

The Life of Virtue as an Act of Worship: On the Eucharistic Orientation of the Moral Life

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The Second Vatican Council's sole mention of moral theology, which occurs in the decree on priestly formation *Optatam Totius*, consists in a brief but unmistakable call for its renewal (§16). The need for such renewal stems from the state of moral theology in the mid-twentieth century, dominated by the manualist tradition that had emerged after the Council of Trent. The manuals were increasingly thought to be inadequate in at least two important respects. First, they framed the moral life primarily in juridical terms of duty and obligation.¹ As the author of one early-twentieth-century manual put it, the manuals do not "hold up a high ideal of Christian perfection for the imitation of the faithful. Rather, they deal with what is of obligation under pain of sin; they are books of moral pathology."² Second, the focus of the manuals was principally on resolving cases of conscience rather than on treating the theological principles at the heart of Christian ethics, and the method they employed in this task was primarily philosophical, occasionally supplemented by biblical citations. What resulted from this approach is what one contemporary moral theologian describes as a "stifling of the theological imagination," a severing of moral theology from its place within

¹ See, e.g., Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

² Thomas Slater, S.J., *A Manual of Moral Theology for English-Speaking Countries*, vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908), 6.

the larger context of Christian theology and its self-relegation to the domain of problem-solving.³

Given this context, the Council's summons to renewal would entail a significant reorientation of moral theology in at least two ways. First and perhaps most pressingly, the Council's injunction that moral theology "should shed light on the loftiness of the vocation of the faithful in Christ" calls on moral theologians to re-conceive the moral life in positive terms, as the pursuit of beatitude through growth in holiness, rather than solely in the minimalist terms of avoiding sin (*Optatam Totius* §16). Second, the Council's insistence that moral theology "should be renewed by a more living contact with the mystery of Christ" and "more nourished by Sacred Scripture" demands a recovery of the properly theological character of moral theology and its more intentional integration with Scripture, dogmatic theology, the liturgy, and spirituality (§16).

Over the past seventy-five years—in the time both leading up to and following the Council—Catholic moral theologians have returned to the sources of Christian ethics in fresh and creative ways in order to renew moral theology.⁴ One crucial component of this renewal, especially in the wake of Pope John Paul II's 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*—approximately the midpoint between the end of the Council and the present—has been the resurgence of virtue ethics, including and especially the virtue ethics of Thomas Aquinas, in Catholic moral theology.⁵ This return to virtue has incorporated several important elements of the Council's call for renewal. For example, many virtue ethicists have emphasized the teleological character of the moral life by emphasizing the call to supernatural beatitude as the foundation for moral theology.⁶ In addition, contemporary works in

³ Romanus Cessario, O.P., "On the Place of Servais Pinckaers in the Renewal of Catholic Theology," *Thomist* 73 (2009): 1–27, at 21.

⁴ For diverse histories and assessments of the twentieth-century renewal of moral theology, see James F. Keenan, S.J., "The Renewal of Moral Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*, ed. Richard R. Gaillardetz (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 318–38; Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, C.S.Sp., *Moral Theology in an Age of Renewal* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

⁵ David Cloutier and William C. Mattison III, "Review Essay: The Resurgence of Virtue in Recent Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. 1 (2014): 228–59; Cloutier and Mattison, "Review Essay: Method in American Catholic Moral Theology After *Veritatis Splendor*," *Journal of Moral Theology* 1, no. 1 (2012): 170–92.

⁶ Among scholarly works, see Reinhard Hütter, *Bound for Beatitude: A Thomistic Study in Eschatology and Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019); Matthew Levering, *Aquinas's Eschatological Ethics and the Virtue of Temperance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019). Among moral theology

theological virtues ethics have given special consideration to the relationship between Scripture and the moral life.⁷ For these reasons and others, many scholars regard virtue ethics as the most promising way forward for developing a theological approach to the Christian moral life aligned to the vision of the Council.

There remains, however, one of the Council's desiderata for moral theology's renewal to which virtue ethics has devoted less attention. While theological virtue ethics has striven to "shed light on the loftiness of the vocation of the faithful in Christ" and to ensure that it has been "more nourished by Sacred Scripture," comparatively less consideration has been given to ensuring that moral theology is put in "living contact with the mystery of Christ." To be sure, several recent contributions to Catholic virtue ethics have emphasized the role of grace, the infused virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to highlight the properly supernatural character of the Christian moral life.⁸ But at the same time, virtue ethics has also tended to neglect the intrinsic connection of the moral life to the mystery of Christ inasmuch as that mystery is, as the Council affirms in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, "ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy" (§35). This is most especially true of the relationship between the moral life and the Eucharist, which the Council describes in *Lumen Gentium*, as the "source and summit of the whole Christian life" (§11).

Some recent scholarship, by moral theologians and liturgical and

textbooks, see Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); William C. Mattison III, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008); John Rziha, *The Christian Moral Life: Directions for the Journey to Happiness* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

⁷ William C. Mattison III, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology: A Virtue Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., *Living the Truth in Love: A Biblical Introduction to Moral Theology* (New York: Alba, 1996); Daniel Harrington, S.J. and James F. Keenan, S.J., *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2005); Harrington and Keenan, *Paul and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges Between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

⁸ Daria E. Spezzano, *The Glory of God's Grace: Deification According to St. Thomas Aquinas, Faith & Reason* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2015); Angela McKay Knobel, *Aquinas and the Infused Moral Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021); Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of Veritatis Splendor*, trans. William E. May (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

sacramental theologians alike, has sought to address this lacuna by exploring the relationship between liturgy and ethics. Most frequently, these efforts focus on liturgical participation and sacramental grace as sources of the moral life that confer on Christians the formation, motivation, and spiritual strength needed to practice the virtues. These insights are incredibly important for revitalizing the link between the Eucharist and the life of virtue, but they address only one dimension of this relationship. The Eucharist's role as the *source* of the moral life has often been highlighted to the neglect of its role as the *summit* of that same life. It is precisely this latter role that I hope to address in this article.

