

Aquinas on Christ's Will to Die and Our Salvation

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Why the Psalms Matter for Biblical Thomism

SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, after composing commentaries on several books of the Old and New Testament, commenced work on his commentary on the Psalms.¹ The Psalms commentary originates in a period when commenting on the Psalms was a popular practice; in fact, many theologians began their careers with such works.² Thomas, on the other hand, turns to the Psalms while in the prime of his theological career. Why did he start so late? There are no clear answers, but perhaps the history of commentaries on the Psalms throughout the Middle Ages may shed light on Thomas's approach.

Aquinas wrote *Super Psalmos* at a time that Martin Morard describes as a change of "epochs."³ It seems that high Scholastic interest focused upon

¹ Enrique Alarcón, "Sobre el Comentario al Libro de los Salmos de santo Tomás de Aquino," *Espíritu* 148 (2014): 430–39, at 431. Thomas's commentary covers roughly one third of the Psalms (up to Ps 54) and breaks off abruptly. The Angelic Doctor is said to have ceased dictating it shortly before his experience on December 6, 1273.

² Martin Morard, "Entre mode et tradition: les commentaires des psaumes de 1160 à 1350", in *La Bibbia del XIII secolo: Storia del testo, Storia dell'esegesi*, ed. G. Cremonesi and F. Santi (Firenze: SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2004), 323–52; James Ginther, "The Scholastic Psalms' Commentary as a Textbook for Theology: The Case of Thomas Aquinas," in *Omnia Disce: Medieval Studies in Memory of Leonard E. Boyle, O.P.*, ed. Anne J. Duggan, Joan Greatrex, and Brenda Bolton (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005), 85.

³ Martin Morard, *La harpe des Clercs: Réception médiévale du Psautier latin entre*

Saint Paul and the synthesis of biblical theology.⁴ Neither Albert the Great nor Bonaventure produced written commentaries on the Psalms, and only in the fourteenth century do the Psalms return as a biblical book commented upon at medieval universities. Thomas's distinctive take on the Psalms therefore invites the following questions: what kind of theological message do they reveal for Thomas's *sacra doctrina* and how does it affect what is labeled as "biblical Thomism"?

It is worth emphasizing that the term "biblical Thomism" does not simply refer to exploring forgotten texts of Aquinas.⁵ Rather, it consists essentially in following the method or "form" of the Angelic Doctor's thoughts as the coordinates on which his doctrinal reflections can be located. Biblical Thomism gravitates toward biblical texts, circles around them, and builds a synthesis based on the testimony of Divine Revelation. It thus seeks to understand Aquinas's biblical reasoning and thereby elucidate his speculative approach.

Understood in this way, biblical Thomism approaches theology as the "resonation" of the Word of God.⁶ This resonation echoes the Fathers and gives birth to a synthesis via a continuous "unifying process" around the biblical center using all available knowledge and its consistent interpretation.

Returning to Thomas's commentary on the Psalms, then, we can only understand his style of interpretation by means of this unifying process. Thus, reading his *Super Psalmos* must unfold in tandem with reading those

usages populaires et commentaires scolaires (Paris: 2008).

⁴ See Gilbert Dahan, "Les prologues des commentaires bibliques (XIIe –XIVe siècle)," in *Les prologues médiévaux: Actes du colloque international organise par l'Academia Belgica et l'Ecole française de Rome avec le concours de la FIDEM, Rome, 26–28 mars 1998*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 427–70. See also: Robert Wielockx, "Au sujet du commentaire de saint Thomas sur le 'corpus paulinum' critique littéraire," in *Doctor Communis* (Vatican City: Pontificia Academia Sanctae Thomae Aquinatis, 2009), 150–84.

⁵ More about the Biblical Thomism and its proposals can be found in Jörgen Vijgen, "Biblical Thomism: Past, Present and Future," *Angelicum* 3 (2018): 263–87. See also the editorial introduction in *Towards A Biblical Thomism: Thomas Aquinas and the Renewal of Biblical Theology*, ed. Piotr Roszak and Jörgen Vijgen (Pamplona, Spain: Eunsa, 2018), and Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

⁶ Leo Elders, "Thomas Aquinas and the Fathers of the Church," in *Theological Innovation and the Shaping of Tradition: The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West from the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Ignaz Backus (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 337–66.

works of Saint Thomas in which he refers and quotes specific Psalms.⁷ The great number of these quotations in Aquinas's answer to the theological question (often in the *sed contra*, but also in the corpus of the article) make the tissue of that question biblical, testifying to the psalmist's argumentative value.

At the same time, to grasp the full message of Aquinas, it is also necessary to take into account the *Magna glossatura* of Peter Lombard and to compare it to the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae* [ST], which was written at the same time as the *Super Psalmos*. Precisely for that reason, our topic here will be a theme that is raised in both of these works: the Passion of Christ as a way of realizing our salvation. Therefore, in the hope of regaining Aquinas's soteriological framework, we will rephrase Saint Anselm, raising the question "cur Deus crucifixus?" Why the Cross? Psalm 21 in the Vulgate—"Deus, Deus meus quare me dereliquisti?"—offers a particularly suitable pericope for such analysis.

