a movement towards things themselves, so that love attaches the soul to the thing loved” (*ST* I–II, q. 86, a. 1, ad 2).

²³ *ST* III, q. 22, a. 2c.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

things sin comprises—namely, the stain of sin (“*macula peccati*”) and the debt of punishment (“*reatus poenae*”).²⁵

The debt of punishment is entirely removed by the satisfaction that Christ offers for all humanity to God the Father. The stain of sin is blotted out by sanctifying grace, the principle of the divine life in the human being which the sinner receives through Baptism²⁶ and which after its loss through mortal sin can subsequently be restored through the sacrament of Penance.²⁷ For by grace the sinner’s heart is turned to God. Now, remember Thomas’s principle: “When the soul cleaves to things by love, there is a kind of contact in the soul.”²⁸ Since charity is a divinely infused virtue, the originating principle of which is sanctifying grace, by charity the soul cleaves again to God—with whom there is therefore a kind of contact in the soul, which is the soul’s splendor. Thomas teaches that the priesthood of Christ produces both these effects.²⁹

Three points are crucial: First, Christ’s satisfaction comports fully with divine mercy and divine justice:

That man should be delivered by Christ’s Passion was in keeping with both His mercy and His justice. With His justice, because by His Passion Christ made satisfaction for the sin of the human race; and so man was set free by Christ’s justice: and with His mercy, for since man of himself could not satisfy for the sin of all human nature . . . God gave him His Son to satisfy for him. . . . *And this came of more copious mercy than if He had forgiven sins without satisfaction.* Hence it is said (Eph ii.4): “God, who is rich in mercy, for His exceeding charity wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together in Christ.”³⁰

Second, Christ’s satisfaction allows for a human participation, if the human being is united with Christ in charity:

²⁵ ST III, q. 22, a. 3.

²⁶ ST III, q. 69, a. 4. Thomas expresses the effect of baptism most beautifully in his brief response to the question “Whether the Effect of Baptism Is to Open the Gates of the Heavenly Kingdom?” (ST III, q. 69, a. 7): “To open the gates of the heavenly kingdom is to remove the obstacle that prevents one from entering therein. Now this obstacle is guilt and the debt of punishment. But it has been shown above . . . that all guilt and also all debt of punishment are taken away by Baptism. It follows, therefore, that the effect of Baptism is to open the gates of the heavenly kingdom.”

²⁷ ST III, q. 89, a. 1.

²⁸ ST I–II, q. 86, a. 1.

²⁹ “For by its virtue grace is given to us, by which our hearts are turned to God. . . . Moreover, He satisfied for us fully, inasmuch as ‘He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows’ (Isa liii.4) (ST III, q. 22, a. 3).”

³⁰ ST III, q. 46, a. 1, ad 3; my emphasis.

Christ's Passion is applied to us even through faith, that we may share in its fruits, according to Rom iii.25: 'Whom God hath proposed to be a propitiation, through faith in His blood.' But the faith through which we are cleansed from sin is not *lifeless faith*, which can exist even with sin, but *faith living* through charity; that thus Christ's Passion may be applied to us, not only as to our minds, but also as to our hearts. And even in this way sins are forgiven through the power of the Passion of Christ.³¹

Third, Christ's sacrifice on the Cross restores humanity to the order of charity: "Christ's Passion was the *offering* of a *sacrifice*, inasmuch as He endured death of His own free-will out of *charity*."³² Satisfaction pertains to the debt of punishment, which refers to justice. Sacrifice, by way of which satisfaction is made, pertains to the restoration of the inchoate union between soul and God, which refers to charity. A sacrifice in perfect charity can make satisfaction precisely because in satisfaction the affection and devotion of the offerer is what is measured. And Christ's human affection and devotion, because of their hypostatic union with the divine nature, were absolutely perfect. It is here that Thomas's understanding of Christ's human nature as the *instrument* of his divinity comes into full play. Thomas had inherited this theologoumenon from patristic theology.³³ Christ's sacrifice was most efficacious for blotting out sins, because Christ's human nature operated by virtue of the divine.³⁴

How do we remain continuously united with this sacrifice out of charity through which Christ made a perfect satisfaction for the sins of all humanity? When considering Christ the priest and Christ the victim, Thomas anticipates the answer to this question by pointing to the Eucharistic sacrifice: "The Sacrifice which is offered every day in the Church is not distinct from that which Christ Himself offered, but is a

³¹ ST III, q. 49, a. 1, ad 5.