In this essay, I argue that Thomas Aquinas's account of the virtue of religion enables virtue ethics to conceive of the entirety of the Christian moral life as an act of worship, a living sacrifice offered to God. The virtue of religion bestows upon the totality of the moral life for all the baptized a priestly character, which is exercised not only by their offering of the living sacrifice of the moral life but also through their participation in the sacramental sacrifice of the Eucharist. The virtue of religion thus provides resources for virtue ethicists to affirm that the Christian moral life possesses an intrinsically liturgical orientation, finding its culmination and fulfillment in the Christian's own self-offering united to the offering of Christ in the Eucharist. In this way, the moral life is not merely born from the liturgy as its source but also directed to the liturgy as its culmination. In short, Aquinas's account of religion, combined with recent magisterial teaching on the exercise of baptismal priesthood, enables us to trace more fully the contours of what Pope Benedict XVI has called, in his 2007 apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, "the Eucharistic form of the Christian life" (§82).

To this end, the present article proceeds in five parts. The first section explores several recent efforts to establish links between moral theology and the liturgy and sacraments—especially the Eucharist—and it argues that, while they rightly highlight the Eucharist's role as source of the Christian life, consideration of the Eucharist's role as culmination of that life receives comparatively little attention. The paper then turns to Aquinas's account of the virtue of religion as a resource for remedying this lack. The second section examines the most common interpretation of Aquinas's treatment of religion, which holds that Aquinas's inclusion of religion as a virtue annexed to the cardinal virtue of justice constitutes the principal contribution of Aquinas's account of religion, because it firmly grounds worship within the sphere of morality. The third and fourth sections offer a more expansive reading of Aquinas by taking note of his claim that religion commands the acts of the other virtues and enables them to assume the nature of

sacrifices offered to God. I argue that this provides the resources to affirm, with Aquinas, not only that worship is an act of virtue but also that the practice of the virtues is an expression of worship; not only is worship a part of ethics, but ethics is a part of worship. The final section combines these insights with the theologies of baptismal priesthood and Eucharistic sacrifice that are emphasized in recent magisterial teaching in order to establish that the entire life of virtue is oriented toward a Eucharistic consummation.

Eucharist and Ethics

Recent scholarly efforts to draw explicit connections between Christian worship, especially the celebration of the Eucharist, and the Christian moral life take several forms, but common to all of them is an emphasis on the Eucharist as the source of the Christian moral life.⁹ In this section, I delineate three contemporary approaches to articulating the relationship between the Eucharist and ethics in order to show how each of them, despite differences in their underlying liturgical and sacramental theologies, places a decided emphasis on the Eucharist as source of the moral life and underappreciate its role as summit of that same life.

The Liturgy as Dispositive Cause of the Moral Life

The first approach suggests that the liturgy exerts a dispositive causality with respect to the Christian moral life. It emphasizes the nature of the liturgy as a formative ritual practice that prepares Christians to live in a distinctive way. On this view, which is espoused by both Catholic and Protestant thinkers, it is not so much the sacrament of the Eucharist itself as it is a certain understanding of the activity of liturgical worship itself that serves as a means of moral formation and disposes one toward moral growth. In his trilogy of books dedicated to developing a Christian liturgical anthropology, the Reformed philosopher James K. A. Smith argues for the power of liturgy to shape human desire, and by extension, moral character:

⁹ In his recent work, Xavier Montecel has proposed a distinction between what he calls a “correlational model” and a “pedagogical model” of connecting liturgy and ethics (“Communion in Hope: Eucharistic Ethics in the Key of Virtue” [PhD diss., Boston College, 2021]). I do not intend to challenge this distinction; rather, I simply offer a different schematic here in order to emphasize the different ways that contemporary liturgists and moral theologians understand the sacraments as causes of the moral life. See also Montecel, “Liturgy, Virtue, and the Foundations of an Ecclesial Ethic,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 42, no. 2 (2022): 401–16.

Liturgies . . . shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we *love*. . . . Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies. They prime us to approach the world in a certain way, to value certain things, to aim for certain goals, to pursue certain dreams, to work together on certain projects. In short, every liturgy constitutes a pedagogy that teaches us, in all sorts of precognitive ways, to be a certain kind of person. Hence every liturgy is an education, and embedded in every liturgy is an implicit worldview of “understanding” of the world.¹⁰

Smith’s expansive understanding of liturgy as *any* ritual practice dealing with matters of ultimate concern allows for an array of cultural practices to be classified as liturgical, and he aims to highlight the malformation that participation in certain secular liturgies might entail. In order to counteract the formative power of these anti-liturgies, Smith argues that specifically Christian practices of liturgical worship are all the more necessary, since Christian worship incorporates “crucial aspects of training-by-doing, opportunities for practicing and rehearsing what it means to be the people of God, who desire the kingdom of God.”¹¹ Christian liturgical worship, in Smith’s view, shapes human desires in accordance with the reality of the human person created by God and for God, and thereby forms human beings to act according to those desires.

This view of ritual’s formative power also undergirds the work of many theologians, including both liturgists and ethicists. For example, the Methodist liturgical scholar Don Saliers argues that “the relationships between liturgy and ethics are most adequately formulated by specifying how certain affections and virtues are formed and expressed in the modalities of communal prayer and ritual action.”¹² Similar ideas are expressed from a Catholic perspective by moral theologian Paul Wadell: “It is through the rituals and practices of Christian worship that we discern the shape of the Christian life and begin to acquire the virtues and dispositions that

¹⁰ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

¹¹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 153.

¹² Don E. Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings,” in *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God*, ed. E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 15–35, at 17.

are essential to that life.”¹³ And the Catholic ethicists David McCarthy and James Donohue likewise posit that liturgical practices are essential for “helping us to see differently and to become a certain kind of person and to be gathered as a people so that we can act purposefully in our world as part of Christ’s Body.”¹⁴

For these thinkers, a crucial function of liturgical worship is to initiate worshippers into the Christian narrative.¹⁵ As Wadell puts it, “we have to be apprenticed in the language of God in order to become the friends of God, and the primary place for this ongoing initiation to occur should be in the worship and liturgy of the church.”¹⁶ The Christian moral life requires a radical reorientation of human beings’ self-understanding, their vision of the world, and their affections precisely because the Christian vision of reality differs so markedly from that of the world. In order to live according to this alternative vision, Christians need to become immersed in it. According to Wadell, the liturgy attunes human beings to this new vision of reality “through the constant rehearsal of the stories of God in worship,” but it does not accomplish this in a primarily didactic or cerebral manner.¹⁷ Rather, it occurs, as Saliers puts it, through the “patterns of prayer, reading, proclamation, and sacramental action [that] are precisely such occasions of communal rehearsal of the affections and virtues befitting ‘life in Christ.’”¹⁸

While ritual and narrative clearly possess a formative capacity, an adequate account of the relationship between the Eucharist and the Christian moral life cannot be reduced to these elements alone. Taken by itself, this approach overemphasizes the anthropological dimension of the liturgy and naturalizes its effects. One might misconstrue such an emphasis on ritual practices to

¹³ Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2002), 11.