For Aquinas, Psalm 21 offers a lens through which to read the course of the Passion. From a hermeneutic point of view, Thomas interprets it *ad litteram* as a text illuminating the Passion of Christ, and he treats it figuratively as the story about David and his sufferings. As a type of lamentation, this psalm is interpreted by Aquinas as an integral part of five psalms that refer to Christ's Passion.⁸ Therefore, each psalm, although starting with groaning, anticipates salvation and thanksgiving. Thomas sees this same pattern in the way that Christ begins the prayer on the Cross; it is not an expression of despair but a recitation of the "way of salvation" that marks the beginning of his suffering. Hence, the perspective of interpretation, also supported by the title given the Psalm by Saint Jerome ("The Morning Stag") foreshadows, as the other side of the coin, the resurrection.⁹

Generally speaking, Thomas's interpretation of the psalm takes into account its linguistic nuances (i.e., in the Greek and Hebrew versions there is no verse 2, "look at me") as well as heretical interpretations (i.e., Theodore of Mopsuestia and Arius). He focuses, especially at the beginning, on the significance of Jesus being abandoned by God the Father. On his account, this abandonment can be explained in the sense of the Father's giving permission for the Passion, just like the prayer for taking the cup

⁷ Michael Waldstein, "On Scripture in the Summa Theologiae," *Aquinas Review* (1994): 73–94.

⁸ Aquinas mentions the following Psalms: 21, 34, 54, 68, and 108. See *Super Psalmos* 21, no. 1.

⁹ Jerome, *Psalterium Iuxta Hebraeos*, ed. H. de Sainte-Marie (Rome: Abbaye Saint-Jérôme, 1954), 32.

from Jesus can be treated as speaking on behalf of the members of the Mystical Body, or the corporeality of Jesus.

The first part of the psalm, which is in the form of questions, is for Saint Thomas a manifestation of the attitude of Jesus as he considers the causes of his Passion. Thomas confronts general questions about why Christ suffers or is the abandoned innocent, given that the Old Testament is full of assurances about God saving the righteous, whose glory shines when the good prosper. These arguments seem for Aquinas strong and “amazing,” but the answer is also fundamental. Saint Thomas sees in the psalm the tension between the two salvations: temporal and eternal, originating respectively from the Old Testament and the New Testament. The abandonment concerns a temporal understanding, which is the foretaste of the eternal one. The same thought is expressed in a commentary on another psalm (19), in which Thomas notices two ways in which God saves, which are exemplified by the salvation of the people on Christ’s left and right side.¹⁰ For Aquinas, the true salvation is not only a release from evil, but also a rooting in the good. It is not just breaking free from the embrace of the enemy (as indicated by the Hebrew understanding of salvation, breaking out of the hopeless situation, as in the case of someone surrounded tightly by the enemy); it is about finding an unexpected path of rescue and gaining permanent access to the good.

The concept of salvation, accomplished by Christ, is in the New Testament analogical to the relationship between the literal and spiritual senses of Sacred Scripture. The relationship between the two senses is by no means oppositional, in which one must be rejected if the other is to be accepted. It is not akin to a rocket that, when launched, loses unnecessary components along its flight path. For Aquinas, the spiritual sense is the development of the literal sense.¹¹ Thus Thomas does not undertake a strict division into two senses even as his commentary follows a certain path that always begins with a literal sense.¹² In the anthropology of Aquinas, man

¹⁰ *Super Psalmos* 19, no. 5.

¹¹ Gilbert Dahan, “Le sens littéral dans l’exégèse chrétienne de la Bible au Moyen Âge,” in *Le sens littéral des Écritures*, ed. Oliver-Thomas Venard (Paris: Cerf, 2009), 247; Andrzej Persidok, “¿Revolucionario o ‘genio simplificador’? Santo Tomás de Aquino en la Exégesis medieval de Henri de Lubac,” *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 3 (2015): 67–80; Ignacio Manresa “The Literal Sense and the Spiritual Understanding of Scripture according to St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 3 (2017): 341–73.

¹² See: *Super Psalmos* 8, no. 1; *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1. See also Piotr Roszak, “Exegesis and Contemplation: The Literal and Spiritual Sense of Scripture in Aquinas’ Biblical Commentaries,” *Espiritu* 65 (2016): 481–504.

does not come to spiritual matters directly, but rather through material means. That is also true with respect to salvation, which has to do with temporal liberation as the *inchoatio* of what salvation truly and fully is.¹³

What Is *Causa Passionis*? Soteriological “Lenses” of Psalm 21

During the Eucharist, the celebrant, when pronouncing Jesus's Words of Institution (the Words of Consecration), prays: “At the time he was betrayed and entered willingly into his Passion [Qui cum Passioni voluntarie traderetur].” The preserved adverb [*voluntarie*, “willingly”] regarding the method is extremely important. It emphasizes that the death which Jesus Christ underwent was not accidental or even contrary to his choice. Neither was Jesus's death an unfortunate coincidence, or the effect of a simple plot of opponents who caught him by surprise. Aquinas strongly underlines this characteristic of voluntary suffering by stating that “the Passion of Christ was dependent on his will,”¹⁴ reinforcing the point with expressions such as “he gave himself to death.” This invites a question: who or what is the “cause” of Jesus's death?