³² ST III, q. 47, a. 4 ad 2; my emphasis.

³³ For an extensive discussion of this crucial aspect of Thomas's Christology, see Theophil Tschipke, O.P., *Die Menschheit Christi als Heilsorgan der Gottheit unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Lehre des heiligen Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg: Herder, 1940). Cf. now the recent French translation: *L'humanité du Christ comme instrument de salut de la divinité* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2003).

³⁴ ST III, q. 22, a. 3, ad 1. In order to support this understanding, Thomas appeals to a famous passage from Augustine's *De Trinitate* (4, 14), a passage frequently cited by medieval theologians: "Four things are to be observed in every sacrifice—to whom it is offered, by whom it is offered, what is offered, for whom it is offered; the same one true Mediator reconciling us to God by the sacrifice of peace, was one with Him to Whom it was offered, united in Himself those for whom He offered it, at the same time offered it Himself, and was Himself that which He offered."

commemoration thereof.”³⁵ Thomas cites from Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* (10, 20): “Christ Himself both is the priest who offers it and the victim: the sacred token of which He wished to be the daily Sacrifice of the Church.” Thus we reach our third and final station.

Being Restored to Charity by Participating in the Sacrifice out of Charity

Thomas is very clear that there is only one explicitly revealed way to secure the effects of Christ’s Passion. We must be configured to Christ, and this occurs sacramentally in Baptism. Thomas appeals to Romans 6:4: “For we are buried together with Him by baptism into death.” It is for this reason that at Baptism, no punishment of satisfaction is imposed upon the candidates, because they are fully delivered by Christ’s satisfaction. It is an altogether different matter, however, after Baptism. Thomas states: “But because, as it is written (1 Pet iii. 18), ‘Christ died but once for our sins,’ therefore [one] cannot a second time be likened unto Christ’s death by the sacrament of Baptism. Hence it is necessary that those who sin after Baptism be likened unto Christ suffering [*configurentur Christo patienti*] by some form of punishment or suffering which they endure in their own person.”³⁶

Thomas regards Baptism as an objective incorporation into the Passion and death of Christ and consequently the communication of Christ’s Passion to every baptized person “so that he is healed just as if he himself had suffered and died.”³⁷ And because Christ’s Passion is a sufficient satisfaction for all the sins of all human beings, the baptized person is consequently “freed from the debt of all punishment due to him for his sins, just as if he himself had offered sufficient satisfaction for all his sins.”³⁸ Hence Baptism is the sacrament that accounts for the first consequence of sin, the debt of punishment.

But now we must turn to what is even more important, and what, according to Thomas, is the true end of Christ’s Passion. Remember that Thomas insists that the stain of sin on the soul can be removed only by the soul’s re-attachment to God in charity. For, after all, it was through being separated from God that the soul suffered the loss of its splendor. Thomas thinks this re-attachment of the soul comes about by way of the will. For the will is the faculty of the human soul by way of which the human adheres to God: “when the soul cleaves to things by love, there is

³⁵ *ST* III, q. 22, a. 3, ad 2.

³⁶ *ST* III, q. 49, a. 3 ad 2.

³⁷ *ST* III, q. 69, a. 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

a kind of contact in the soul.”³⁹ And charity is exercised by the faculty of the will. So when the soul cleaves to God by charity, there is a contact in the soul, the soul is re-attached to God in charity—and that is nothing but the incipient union of the soul with God in charity.⁴⁰

And here the Eucharist comes fully into play. Thomas understands the Eucharist in immediate correlation to and distinction from Baptism: “Baptism is the sacrament of Christ’s death and Passion, according as [one] is born anew in Christ in virtue of His Passion; but the Eucharist is the sacrament of Christ’s Passion according as [one] is made perfect in union with Christ Who suffered. Hence, as Baptism is called the sacrament of Faith, which is the foundation of the spiritual life, so the Eucharist is termed the sacrament of Charity, which is ‘the bond of perfection’ (Col iii.4).”⁴¹

The key word here is *charity*, which, according to Colossians 3:4, is the bond of perfection. Unlike Baptism, which “is directly ordained for the remission of punishment and guilt,”⁴² the Eucharist is given for those baptized into Christ’s death to be nourished and perfected through Christ. What does Thomas have in mind here?