¹⁴ David Matzko McCarthy and James M. Donohue, C.R., *Moral Vision: Seeing the World with Love and Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 176.

¹⁵ Wadell, McCarthy, and others who emphasize this approach are influenced by the Christian-narrative ethics of Stanley Hauerwas and the account of practices and narrative developed by Alasdair MacIntyre. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 181–225; Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Hauerwas, “The Gesture of a Truthful Story: The Church and ‘Religious Education,’” *Encounter* 43 (1982): 319–29.

¹⁶ Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 25.

¹⁷ Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 25.

¹⁸ Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics,” 24.

suggest that the liturgy's formation is a purely human affair in which human beings work to form themselves for the task of the Christian moral life. Such a view is clearly problematic, and even those who value the formative power of ritual practices still take pains to insist that Christian worship must not be understood as a purely natural phenomenon.¹⁹

The Sacraments as Instrumental Efficient Causes of the Moral Life

In contrast, a second approach to delineating the relationship between the life of worship and the moral life focuses on the sacraments as instrumental efficient causes that empower the Christian to live the moral life. Most adherents of this approach endorse a "sacramental realism" which draws upon Aquinas's sacramental theology and affirms the sacraments as true causes of grace.²⁰ For these sacramental realists, the connection between the sacraments and the moral life is rooted in the causal efficacy of the sacraments.²¹ For example, Roger Nutt argues that it would be "a significant theological mistake . . . to divorce the general doctrine of grace, the Christian moral life, which depends on grace, and the universal call to holiness from

¹⁹ For instance, in addition to his analysis of narrative's power to form character, Wadell also contends that "Christian worship allows God to go to work on us, sanctifying us, gracing us, purifying, renewing, and redeeming us" (*Becoming Friends*, 16). Smith, too, admits the potential pitfall of immanentizing the liturgy by presuming that its character as something material and embodied implies that it is entirely a natural phenomenon. Against this misinterpretation, he insists that "the centrality of embodiment should not be understood as a 'naturalizing of worship that would deny the dynamic presence of the Spirit; to the contrary, the Spirit meets, nourishes, and empowers us just *through* and *in* such material practices" (*Desiring the Kingdom*, 150).

²⁰ Colman E. O'Neill, O.P., *Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments* (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1983); O'Neill, *Meeting Christ in the Sacraments* (New York: Alba, 1964); Roger W. Nutt, *General Principles of Sacramental Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017); Reginald Lynch, O.P., *The Cleansing of the Heart: The Sacraments as Instrumental Causes in the Thomistic Tradition* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017); Lynch, "The Sacraments as Causes of Sanctification," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 12, no. 3 (2014): 791–836; Romanus Cessario, O.P., "Sacramental Causality: *Da Capo!*," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 2 (2013): 307–16; Bernhard Blankenhorn, O.P., "The Instrumental Causality of the Sacraments: Thomas Aquinas and Louis-Marie Chauvet," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 4, no. 1 (2006): 255–94.

²¹ Thomas Harmon, "The Sacramental Consummation of the Moral Life According to St. Thomas Aquinas," *New Blackfriars* 91 (2010): 465–80; Harmon, "The Efficacy of the Sacraments for Christian Living: A Thomistic View," *Antiphon: A Journal for Liturgical Renewal* 14, no. 3 (2010): 247–60; Roger Nutt, "From within the Mediation of Christ: The Place of Christ in the Christian Moral and Sacramental Life according to St. Thomas Aquinas," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 5 (2007): 817–42.

the sacraments, especially since they are the instrumental causes of grace on which they depend.”²² In short, Nutt frames the relationship between morality and sacraments as one of fundamental dependency: sacraments and ethics are inextricably linked insofar as the former requires the latter as a condition for its fulfillment.

For Nutt, as for other Thomistic sacramental realists, grace constitutes the crucial link between the sacraments and the moral life. Aquinas holds that grace is a quality of the soul that makes human beings partakers of the divine nature, and he affirms that God is the ultimate source of grace, since only God can extend to another a participation in God’s own life.²³ At the same time, Aquinas also underscores the instrumental role that Christ’s humanity plays in the communication of grace. By virtue of the hypostatic union, Christ possesses in his human nature the fullness of grace, and by virtue of his headship, he can communicate that grace to others.²⁴ Consequently, Aquinas affirms that “Christ by his passion merited salvation, not only for himself, but likewise for all his members.”²⁵ At the same time, Aquinas recognizes that, although Christ’s Passion merits grace for human beings universally, nevertheless the effects of his Passion “need to be applied to each individual.”²⁶ This application, he submits, belongs to the sacraments, whose efficacy as sources of grace is drawn from Christ’s Passion.²⁷ As Daria Spezzano summarizes, “grace extends from God as principal cause through the conjoined instrumental cause of Christ’s humanity to his sacraments as separated instrumental causes of grace.”²⁸

Aquinas maintains that the grace which flows from the sacraments gives rise to the infused virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit. While sanctifying grace perfects the essence of the human soul, elevating the human person to become a sharer in the divine nature, the work of grace extends to all the powers of the soul through the infused virtues—theological and moral—which flow from grace, “as their principle and root,” and through the gifts.²⁹ The virtues and gifts are thus infused together with grace, so that grace’s divinizing effects might transform the whole human person.

Since Aquinas holds that the sacraments are causes of grace, and grace is

²² Nutt, *General Principles*, 141.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 112, a. 1.