Thomas, using the Aristotelian description of causality (which, in the thirteenth century, was synonymous with the scientific approach), asks about the cause of the Passion. He offers a twofold response: Christ did not kill himself, but he was killed by others. These are the facts. So, in a sense, can Jesus be considered as the cause of his death and the resultant salvation that he brought?

We are dealing here with *modus dicendi*, “a manner of speaking”—a category often used in Thomistic exegesis to describe a thought which must be taken into consideration in order to grasp the presented thesis. Aquinas uses the *modus dicendi* of considering Christ as the cause of his death to stress the voluntary aspect of his Passion. Jesus did not take actions which could have prevented his death. He could have avoided the Cross by the power of his divine nature, but that did not happen. By not fleeing from death, Jesus thus contributed to the effect of the Cross.

It reminds us of someone who has not closed the window during the rain, says Aquinas.¹⁵ He or she is a cause of the wet floor in the room. In this way, Saint Thomas answers the question of how Christ wills his death. This opens the reflection of the true *causa passionis* and therefore the causative power of the Passion, which is the subject of question 47 of the *tertia*

¹³ Piotr Roszak, “The Earnest of Our Inheritance (Eph 1:5): The Biblical Foundations of Thomas Aquinas' Soteriology,” *Przegląd Tomistyczny* 23 (2017): 213–33.

¹⁴ *ST* III, q. 46, a. 9, resp.

¹⁵ *ST* III, q. 47, a. 1, resp.

pars. It is, however, worthwhile to begin with the analysis of the formulas which express the character of Christ's death as a precursor to interpreting the soteriological meaning of Psalm 21 and its resonance with *ST III*.

The Theological Meaning of Jesus's Voluntarily Undertaking His Passion

Early opponents of the Gospel perceived the death of the Christ, whom Christians recognized as God, as a scandal and stupidity. Saint Thomas observes in his commentary on the First Letter to the Corinthians that the Passion of Jesus appears to be

to Jews a stumbling block, because they desired strength working miracles and saw weakness, suffering and to the Gentiles foolishness, because it seemed against the nature of human reason that God should die and that a just and wise man should voluntarily expose himself to a very shameful death.¹⁶

Jesus's voluntary submission to death, however, reveals the power of God, which overcomes opponents' reservations. In addition, Saint Thomas, in his commentaries and systematic works, gives several reasons for this action of God. His *rationes* show the motives of God's action, indicating the harmony and appropriateness of God's conduct.

Among the main theological aspects of the death of Jesus, one which exceeds the simple statement of the fact of suffering is the "self-giving" that testifies to the double betrayal that the Son of God experienced.¹⁷ How can the Son's betrayal by the Father be fitting when his betrayal by Judas and others exemplifies sin? The same action can be judged according to the *ratio* of the action: on the one hand, the Father betrayed his Son in his freedom and gives himself out of love, but in the case of others, Aquinas notes, the motivations for the betraying of Jesus are different: "Judas betrayed [*tradidit*] Christ from greed, the Jews from envy, and Pilate from worldly

¹⁶ *Super I Cor* 1, lec. 3: "... Iudaeis scandalum, quia scilicet desiderabant virtutem miracula facientem et videbant infirmitatem crucem patientem; nam, ut dicitur II Cor. ultimo: crucifixus est ex infirmitate. Gentibus autem stultitiam, quia contra rationem humanae sapientiae videtur quod Deus moriatur et quod homo iustus et sapiens se voluntarie turpissimae morti exponat."

¹⁷ Among the many terms used by St. Thomas it is worth mentioning the following: *seipsum tradidit*; *passus est voluntarie*; *voluntarie mortem sustinuit*; *voluntarie subiit*; *voluntarie mortuus fuit*, *dando se ad passionem*, *seipsum pateretur*; *ex propria voluntate*; *Christus propria voluntate est passus*.

fear, for he stood in fear of Caesar; and these accordingly are held guilty.”¹⁸

Although the reasons Aquinas cites seem diverse, all of them transmit the same truth concerning the voluntary character of Jesus's death. They not only reveal the fundamental doctrinal truths about Christ himself and his work of salvation but also offer an example of moral action that Christians are called to internalize in themselves.¹⁹ In this manner, they express the divine way of overcoming evil by a voluntary choice of the greater good,²⁰ which is the essence of satisfaction.²¹

With the above in mind, what does it mean, then, to say that Christ entered “willingly” into his Passion?

*Willingness as an Expression of Power and
Truth about the Divine Nature of Christ*

Aquinas starts his reflection with the question whether the Passion of Christ is necessary for the salvation of man, and he answers it using the twofold Aristotelian distinction concerning necessity. The first type of necessity (absolute) is one which by nature excludes its opposite. In this sense, the Passion was not necessary, because the choice of such a way of the human salvation was not the only one possible. However, it has become necessary in the other sense (conditional) when external factors are involved, such as if someone stands in our way and forces us to stop. Human sin led to the situation in which the death of Jesus offers a fitting response by God to evil. This necessity of the second type is expressed by the language of fittingness (*convenientia*), which is used by Saint Thomas both when considering the Incarnation and when considering the death of the Son of God on the Cross.²²

Furthermore, Aquinas notes, the Passion of Christ was not necessary on the part of the Father who would impose his Passion on the Son; fulfilling the will of “the One who sent him” does not destroy the freedom of

¹⁸ ST III, q. 47, a. 3, ad 3.