As is well known, Thomas consistently considers the Eucharist in two respects, as sacrament under the aspect of communion and as sacrifice under the aspect of offering. Considered as a sacrament, the Eucharist has a strengthening and perfecting power. According to the intensity of the bond of charity between Christ and us as we devoutly receive Christ’s sacred Body and Blood, we grow in charity, and consequently we participate with ever-growing devotion in the Eucharistic sacrifice by uniting in charity our own spiritual self-offering with Christ’s sacrifice to the Father.

Considered as a sacrifice under the aspect of offering, the Eucharist has a satisfactory power pertaining to post-baptismal sins. If one were to consider only the quantity of what is being offered—the sacred Body and Blood of Christ of the one sacrifice on Calvary—this offering suffices to satisfy for all punishment. Yet crucially, Thomas reminds us that in satisfaction, the affection and the devotion—in short, the effects of charity—of the offerer or the one for whom it is offered are weighed and not the

³⁹ ST I–II, q. 86, a. 1c.

⁴⁰ This incipient union of the soul with God in charity is the beginning of the mystical life to which every baptized Christian is called. See on this topic, indispensable for Christian existence in the twenty-first century, the important work by John G. Arinterro, O.P., *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*, 2 vols., trans. Jordan Aumann, O.P. (St. Louis/London: Herder, 1949).

⁴¹ ST III, q. 73, a. 3, ad 3.

⁴² ST III, q. 79, a. 5, ad 1.

quantity of the offering. Hence, Thomas states, “although this offering suffices of its own quantity to satisfy for all punishment, yet it becomes satisfactory for them for whom it is offered, or even for the offerers, according to the measure of their devotion, and not for the whole punishment.”⁴³ The measure of affection and devotion is the measure of the union of charity between the offerer or the one for whom it is offered and Christ. For it is by this charity that he is united with Christ’s sacrifice. Hence the unity in distinction of sacrifice and sacrament integrates the demand of justice into an ever-intensifying circle of charity.

This is the sacramental pillar of the restored arc of the order of charity. We shall now turn to the other pillar of the restored arc of the order of charity, the human participation by way of mercy, which is an effect of charity. Alms deeds stand out most crucially here because they integrate the demands of justice and satisfaction into the encompassing circle of the sacrifice in charity. For ultimately, both pillars denote offerings out of charity, that is, sacrifices “offered to God in order to raise the human spirit to God in charity.”

Some, however, might want to ask whether alms should be understood at all as acts of charity rather than exclusively as acts of justice. For Daniel 4:24 (according to the *Vulgate*) says after all: “*Peccata tua elemosynis redime.*” “Redeem your sins with alms.” And satisfaction is an act of justice. Now, Thomas responds to this objection, as usual, with a distinction. Almsgiving is reckoned among the works of satisfaction and hence as an act of justice insofar as the pity for the one in distress is directed to the satisfaction for one’s own sin. But insofar as almsgiving is directed to please God, it has the character of a sacrifice. And an act of mercy united with Christ in charity, that is, done for God’s sake, has the character of a sacrifice.⁴⁴ So how does Thomas understand alms? In *Summa theologiae* II–II, q. 32, a. 1 Thomas defines almsgiving as “a deed whereby something is given to the needy, out of compassion and for God’s sake.” An alms deed is motivated by mercy and, since mercy is an effect of charity, alms deeds are acts of charity through the medium of mercy. Thomas is adamant about this aspect of alms deeds. Whereas almsgiving can be materially without charity, to give alms “formally,” that is, genuinely for God’s sake with delight and readiness, is possible only with charity.⁴⁵

Thomas usefully draws upon a traditional distinction of alms deeds and regards them as suitably reflecting the various needs of our neighbor. Seven bodily alms deeds correspond to the needs of the body: feeding the

⁴³ *ST* III, q. 79, a. 5.