²⁴ ST III, q. 8, aa. 1, 5.

²⁵ ST III, q. 48, a. 1.

²⁶ ST III, q. 49, a. 1, ad 4.

²⁷ ST III, q. 49, a. 1, ad 4; q. 62, aa. 1, 5.

²⁸ Spezzano, *Glory of God’s Grace*, 190.

²⁹ ST I-II, q. 110, a. 3, ad 3.

the source of infused virtue, the conclusion that the sacraments are sources of virtue follows readily.³⁰ Aquinas notes this explicitly. In his discussion of baptism, for example, he argues that, by virtue of being sacramentally incorporated into the Body of Christ, the baptized “receive an influx of grace and virtues.”³¹ Similarly, in his treatment of the sacrament of penance, he asserts that the infused virtues, which had been lost through mortal sin, are restored in the sacrament of penance.³² And crucially for our purposes, Aquinas contends that the sacrament of the Eucharist “confers grace spiritually together with the virtue of charity,” and what is more, that “not only is the habit of grace and virtue bestowed, but it is furthermore aroused to act.”³³ The Eucharist thus both increases and stimulates the virtue of charity and the other infused virtues, serving as not merely a dispositive or meritorious cause of the Christian moral life, but as its efficient cause.

For Aquinas and those who adhere to this kind of sacramental realism, the sacraments are not only causes of grace but also, by extension, causes of the virtues and gifts that are necessary for attaining the last end. In this respect, reception of the sacraments is crucial for progress in the Christian moral life. Steven Long sums up this position succinctly: “The moral challenges of life, and the infinite elevation of the last end, provide the strongest grounds possible for desiring divine aid. This aid is bestowed and strengthened in the sacraments and is effectual for the perfection both of contemplation and action.”³⁴ For sacramental realists, therefore, the sacraments are the fount from which the life of Christian virtue flows insofar as the grace that the sacraments communicate enables and empowers Christians to live the moral life.

³⁰ In *ST* III, q. 62, a. 2, Aquinas considers “whether sacramental grace confers anything in addition to the grace of the virtues and gifts.” He answers in the affirmative, submitting that “sacramental grace confer[s] . . . a certain divine assistance in obtaining the end of the sacrament,” an effect which is to be distinguished from the virtues and gifts, but his affirmation that sacramental grace brings about a unique effect does not imply that the sacraments are not also causes of virtue, as he illustrates in his treatments of particular sacraments.

³¹ *ST* III, q. 69, a. 6.

³² *ST* III, q. 89, a. 1.

³³ *ST* III, q. 79, a. 1, ad 2.

³⁴ Steven A. Long, “The Gifts of the Holy Spirit and Their Indispensability for the Christian Moral Life: Grace as *Motus*,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 2 (2013): 357–73, at 372.

The Eucharist as Exemplar Cause of the Moral Life

A final approach to connecting liturgy and ethics highlights the Eucharist as an exemplar cause that gives distinctive shape to the Christian moral life. Although various iterations of this approach differ with respect to their details, they generally agree that the Eucharist, as the sacramental enactment of Christ's ultimate act of self-giving, conforms those who participate in the Eucharist to that mystery of self-giving, enabling their own lives to be patterned on Christ's self-giving love, and thus to become Eucharistic in nature.

Louis-Marie Chauvet exemplifies one mode of this approach when he articulates the relationship between the Eucharist and ethics in terms of receiving a gift and making a gift in return. For Chauvet, the Eucharist possesses the character first and foremost of God's gift to human beings and is the mode by which Christians receive the gift of God made manifest in the historical events of the Paschal mystery. In receiving the Eucharist, he argues, Christians receive their own graced identity by being made more fully sons and daughters of God, and the Church itself receives its graced identity as the Body of Christ. For Chauvet, this gift necessarily calls forth a return gift, which is made through ethical living. He argues that the Eucharistic gift of the Church's "gathering into a single body through the Spirit . . . has an immediate *ethical* implication."³⁵ Those who share in the Eucharist, which is nothing other than "Christ-giving-himself,"³⁶ should in response be "committed to live out their own oblation of themselves in self-giving to others as Christ did."³⁷ For Chauvet, the moral life brings the sacramental celebration of the Eucharist to its proper completion and serves as "verification" of Christians' Eucharistic practice.³⁸ In this sense, he insists that there exists as an intrinsic connection between Eucharist and ethics as between receiving and returning a gift.

While Chauvet regards Christian ethics as the necessary response to the gift of the Eucharist, Jonathan Ciraulo has argued that Hans Urs von Balthasar presents an even more intrinsically Eucharistic ethic. Like Chauvet, Balthasar views the Eucharist in terms of gift. More precisely, he regards the

³⁵ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J., and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995), 277.

³⁶ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Themes de reflexion sur l'eucharistie* (Lourdes: Congrès Eucharistique International, 1981), 25; quoted in Timothy M. Brunk, *Liturgy and Life: The Unity of Sacrament and Ethics in the Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 80.

³⁷ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 277.

³⁸ Brunk, *Liturgy and Life*, 81–82.

Eucharist as “God in the form of his givenness.”³⁹ Yet Balthasar argues that to receive such a gift is not merely to feel the urge to reciprocate that gift by ethical living. Rather, truly to receive the Eucharist entails that the recipient herself “is transformed into the form of givenness, conformed to it.”⁴⁰ For Balthasar, the Eucharist not only elicits the response of self-gift but in fact constitutes the very pattern according to which one is conformed. Ciraulo argues that Balthasar leaves the practical specifics of this conformity undetermined, but he notes that it somehow requires that, in the concrete exigencies of one’s own life, one embody the obedience, receptivity, and kenosis that characterize Christ’s self-gift on the Cross and in the Eucharist.⁴¹ As Ciraulo puts it, “readiness and receptivity toward God, perfect disponibility to being used (and used up) for the sake of the world is what is required” of the one who partakes of the Eucharist.⁴² Balthasar’s view thus illustrates that Christian ethics flows from the Eucharist insofar as it receives its very source and pattern from Christ’s self-gift, which is assimilated and enacted in the Eucharistically inflected moral lives of Christians.