¹⁹ Not so much as *exemplum*—external example to be imitated—but more as *exemplar*, that is a pattern to be applied in one's action.

²⁰ *Super Psalmos* 35, no. 3: “plus dat quam meruit”; *Compendium theologiae* [CT] I, ch. 217; *In IV sent.* d. 15, q. 1, a. 3, sol. 1, ad 2. That is why the Cross is “tota ars bene vivendi” (*Super Gal* 6, lec. 4). See also J. M. Meinert, “Divine Exemplarity, Virtue and Theodicy,” *The Thomist* 82 (2018): 235–46.

²¹ See Romanus Cessario, *Christian Satisfaction in Aquinas: Towards a Personalist Understanding* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982).

²² ST III, q. 1, a. 1, corp. See also Mark Johnson, “A Fuller Account: The Role of ‘Fittingness’ in Thomas Aquinas’ Development of the Doctrine of the Atonement,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2010): 319–40.

the Incarnate Word. Similarly, there is no need for Christ himself to betray himself “internally,” because “his suffering was voluntary.”²³ If, on the side of Christ, there is a consent to death, then he is a victim of an unjust trial and of evil, which is revealed during the Passion. What would such a decision prove? What does it signify?

In the context of question 56 of *ST* III, the fruitfulness of the resurrection, Thomas exposit the Passion, paradoxically, as the manifestation of the “power of God,” which “destroys death,” just as the resurrection of Jesus is the efficient (and exemplary) cause of our resurrection and return to life.²⁴

Why is the death of Jesus the “dying of death itself”? Does Christ’s voluntary acceptance of it matter? His acceptance of his human body was a union with “human nature” which, thanks to its relationship to the Word, gains the opportunity to overcome death. Jesus could save what he truly assumed. This emphasis in the Christology of Aquinas on the reception of the body exemplifies Thomas’s soteriological logic. On the other hand, it testifies to the status of the person of the Word who assumes the fullness of humanity without losing the fullness of his divinity. Saint Thomas explains, “Christ was not held fast by any necessity of death, but was ‘free among the dead’: and therefore he abode a while in death, not as one held fast, but of his own will, just so long as he deemed necessary for the instruction of our faith.”²⁵

According to Aquinas, Christ’s voluntary death testifies to the fact that our death and that of Jesus are simultaneously similar and different. As he explains in the *Compendium theologiae*, death, which consists in separating the soul from the body in us, occurs necessarily or by nature (*ex necessitate vel naturae*). But in the incarnate Lord it occurred by means of his own power and will (*ex potestate et propria voluntate*).²⁶ For we are subject to the natural finitude of being human, but in the case of the Incarnate Word, the power of divinity embraces both of his natures. Thus, his body and soul remain in unity by means of his divinity, and their separation requires a discrete act of his will that also manifests his power. This power over death manifests itself in his ability to “shout” from the Cross, which, according

²³ *ST* III, q. 46, a. 1, resp.

²⁴ *ST* III, q. 56, a. 1, ad 4.

²⁵ *ST* III, q. 53, a. 2, ad 2: “Christus autem nulla necessitate mortis tenebatur adstrictus, sed erat inter mortuos liber. Et ideo aliquandiu in morte mansit, non quasi detentus, sed propria voluntate, quandiu iudicavit hoc esse necessarium ad instructionem fidei nostrae.”

²⁶ See *Super Matt* 27, lec. 2 (ed. Leodegarii Bissuntini).

to Aquinas, along with his taking a short time to die (*velocius mortuus fuit*)²⁷ compared with the other convicts, contributed to the centurion's attestation to Jesus's divinity. This, in turn, leads Aquinas to a statement:

Yet we may not aver that the Jews did not kill Christ, or that Christ took his own life. For the one who brings the cause of death to bear on a person is said to kill him. But death does not ensue unless the cause of death prevails over nature, which conserves life. Christ had it in his power either to submit his nature to the destructive cause or to resist that influence, just as he willed. Thus Christ died voluntarily, and yet the Jews killed him.²⁸

Thus, Jesus's willingness is an indication of his divine nature and his will, to which everything is subordinated. The particular relationship of Jesus to his own death, which reveals that he is not a *purus homo* (but always *verus homo*), is at the center of interpretation in *Super Ioannem*:

But in Christ, his own nature and every other nature are subject to his will, just like artifacts are subject to the will of the artisan. Thus, according to the pleasure of his will, he could lay down his life when he willed, and he could take it up again; no mere human being can do this, although he could voluntarily use some instrument to kill himself. This explains why the centurion, seeing that Christ did not die by a natural necessity, but by his own [will]—since “Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit” (Matt 27:50)—recognized a divine power in him, and said: “Truly, this was the Son of God” (Matt 27:54).²⁹

²⁷ *ST* III, q. 47, a. 1, ad 2.

²⁸ *CT* I, ch. 230: “Non tamen dicendum est quod Iudaei non occiderint Christum, vel quod Christus ipse se occiderit. Ille enim dicitur aliquem occidere qui ei causam mortis inducit, non tamen mors sequitur nisi causa mortis naturam vincat, quae vitam conservat. Erat autem in potestate Christi ut natura causae corrumpenti cederet, vel resisteret quantum ipse vellet: ideo et ipse Christus voluntarie mortuus fuit, et tamen Iudaei occiderunt eum.”