⁴⁴ *ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 1, ad 2 and 3.

⁴⁵ *ST* II–II, q. 32, a. 1, ad 1.

hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, harboring the harborless, visiting the sick, ransoming the captive, and giving burial to the dead. Seven spiritual alms deeds correspond to the needs of the soul: prayer, instruction, counseling, comforting, reproving, pardoning the injury, and bearing one another's burdens.⁴⁶

What makes the discussion of alms in Thomas's theology so instructive is that, in his way of thinking, alms deeds follow the logic of sacrifice and satisfaction that already characterized the sacramental pillar of the restored arc of charity: the demands of justice—satisfaction—are integrated in the overarching horizon of the sacrifice in charity. The human response of satisfaction to the demands of justice, paying the debt of punishment, is elevated to a human participation in the sacrifice in charity.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to return to the beginning. The one single bond that in Thomas's theological synthesis holds together the debt of punishment consequent upon sin, substitutionary satisfaction, Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, and our participation in that sacrifice through Baptism, Eucharist, and alms deeds is the one bond of perfection, which is charity. In his Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, Thomas comments on the bond that stood against us on account of our debt of guilt. Colossians 2:13–14 states: "And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (RSV). Consider Thomas's terse but poignant commentary on this passage:

112 But how has God forgiven us? I answer that a person incurs two things by sinning, that is, a debt of guilt, and slavery to the devil. And so he explains how sins are forgiven: first, our being freed from slavery to the devil, and second, he mentions the removing of the debt of guilt.

113 He says, *having canceled the bond that stood against us*; this bond or written decree [*chirographum decreti*] . . . is a warranty usually employed in contracts. And whoever violates God's bond is subject to a debt of punishment. . . . Now the memory of this violation is called a bond. And it is Christ who has forgiven all by having canceled the bond, that is, the memory of the transgression, *which stood against us*. . . . The term *bond* is used because its violation is not forgiven in such a way as to bring it about that there was never any sin. Rather, such sin is not remembered by God as something to be punished . . .

⁴⁶ ST II–II, q. 32, a. 2.

115 How did Christ cancel this bond? On the cross, for *this he set aside, nailing it to the cross*. It was the custom for a bond to be torn up once a person had fulfilled all his obligations. Now man was in sin and Christ paid for this by his suffering. . . . And therefore, at the moment of Christ's death this bond was canceled and destroyed. And so he says, *this he set aside, nailing it to the cross*, by which he took away our sin by making satisfaction to God.⁴⁷

This is where Lutheran theology would usually tend to stop. But as Augustine famously and rightly stated: "God created us without us, but he did not save us without us."⁴⁸ And, according to Thomas, the very point of the active human participation in God's saving activity is the restoration of the human soul to divine charity, in virtue of which the soul cleaves to God, such that there is a kind of contact in the soul with God, an inchoate union between the soul and God. The very access to this inchoate union with God in charity is our participation in Christ's satisfactory sacrifice in charity. The debt of punishment is not simply cancelled in Christ. Rather it becomes the very occasion for the sinner's restoration to the order of charity and the sinner's soul to the splendor that comes from cleaving to God in charity. Active participation, "*participatio actuosa*," in Christ's sacrifice in charity is the way God chose most fittingly for sinners to become saints. We can see now how Thomas adopts the biblical mercantile grammar of debt and payment and employs it as an instrument of charity, to the end of restoring the sinner to the order of charity. "*Quoniam Deus caritas est*." "For God is love" (1 John 4:8).

I am grateful to Gary Anderson not only for provoking me by way of his book *Sin: A History* to read Thomas's theology of sin and salvation in a way that proves to be ecumenically fruitful, but also for offering my old Lutheran theological habits and reflexes a most welcome biblical escape valve. **N V**

⁴⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Colossians*, trans. Fabian Larcher, O.P., ed. Daniel A. Keating (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2006), 61f. (Marietti 130–32).

⁴⁸ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 169, 11.13 (PL 38, 923).