This understanding of the Eucharist as giving form to the Christian life has also made its way into recent magisterial teaching, especially in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI.⁴³ For example, in his 2005 encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict describes the Eucharist as the sacrament in which “God’s own *agape* comes to us bodily in order to continue his work in us and through us” (§14). The Eucharist is thus the sacramental communication of God’s self-giving love that aims to conform those who receive it so that they might give themselves to others. Indeed, Benedict posits that the “Eucharist draws us into Jesus’s act of self-oblation” insofar as those who receive it “enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving” (§13). For Benedict, the transformation that the Eucharist accomplishes manifests itself in visible ways such that he can insist that “a Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented” (§14). Thus, he contends in *Sacramentum Caritatis* that understanding the Eucharist as the sacrament of charity offers the possibility of overcoming superficial

³⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “A Verse of Matthias Claudius,” in *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 15; quoted in Jonathan Martin Ciraulo, *The Eucharistic Form of God: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Sacramental Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 102.

⁴⁰ Balthasar, “Verse of Matthias Claudius,” 15; quoted in Ciraulo, *Eucharistic Form of God*, 102.

⁴¹ Ciraulo, *Eucharistic Form of God*, 100–106.

⁴² Ciraulo, *Eucharistic Form of God*, 102.

⁴³ Ciraulo suggests that Benedict is especially indebted to Balthasar here (*Eucharistic Form of God*, 105).

dichotomies between worship and ethics insofar as the moral life becomes the expression of one's "heartfelt yearning to respond to the Lord's love" encountered in the sacrament (§82).

The Need for a More Complete Account

Although the three approaches considered above articulate different aspects of the connection between the Eucharist and the moral life, they need not be viewed as competing explanations. Rather, they are best understood as components of an integral vision of the Eucharist as the source of Christian living. As efficient cause, the Eucharist serves as an instrument to convey grace and the infused virtues; as dispositive cause, the reverent and devout celebration of the liturgy prepares human beings to appropriate the effects of the sacrament more fruitfully; and as exemplar cause, the Eucharist gives shape and definition to the moral life as one conformed to Christ's self-giving charity. What is common to all three approaches is their decided emphasis on the Eucharist as the source of the moral life. Whether they construe the relationship primarily in terms of the efficient causality of sacramental grace, the dispositive causality of ritual formation, or the exemplar causality of Christological *agape*, these positions converge upon the claim that participation in the worship and sacraments of the Church serves as a vehicle for the Christian's growth in virtue.

While this is undoubtedly true, it nevertheless provides an incomplete picture of the relationship between the sacramental life and the moral life. *Lumen Gentium* strikes a clear balance in its affirmation of the Eucharist as the "source and summit of the Christian life." With this phrase, the Council evidently envisions the moral life not only as flowing from the Eucharist as its source, but also as leading back to the Eucharist as its culmination. While contemporary accounts of liturgy and virtue ethics have given due attention to the first element of this formula, they have devoted less consideration to the second.

This imbalance has the potential to lead to serious misconceptions about the relationship between liturgy and ethics. In particular, an overemphasis on the liturgy as *source* of the moral life without adequate attention to the liturgy as its *summit* can easily be thought to imply that the liturgy is directed to ethics as its *telos*. This would, of course, instrumentalize the liturgy by reducing it to a mere vehicle for moral improvement. Romano Guardini warns against such instrumentalization when he writes of the "playfulness" of the liturgy, insisting that Christian worship "is not a means which is

adapted to attain a certain end—it is an end in itself.”⁴⁴ Although scholars who emphasize the Eucharist’s place as source of the Christian life take pains to insist that they do not intend to instrumentalize it, without an adequate account of the liturgy as the summit of the Christian life—including the moral life—such protestations provide little security against the inevitable temptation to minimize the inherent value of the liturgy and simultaneously to over-exalt the moral life.

It is necessary, therefore, to complement the rightful but unbalanced emphasis on the Eucharist’s role as source of the moral life, expressed in the language of dispositive, efficient, and exemplar causality, with an account of the Eucharist’s role as the summit of the Christian life, understood in terms of a quasi-final causality.⁴⁵ If the Eucharist is the source from which the moral life flows, it is also a goal to which it returns. It is to the task of developing such an account of the liturgy as the summit of the Christian moral life that we now turn, with the assistance of Aquinas’s treatment of religion.⁴⁶

Religion as a Virtue

In the *Summa theologiae* (ST), Aquinas’s treatment of the act of worship occurs not, as one might expect, as a preamble to his exposition of the sacraments in the *tertia pars*, but rather within his analysis of the virtues in the *secunda pars*. Specifically, Aquinas treats worship as one of the paradigmatic acts of the virtue of religion, which he discusses within the broader context of the cardinal virtue of justice. In order to understand the virtue of religion, therefore, it is necessary to consider it in relation to justice.

Adopting the definition found in Justinian’s *Digest*, Aquinas affirms that

⁴⁴ Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (New York: Herder & Herder, 1998), 66.

⁴⁵ By invoking the language of final causality, I do not mean to suggest that the Eucharist is itself the ultimate end of the moral life, but rather that the Eucharist anticipates the human person’s ultimate end of the beatific vision and allows him a proleptic participation in that reality, as a “pledge of future glory.” Thus, the Eucharist might be considered a final cause of the moral life in an intermediate manner.

⁴⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Grand Rapids: MI: Brazos, 2013), 151–55; Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 150–51. See also Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 20: “Liturgy and worship should be about praising God and celebrating the goodness and faithfulness of God.” But see also Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, 17: “Ultimately, the goal of Christian worship is to create and sustain a community of friends of God who, precisely because they are friends of God, commit themselves to embodying and proclaiming and practicing God’s reign in the world.”

justice is the “perpetual and constant will to render to each one his right.”⁴⁷ He unpacks his understanding of right, or *iūs*, by appealing to the notion of equality, and posits that “a man’s work is said to be just when it is related to some other by way of some kind of equality.”⁴⁸ Thus, the works of justice have three main components: first, a relation to another person; second, the provision of something due to the other; and third, the establishment of equality through the rendering of what is due.⁴⁹ In this way, the virtue of justice perfects the will by rightly ordering the agent’s external operations according to the real mean established by reason (in the case of acquired justice) or divine law (in the case of infused justice).