²⁹ *Super Ioan* 10, lec. 4: “In Christo autem natura sua et tota alia natura subditur voluntati eius, sicut artificata voluntati artificis. Et ideo secundum voluntatis suae placitum, potuit animam ponere cum voluit, et iterum eam sumere: quod nullus purus homo facere potest, licet voluntarie causam mortis sibi possit inferre. Et inde est quod centurio videns eum non naturali necessitate mori, sed sua dum clamans voce magna emisit spiritum: Matth. XXVII, 50 recognovit in eo virtutem divinam dicens: vere filius Dei erat iste.”

Other terms that are associated with *voluntarie*, such as *sustinere* and *subiit*, refer to this understanding of the Passion, in which Jesus allows the suspension of his divine power. Both the divine and human will of Christ must together be willing his death, almost in a perichoretic manner. There cannot be contradiction between these two wills. Jesus's willingness proves, as Saint Thomas notes, that his source of suffering is not only external, but also has an internal *principium*.³⁰ Willingness illustrates the power of Jesus who overcomes death and iniquity. This is the reason why the mere physical presence of the Crucified among villains is not the most important point of the Passion narrative; rather, as Chrysostom observes, the conversion and introduction of a good villain to paradise is vital.³¹ And notably, the reader sees in the repentant thief a person who, willingly, has been converted to Jesus. The criminal now not only accepts his death as a just sentence but also embraces Jesus as the object of his love or desire.

Above all, Jesus's willingness expresses who he is: he is the Lord of nature, of life and, of death. This point is conveyed by Saint Thomas in *Quodlibet* I, where he stresses that Christ is true God and true man so that everything that is in him is in harmony with and subjected to what is divine (*subiecti voluntati Christi*). Christ's humanity thus suffers and experiences happiness. By virtue of the unity of Jesus's two wills, there was no *redundantia* between the higher and the lower actions of the soul, which does happen in the case of other people because of the natural connection between powers and the lingering effects of concupiscence. That is why one cannot speak of suicide with respect to Christ's Passion and death.³² In this vein, Saint Thomas also explains the words of Christ, "Destroy this temple," which Jesus intended to refer to his body. Aquinas analyzes the exact meaning of *soluite*; the Latin term indicates a solution rather than demolition, and he argues that the consent of Jesus should be treated in this way while actively opposing his enemies.³³

Why, then, did Jesus agree to be tormented? As we have already noted, he did so to draw attention to the need for such torture to be inflicted upon him—"need" understood here in the absolute sense.³⁴ His action invites reflection on why he suffered for us, *pro nobis*, when he was not required to suffer. Thomas reasons that Jesus respects our dignity and

³⁰ *ST* III, q. 48, a. 1, ad 1.

³¹ *ST* III, q. 46, a. 11, ad 1.

³² *Quodlibet* I, q. 2, a. 2, resp.

³³ *Super Ioan* 2, lec. 3.

³⁴ Thomas distinguishes between necessity as *coactionis* and *finis* (see, e.g., *ST* III, q. 46 a. 1, resp.).

builds reciprocity with humankind. He could have saved humanity with one act of the will, but the choice of the Cross and death implies the inclusion of people into a certain process. The thematic key is to understand the communication between the members of the Mystical Body with its Head—a motif present in the entire commentary on the Psalms, where this unity is constantly emphasized as the heritage of Saint Augustine and his *Christus totus*.³⁵ Therefore, Thomas does not exposit a legalistic understanding of the redemptive death of Jesus in the key of satisfying the wrath of God after the sin of man. Rather, he stresses the union of the faithful with Christ, a union based on solidarity, and this facilitates a true understanding of “reparation.”

Aquinas expresses Christ's willing acceptance of his Passion not only through direct phrases that emphasize this idea. The scriptural quotes themselves, which appear not merely as a simple illustration of theological truths, but rather as the opening and deepening of the studied subject, play an important role in his theological thinking.³⁶ In the case of the voluntary aspect of the Passion, an important confirmation of the scriptural witness is the quotation from Isaiah 53:7—“oblatus est quia ipse voluit” (“He was offered because it was his own will”)—which Aquinas cites several times in his writings. We find it, for example, in the commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew: “We are going up to Jerusalem” (see Matt 20:18).³⁷ It is the moment when Jesus is going to the city of Jerusalem with the will to suffer for the salvation of the world.

Willingness as an Expression of Christ's Obedience

In his exegesis of Psalm 21, Aquinas leads the reader as if on two parallel levels. On the one hand, he focuses on the sense in which the Passion brings the salvation of man. On the other hand, he perceives it as part of the meta-plan of the whole history of salvation—the need for redemption and the conquest of evil. This macro scale is complemented by Thomas's focus on the details of the account of the Passion.

The first level emphasizes Jesus's consent to the Passion. Thomas inter-

³⁵ Augustinus, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 142.3 (*PL*, 37:1846). See also Tarcisius van Bavel, “The ‘Christus Totus’ Idea: A Forgotten Aspect of Augustine's Spirituality,” in *Studies in Patristic Christology*, ed. Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1998), 84–94.

³⁶ See Piotr Roszak, “The Place and Function of Biblical Citation in Thomas Aquinas' Exegesis,” in *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas: Hermeneutical Tools, Theological Questions and New Perspectives*, ed. Piotr Roszak and Jörgen Vijgen (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2015), 115–39.