Aquinas relates the virtue of religion to the cardinal virtue of justice as a potential part. In Aquinas’s schema for classifying the virtues, potential parts are true virtues that possess some relevant feature in common with the principal virtue to which they are annexed, but they also fall short of the principal virtue’s complete definition in some critical respect.⁵⁰ Thus, Aquinas holds that religion shares something crucial in common with justice, yet also lacks some aspect of the fullness of justice. Religion’s likeness to justice concerns both its relation to another and its provision of something due. Religion is the virtue that governs the human person’s relationship to God, specifically considered as “the first principle of the creation and government of things.”⁵¹ Through the virtue of religion, the human person renders to God what is due to him under this aspect, namely, honor, reverence, and worship. This is accomplished through both interior acts, such as prayer and devotion, and exterior acts, including sacrifice, tithes, vows, and oaths. Nevertheless, religion lacks the perfection of justice insofar as the human person’s rendering what is due to God through the practice of religion cannot establish equality between human beings and God. As Aquinas puts it, in

⁴⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 58, a. 1.

⁴⁸ *ST II-II*, q. 57, a. 1.

⁴⁹ For a more complete analysis of Aquinas’s account of the virtue of justice, see Jean Porter, *Justice as a Virtue: A Thomistic Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), esp. 1–57; Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966): 41–113; Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Virtues, Or the Examined Life* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1991): 127–56.

⁵⁰ *ST II-II*, q. 80, a. 1.

⁵¹ *ST II-II*, q. 81, a. 3. It is important to note that religion relates the human being to God differently from the virtue of charity, which perfects the relation of the human person to God in friendship. See *ST II-II*, q. 23, a. 1. On the relationship between charity and religion, see note 76, below.

exercising the virtue of religion, “whatever man renders to God is due, yet it cannot be equal as though man rendered to God as much as he owes Him.”⁵²

Aquinas is careful to insist that the human person’s inability to give God the full measure of honor that he is owed does not represent a failure of religion. Rather, it is the result of the basic inequality that is intrinsic to the relationship between the human person and God. Thus, he affirms that “virtue is praised because of the will, not because of the ability: and therefore, if a man fall short of equality, which is the mean of justice, through lack of ability, his virtue deserves no less praise, provided there be no failing on the part of his will.”⁵³ Simply put, the metaphysical asymmetry that is constitutive of the relationship between humans and God—and not necessarily a shortcoming of human desire—makes a strict repayment impossible. Although it is precisely this inability to establish equality that causes religion to “fall short” of the full measure of justice and merits its classification as a potential part, it is important to recognize that, as Jean Porter puts it, “the deficiency in question is a logical, rather than a normative, lack” because it fails to conform the definition of justice, not because it fails to conform to the standards of right reason or divine law.⁵⁴ In other words, Aquinas holds that religion is a true and genuine virtue.

As a virtue, religion constitutes a perfection of a particular human capacity—in this case, of the will—and, by extension, a certain perfection of the human person.⁵⁵ Aquinas holds that religion perfects the human person by establishing a right ordering between her and God. “We pay God honor and reverence,” Aquinas argues, “not for his sake . . . but for our own sake.”⁵⁶ This observation is critical. It shows, first, that the virtue of religion is not fundamentally about the repayment of a debt, as if the failure to render God the full measure of due worship were somehow detrimental to God. Although God is owed honor and worship from human beings, God does not *need* their honor and worship. On the contrary, Aquinas submits that the honor and worship that human beings render to God redounds in some sense to their own benefit. He argues that “by the very fact that we revere and honor God, our mind is subjected to him; wherein its perfection consists, since a

⁵² *ST* II-II, q. 80, a. 1.

⁵³ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6, ad 1.

⁵⁴ Porter, *Justice as a Virtue*, 49. See also Cessario, *Virtues*, 115–16.

⁵⁵ On virtues as perfections, see Jean Porter, *The Perfection of Desire: Habit, Reason, and Virtue in Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2018).

⁵⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 7.

thing is perfected by being subjected to its superior.”⁵⁷ This subjection of the human person to God is accomplished through the acts of religion. For example, through the act of devotion, one manifests “the will to give oneself readily to things concerning the service of God,”⁵⁸ and through prayer, one “confesses that he needs him as the author of his goods.”⁵⁹

Aquinas’s treatment of religion as a virtue supplies an immediate connection between the life of Christian worship and the Christian moral life. By discussing the virtue of religion within the broader context of his moral theology, Aquinas shows that these two aspects of Christian existence are not separate. And by treating religion as a virtue, Aquinas seems to suggest that worship is part of the moral life. Recent scholarship has taken note of this connection in Aquinas’s thought, although judgments about its wisdom are far from unanimous. For example, Reinhard Hütter lauds Aquinas’s situation of religion within the context of justice as “theologically profound [and] philosophically robust” because it shows how religion is not “some supererogatory moral excellence that is up to one’s personal discretion.”⁶⁰ According to Hütter, justice aptly situates religion as a virtue that rectifies the human will in relation to God, and thus prepares the human person for beatitude. On the other hand, John Mahoney decries Aquinas’s yoking of religion to what he describes as “the non-Christian, indeed atheistic, category of justice.”⁶¹ For Mahoney, the virtue of justice serves as a “mental straitjacket” for Aquinas, forcing him to reduce the richly biblical vision of worship to satisfy the demands of pagan virtue, which ultimately leads to an account of religion that is “a travesty of the Gospel.”⁶² Despite their divergent assessments, both Hütter and Mahoney identify as a principal contribution of Aquinas’s treatment of *religio* the inclusion of divine worship within the order of justice, that is, within the sphere of morality. In short, an important consequence of Aquinas’s treatment of religion is the connection it establishes between worship and ethics by situating worship within the moral life.

⁵⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 7.

⁵⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 1.

⁵⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 3.

⁶⁰ Reinhard Hütter, “Happiness and Religion: Why the Virtue of Religion Is Indispensable for Attaining the Final End: A *Re-lecture* of Thomas Aquinas with an Eye to His Contemporary Relevance,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 14, no. 1 (2016): 15–60, at 16, 42.

⁶¹ John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 251.

⁶² Mahoney, *Making of Moral Theology*, 251–52.

The Virtues as Religion

Aquinas's classification of religion as a potential part of justice is illuminating, but also potentially misleading. On the one hand, by annexing religion to the virtue of justice, he highlights the moral character of Christian worship. For Aquinas, worship is not separate from ethics, but is an integral component of the moral life, for it renders to God what is due and directs the human person toward her ultimate end. On the other hand, by treating religion as a potential part of justice, Aquinas runs the risk that the significance of religion may inadvertently be eclipsed by other, seemingly more "complete" virtues. One might be tempted, for instance, to regard the cardinal virtue of justice as more important than religion, a mere potential part.

We have seen, however, that religion's designation as a potential part of justice refers to its logical rather than moral deficiency in relation to justice. In other words, although religion is a potential part of justice, it is not thereby normatively subordinate to justice. On the contrary, Aquinas affirms that religion "is the chief of the moral virtues" and is thus superior, normatively, even to the cardinal virtue of justice.⁶³

This claim about religion's superiority among the moral virtues requires further examination. For Aquinas, the hierarchy among the virtues is determined according to their objects.⁶⁴ Virtues whose objects are more proximate to the human person's last end, which is God himself, are superior to those whose objects are more remote from it. Thus, Aquinas contends that the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, which take God as their immediate object by believing God, hoping for and in God, and loving God, are superior to the moral virtues, whose proper objects are "something comprehensible to reason."⁶⁵ Despite the fact that religion is the virtue by which human beings render due worship to God, Aquinas classifies religion as a moral virtue, rather than theological. This is so, he argues, because the material object of religion is not God himself, but rather that which is offered to God in worship. Religion, in other words, does not directly and immediately attain to God as faith, hope, and charity do, but rather stretches out toward God through the mediation of what is offered in worship. Thus, Aquinas describes God as the "end" of the virtue of religion, while the *cultus* that the human being offers to God is religion's proper object.⁶⁶ Therefore, religion is properly a moral virtue, and thus subordinate to the theological virtues.

⁶³ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6, sc.

⁶⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 6; q. 58, a. 12.

⁶⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 62, a. 2.

⁶⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 5.

Among the moral virtues themselves, however, Aquinas holds that religion is supreme. His reasoning here is based on the same principle considered above. He posits that “religion approaches nearer to God . . . insofar as its actions are directly and immediately ordered to the honor of God,” unlike the other moral virtues whose acts are immediately and directly ordered to some more proximate good: in the case of virtues associated with temperance and fortitude, with the good of the agent; and in the case of the virtues connected to justice, with the good of other persons.⁶⁷ For this reason, Aquinas concludes that religion “excels among the moral virtues.”⁶⁸

The declaration that religion is chief among the moral virtues is not a mere indulgence of a Scholastic penchant for hierarchical classification, but in fact has concrete implications for Aquinas’s moral theology, because religion’s superior status enables it to command the acts of the other moral virtues. This is a specific application of a more general principle in Aquinas’s virtue theory.⁶⁹ He posits that, when two distinct habits, specified by distinct proximate ends, operate concurrently, “the habit which is directed to the [more] ultimate end is above the other habits and commands them.”⁷⁰ In addition to eliciting their own proper acts, superior virtues can also command—that is to say, can order or direct to their own proper ends—the acts of inferior virtues. Aquinas employs this logic to explain how charity can command the acts of all the other virtues and direct them to the ultimate end of beatitude, such as when one fasts out of love for God.⁷¹ He also uses the language of command to describe how legal justice can direct the acts of the other moral virtues by referring them to the political common good, such as when a soldier fights courageously in battle in order to defend his community.⁷²

In these cases, the higher virtue makes use of the subordinate virtue, but it does not violate the integrity of the subordinate virtue. Because virtues are specified by their proximate ends, an act of temperance remains an act of temperance, and an act of courage remains an act of courage. The commanding virtue does not change the species of the subordinate virtue by removing its orientation toward its proper proximate goal, but takes the act of the

⁶⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6.

⁶⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 6.

⁶⁹ See David Decosimo, “More to Love: Thomas Aquinas on Infused and Acquired Moral Virtue,” in *The Virtuous Life: Aquinas on the Moral Virtues*, ed. Harm Goris and Henk Schoot (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 47–72.

⁷⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 47, a. 11, ad 3.

⁷¹ *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 4, ad 2.

⁷² *ST* II-II, q. 58, a. 6.

subordinate virtue, in all its integrity, and further directs it to a more ultimate end. At the same time, Aquinas suggests that the commanding virtue does “inform” the subordinate virtue by conferring an additional species upon its act. In other words, the singular act of the ascetic’s fasting now becomes an act both of temperance and of charity, and the soldier’s single act of fighting becomes an act of courage and of justice.⁷³

Applying this logic to religion, Aquinas distinguishes two types of acts that belong to this virtue.⁷⁴ The first kind are what he calls religion’s “proper and immediate” or “elicited” acts. These are acts like prayer, devotion, adoration, and sacrifice, which by their very nature are ordered *per se* to the worship of God. But, as a superior moral virtue, religion can also command the proper, elicited acts of the other moral virtues and order them to religion’s proper end. Thus, Aquinas holds that the second category of acts of religion comprises those acts “which it produces through the mediation of the virtues which it commands, directing them to the honor of God.”⁷⁵ His description of religion as a commanding virtue gives it enormous scope, and he goes so far as to declare in another passage that “every act of virtue belongs to religion . . . by way of command, insofar as it is directed to the reverence of God.”⁷⁶

As an example, Aquinas considers the Letter of James’s assertion that “to

⁷³ Decosimo, “More to Love,” 50n9.

⁷⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad 1.

⁷⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad 1.