³⁷ *Super Matt* 20, lec. 2.

prets Jesus's death using his metaphysical coordinates of causality; therefore there is no problem for him that it is both voluntary (Jesus agreed to it) and the fault of the perpetrators. Jesus's consent to death indicates that his Passion is not a mere historical accident. It has sacrificial significance. Aquinas writes: "Christ did not suffer death which comes of sickness, lest he should seem to die of necessity from exhausted nature: but he endured death inflicted from without, to which he *willingly* surrendered himself, that his death might be shown to be a *voluntary* one."³⁸

For Saint Thomas, the Passion *ex propria voluntate* signifies Christ's acting in obedience to the Father.³⁹ The Father does not give an order to the Son as something external. Thomas states: "It is indeed a wicked and cruel act to hand over an innocent man to torment and to death against his will. Yet God the Father did not so deliver up Christ, but inspired him with the will to suffer for us."⁴⁰

Aquinas points to three possible understandings of how the Father "betrayed" the Son: (1) in his eternal will, the Father preordained Christ's Passion; (2) the Father inspired Jesus with the will to suffer by infusing charity; and (3) the Father did not defend him from torment.

For Thomas, Jesus's willingness dovetails with his obedience. This is possible when the "will to do" accomplishes something undertaken in freedom.⁴¹ There is no obedience where man has no way out and cannot act otherwise. Moreover, when obedience concerns difficult matters, which undoubtedly includes choosing to die, it is even more praiseworthy.⁴² It is clear, therefore, that *voluntarie* denotes more than a lack of "coercion." It is a positive expression of the will of Christ, which is full of virtues inasmuch as "per obedientia intelligitur omnis virtus" ("inasmuch as all virtue is known through obedience")⁴³ The will to suffer for us is not an "empty," autonomous will, free from being shaped by the good, but is rather emerging from the good and acting for the good. Christ's willingness is evidence of this awareness of goodness.

Saint Thomas deepens his reflection on the obedience of Christ when he develops the basis of the interpretation of the famous canticle of Philip-

³⁸ ST III, q. 50, a. 1, ad 2: "Christus non sustinuit mortem ex morbo provenientem, ne videretur ex necessitate mori propter infirmitatem naturae. Sed sustinuit mortem ab exteriori illatam, cui se spontaneum obtulit, ut mors eius voluntaria ostenderetur" (emphasis added).

³⁹ ST III, q. 83 a. 5, ad 5.

⁴⁰ ST III, q. 47 a. 3, ad 1.

⁴¹ ST III, q. 47, a. 2, ad 2.

⁴² CT I, ch. 227.

⁴³ *Super Phil.* 2, lec. 3.

pians 2. In Aquinas's exegesis, obedience is identified with humility:

Hence, in order to show the greatness of Christ's humility and passion, he says that he became obedient; because if he had not suffered out of obedience, his Passion would not be so commendable, for obedience *gives merit to our sufferings*. But how was he made obedient? Not by his divine will, because it is a rule; but by his human will, which is ruled in all things according to the Father's will: "Nevertheless, not as I will but as you will" (Matt 26:39). And it is *fitting that he bring obedience into his Passion*, because the first sin was accomplished by disobedience: "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19); ["The obedient man shall speak of victory" (Prov. 21:28)]. *That his obedience is great and commendable is evident from the fact that obedience is great when it follows the will of another against one's own*. Now the movement of the human will tends toward two things, namely, to life and to honor. But Christ did not refuse death: "Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous" (1 Pet 3:18). Furthermore, he did not flee ignominy; hence he says, even death on a cross, which is the most shameful: "Let us condemn him to a shameful death" (Wis 2:20). Thus, he refused neither death nor an ignominious form of death.⁴⁴

Saint Thomas illuminates the path of Christ's obedience, which overcomes the disobedience of the first parents. The logic of the superiority of obedience is not a matter of comparison. Rather, it emphasizes the greater good which lies behind obedience: "Christ's love was greater than his slayers' malice."⁴⁵ It follows the metaphysical rule that "causes are similar to their effects."⁴⁶ Accordingly, in his commentary on the Letter to the Romans, Thomas points out that the death of Jesus is not pleasing to God on the basis of the death itself (*ex communi mortis ratione*), for God did not make death (see Wis 1:13). Nor does God approve the behavior of the assassins, whose action, on the contrary, deepens the wrath of God. The relevant reason for Jesus's death must be that it is the cause of reconciliation between God and humankind. Thomas writes that such reconciliation

⁴⁴ *Super Phil* 2, lec. 2 (emphatic italics added).

⁴⁵ *ST* III, q. 48, a. 2, ad 2.

⁴⁶ *Super Rom* 5, lec. 5.

proceeds from the will of Christ suffering, which was a will formed to the endurance of death, in obedience to the Father . . . and out of love for men. . . . From this aspect Christ's death was meritorious and satisfied for our sins; it was accepted by God as sufficient for reconciling all men, even those who killed Christ.⁴⁷

The essence of Jesus's obedience is righteousness because it relies on the observance of the law and thereby makes people righteous. It does not contradict the motivation originating from "love," since Christ is obedient because of love.⁴⁸

In an interesting way, Saint Thomas's commentary on Psalm 21 foregrounds the will of Jesus to give himself up (*se daret*). In this context, the expression Christ's *votum* appears, which is used by Saint Thomas to reveal the desire of Jesus. Together with related quotes, it builds a "semantic network" in which Saint Thomas observes:

Christ repays these vows by giving himself to the passion, and furthermore when he gave his body for the food of the faithful. And so he says, "Vows," that is, sacrifices: "I will repay," on the altar of the Cross and the sacrifice of the faithful; and this I will do, "in the sight of those who fear him"—Ecclesiasticus 5: "He who fears the Lord, honors his parents."⁴⁹

The term *votum/vota* is mainly present in the liturgy (including the Mozarabic Rite), and in the corpus of Aquinas's works in the sense of the voluntary commitment that Christ undertakes. It is a use of freedom which determines a specific goal.

⁴⁷ *Super Rom* 5, lec. 2: "... quod processit ex voluntate Christi patientis, quae quidem voluntas informata fuit ad mortem sustinendam, cum ex obedientia ad patrem, Phil. II, 8: factus est obediens patri usque ad mortem, tum etiam ex charitate ad homines, Eph. V, 2: dilexit nos et tradidit se pro nobis. Et ex hoc mors Christi fuit meritoria et satisfactoria pro peccatis nostris, et intantum Deo accepta, quod sufficit ad reconciliationem omnium hominum, etiam occidentium Christum."

⁴⁸ *Super Rom* 5, lec. 5.

⁴⁹ *Super Psalmos* 21, 21: "Haec vota solvit Christus dando se ad passionem, et iterum quando dedit corpus suum in cibum fidelium; unde dicit, vota, idest sacrificia: reddam, in ara crucis et in sacrificium fidelium; et hoc faciam in conspectu timentium eum: Eccl. 3: qui timet dominum, honorat parentes."

Willingness as "Sacrifice": The Soteriological Sense of Jesus' Death

Thomas adds a further interpretive dimension to the voluntary nature of Christ's death with his emphasis on its sacrificial character. Christ's death may be described as a *hostia*—because of both the impurity/corruption caused by sin and the consent of Jesus's will to submit to the Passion.⁵⁰ Thomas, relying on the Augustinian theory of sacrifice, does not stress the *placatio* of God. Instead he sees the Passion as a deed so that "we may cling to God in holy fellowship, yet referred to that consummation of happiness wherein we can be truly blessed."⁵¹ It is not about changing the will of the insulted person to appease him but rather about establishing a stronger relationship with God. This stronger relationship can be established if some good is offered. Thus, the sacrifice is about the power of good, which leads to intimacy; that is why sacrifice has always been combined with feasts which testify to such a community. Having found this good in the human nature of the Incarnate Word, God is appeased.⁵²

Still, what is so "good" in the death of Jesus that it becomes a sacrifice which introduces man into a new communion with God? Saint Thomas's answer to the question is multivalent and based on his interpretation of the Scriptures; his analysis of the Psalms has a clear impact on his thinking.

Aquinas comments that the primary motivation for the Passion is love, and love is only possible in freedom of choice. If, then, the Passion is a maximal expression of love, it is also a maximal expression of choice, which, for Thomas, constitutes a great good that destroys the logic of evil. In the face of death, Jesus remains in goodness. Jesus incarnates divine goodness and reveals it fully in the hostile environment of his Passion and death as the *solutio* to evil. Thomas thus summarizes the effect in the following way: "Christ's Passion wrought our salvation, properly speaking, by removing evils; but the resurrection did it as the beginning and exemplar of all good things."⁵³

This *remotio mali* happened, however, not by Christ's fighting with evil directly, but rather through his increasing the presence of good even in a situation that seemed completely overwhelmed by evil. Thomas's analysis of God's fitting action indicates the way of God's conduct: it is a kind of

⁵⁰ ST III, q. 22, a. 2, ad 2.

⁵¹ ST III, q. 48, a. 3, resp: "... ut sancta societate Deo inhaereamus, relatum scilicet ad illum finem boni quo veraciter beati esse possumus."

⁵² ST III, q. 49, a. 4, resp.

⁵³ ST III, q. 53, a. 1, ad 3: "Passio Christi operata est nostram salutem, proprie loquendo, quantum ad remotionem malorum, resurrectio autem quantum ad inchoationem et exemplar bonorum."

“race” for a greater good in which evil is left behind. Therefore, redemption and salvation allow man to realize the good which has become impossible due to sin. It is the submission to the power of love that transforms man and opens up goodness for him. This is how the possibility of truly deserving eternal life opens up for man. It is not by man’s collecting arguments to convince God in the future. It is rather his conviction that God offers a free cooperation with God’s grace. We are “God’s co-workers.” The merit consists in the participation in the good which manifests itself in the “ability to voluntarily endure’ [all] because of God, because of love.”⁵⁴ That good found in human nature—in the voluntary death of the Incarnate Word and in the voluntary nature of Christ’s saving activity—is a gift of self. It rejects the image of a God who is looking for revenge and reveals God as self-giving. Furthermore, the exemplarity of Christ’s voluntary suffering is not about finding value in suffering as such, but seeing it as a means of expression, an opportunity to demonstrate obedience based on Christ’s example.⁵⁵

Voluntarie as an Expression of Love

For Saint Thomas, the voluntary attitude with which Christ accepts the Passion reveals his divine nature and obedience to the Father. More importantly, however, it reveals the love which grounds and effects the entire work of redemption. There is no love without this free choice.⁵⁶ A sign of true freedom is the ability to sacrifice for another person.⁵⁷ The voluntary death of Jesus is a sacrifice precisely because it is a “manifestation of love,” even as the perpetrators considered it a crime because sin deformed their ability to see and love goodness.⁵⁸ Aquinas observes that, “in order to demonstrate the fullness of his love, on account of which he suffered, Christ upon the Cross prayed for his persecutors.”⁵⁹

Love is the motive for the Father’s acceptance of the Son’s sacrifice. The concept of satisfaction is not about equalizing the accounts of evil, but about giving the insulted person something that he values more than the damage done by mankind. Thomas writes: “But by suffering out of love and obedience, Christ gave more to God than it was required to compen-

⁵⁴ *Super Rom* 8, lec. 4: “voluntarie sustinet propter Deum ex charitate.”

⁵⁵ *In II Sent.*, d. 40, q. 1, a. 4, ad 1.

⁵⁶ *In III Sent.*, d. 20, q. 1, a. 5, qc 1, resp.

⁵⁷ Thomas’s understanding of merit is based on the free action of love. There can be no merit without free choice, and there can be no meritorious free choice which is not also an expression of love for God and neighbor. See *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 5, resp.

⁵⁸ *ST* III, q. 48, a. 3, ad 3.

⁵⁹ *ST* III, q. 47, a. 4, ad 1.

sate for the offense of the whole human race.”⁶⁰ Pardoning sins requires reparation, which is understood as “something” on the part of the one who forgives sins. Such reparation is an act of will that does a good. The Incarnate Word through his humanity offers satisfaction for all when he takes “a free death suffering from love.”⁶¹

Conclusion

An analysis of Aquinas's commentary on Psalm 21 in concert with *ST* III has shown the basic framework of the soteriology of Aquinas, thanks to which it is possible to discover the true meaning of “salvation” that emerges from the voluntary sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. This is essentially a very biblical concept of salvation. Thomas's principle findings may be classified as four fundamental effects following from Christ's Passion of *ex propria voluntate*. Jesus's “sacrifice” is not that of a passive victim, neither is it the necessary payment required by a God who requires suffering for reconciliation. The key to understanding the sacrifice of Christ is the good that the Incarnate Word accomplishes through his human nature. Salvation signifies breaking the logic of evil by removing the obstacle on the way to achieving the good and replacing it with the “prototype of good” (an *exemplar*, which is the resurrection). From this perspective, the voluntary nature of Jesus' death, professed during the celebration of the Eucharist, underlines that Christ remains God during the Passion. His voluntary acceptance of death means he does not prevent death from happening, yet it is not a positive wish for the evil of death. This, in turn, illustrates the true divine and human nature of Christ, as well as his choice of the path of suffering as an appropriate way to overcome evil.

Voluntarie signifies not acting under the dictatorship of evil: the acceptance of the Passion denotes that the Son of God, in his greatest suffering (since for Aquinas, the suffering of the Incarnate Word is the highest suffering), in the world of evil, employs the logic that chooses the good and trusts the Father. His sacrifice allows man to do good deeds that, by becoming meritorious, lead to eternal life.

To point to the Passion as taken up by Christ *ex caritate* is to emphasize

⁶⁰ *ST* III, q. 48, a. 2, resp.: “Christus autem, ex caritate et obedientia patiendo, maius aliquid Deo exhibuit quam exigeret recompensatio totius offensae humani generis.” As he explains in the body of the article, the greater is the immensity of love for which he suffered: (1) the value of life of God-man (2) and the overwhelming suffering and pain. It is expressed by the triad *magnitudo–dignitas–generalitas*.

⁶¹ *Summa contra gentiles* IV, ch. 55, no. 21. Cf. *In III sent.*, d. 15 q. 2 a. 3 qc 3, resp.

satisfaction as a method of overcoming evil. *Satisfactio* is for Saint Thomas the defeating of evil with a greater good by virtue of the Father's prior unity with the Son and not as something external. For this reason, the salvific power is not hidden in death as such, but in love as manifested in the voluntary acceptance of it. *Vota Christi*—this expression from *Super Psalmos* indicates the sacrificial meaning of Christ's life and merit for our salvation. The desire for the salvation of man is linked with the gradual uncovering of its fullness, the transition from the "earthly" salvation to the spiritual one. Such are the words that Jesus says on the Cross, quoting Psalm 21: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." They do not comprise a question of Jesus, but rather a prayer of lamentation in which everything is directed toward the recognition of the situation of evil and the praise of God for his faithfulness and the gift of salvation. Thus, the soteriology of Aquinas, immersed in the biblical texts, is not juridical in the sense of a mere extrinsic exchange between God and sinners with Christ as a sacrifice.⁶² Rather, it is grounded in friendship, since satisfaction can only be realized when both remain united by love. Christ's satisfaction, therefore, results from his love and obedience. It does not change God, but brings about a change in us.⁶³ N·V

⁶² Matthew Levering, "Juridical Language in Soteriology: Aquinas's Approach," *Angelicum* 80 (2003): 309–26.

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