⁷⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 5. At the same time, it is important to note that Aquinas holds that religion’s commanding role does not extend to the theological virtues, because they are superior to religion, since they regard God himself as their object. In fact, Aquinas affirms that “by their command, they cause the act of religion, which performs certain deeds directed to God” (q. 81, a. 5, ad 1). So, we could conceive of a certain “nesting” of virtues such that charity commands religion, which commands one of the other moral virtues. It is important, I would argue, not to elide the commanding roles of charity and religion. The mediation of religion adds something substantial that would otherwise be absent in a case where the moral virtues were commanded by charity alone. Aquinas points out that “it belongs immediately to charity that man should give himself to God, adhering to him by a union of the spirit; but it belongs immediately to religion, and, through the medium of religion, to charity which is the principle of religion, that man should give himself to God for certain works of divine worship.” (*ST* II-II, q. 82, a. 2, ad 1). Thus, while the command of charity confers on the other virtues—including religion—a further orientation toward union with God by knowledge and love, the command of religion confers on those virtues an orientation toward the worship of God. Religion’s command, therefore, cannot be dismissed as superfluous. On the relationship of religion to the theological virtues, see R. Jared Staudt, *The Primacy of God: The Virtue of Religion in Catholic Theology* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2022), 219–56.

care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” constitutes “religion that is pure and undefiled” (1:27). He observes that, strictly speaking, these actions are not elicited or proper acts of religion. Rather, to care for persons in distress is properly an act of the virtue of mercy, and to abstain from worldly pleasures is an act of the virtue of temperance. Nevertheless, Aquinas argues that the virtue of religion can command the acts of mercy and temperance by directing them to the worship of God by a conscious intention to honor God through one’s acts of mercy or temperance. Caring for orphans and widows and abstaining from worldly pleasures remain elicited acts of mercy and temperance, respectively, but these actions can also become acts of religion—in addition to being acts of mercy or temperance—if the agent intends that God be honored through their performance. Consequently, Aquinas declares that “religion has reference . . . to the acts of all the virtues which, insofar as these are referred to God’s service and honor, become acts of religion.”⁷⁷

The Life of Virtue as a Living Sacrifice

It is noteworthy that Aquinas does not state that the acts of the virtues commanded by religion simply become generic “acts of religion.” Rather, he submits that, by religion’s command, “the act of any virtue assumes the character of a *sacrifice* through being done in order that we may cling to God in holy fellowship.”⁷⁸ Here, he adopts the broad definition that Augustine

⁷⁷ ST II-II, q. 186, a. 1, ad 2. A review of the current literature suggests that this is an underappreciated aspect of Aquinas’s treatment of religion. Even among those who do acknowledge Aquinas’s view that religion is chief among the moral virtues, few seem to recognize the full implications of such a claim. See, for example, Staudt, *Primacy of God*, 231–33; see also Nicholas Austin, S.J., “Thomas Aquinas on the Virtue of Religion” in *Abme nach, was du vollziehst: Positionsbestimmungen zum Verhältnis von Liturgie und Ethik*, ed. Martin Stuflesser and Stephan Winter (Regensburg: Pustet, 2009): 85–100. To my knowledge, the most recent moral theologian to offer sustained reflection on the architectonic potential of Aquinas’s claims about the virtue of religion is Bernard Häring, who, in his pre-conciliar work *The Law of Christ*, draws upon St. Thomas’s teaching on religion’s centrality among the moral virtues in order to speak of the “cultal character of Christian morality.” He then proceeds to devote nearly a third of the second volume of the work to the virtue of religion. See *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, vol. 2, trans. Edwin G. Kaiser, C.P.P.S. (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1964 [originally 1954]), 111–346, esp. 121–28. Notably, however, this extended discussion of religion is absent from Häring’s most detailed post-conciliar work, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity* (New York: Seabury, 1976).

⁷⁸ ST II-II, q. 85, a. 3, ad 1.

formulates in order to elaborate an account of sacrifice that extends beyond acts of specifically liturgical worship and to incorporate any action that involves the offering of some good to God (*De civitate Dei* 10.6).

As noted above, Aquinas holds that human beings worship and revere God so that their intellect and will maybe subjected to God, for such subjection is constitutive of the human person's proper perfection.⁷⁹ He contends that this subjection occurs chiefly through the giving over of one's intellect to God in prayer and the offering of one's will to God in devotion. Yet, as creatures composed of body and soul, human beings' subjection of intellect and will to God requires the assistance of sensible, bodily actions so that "man's mind may be aroused, as by signs, to the spiritual acts by means of which he is united to God."⁸⁰ Therefore, Aquinas maintains that "it is a dictate of natural reason that man should use certain [sensible things], by offering them to God in sign of the subjection and honor due to him, . . . [and] this is what we mean by a sacrifice."⁸¹ He cites Augustine to explain the significance of sacrifice as an external act of religion: "The visible sacrifice is the sacrament, that is a sacred sign, of the invisible sacrifice."⁸² The exterior offering of sensible things to God both signifies and disposes the interior subjection of one's soul to God through prayer and devotion.

Concerning the matter of the visible sacrifice—precisely *what* is offered to God as a sign of that internal subjection—Aquinas notes that, in addition to the good of the soul which is the matter of the internal sacrifice, the human person possesses both external goods and goods of the body. He argues that external goods can be offered to God in sacrifice either directly, as when one pays a tithe, or indirectly, "when we share them with our neighbor for God's sake."⁸³ And it is in this latter sense that Aquinas asserts that almsgiving, when directed to the honor of God, constitutes a genuine sacrifice.⁸⁴

Of greater interest for our purposes is Aquinas's discussion of the good of the body presented to God as a sacrifice, for he implies that it is precisely through the exercise of the moral virtues that this sacrifice is offered. Commenting on Paul's admonition to "present your bodies as a living

⁷⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 7.

⁸⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 7. See also q. 84, a. 2: "Since we are composed of a twofold nature, intellectual and sensible, we offer God a twofold adoration; namely, a devotion of the mind; and a bodily adoration, which consists in an exterior humbling of the body."

⁸¹ *ST* II-II, q. 85, a. 1.

⁸² Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 10.5; quoted in *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 7, ad 2; see also Thomas Aquinas, *Super Rom* 12, lec. 1, no. 957.

⁸³ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 3, ad 2.

⁸⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 32, a. 2, ad 1; see also q. 86, a. 2, ad 1.

sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God" (Rom 12:1), Aquinas observes that "a person can present his body to God as a sacrifice in three ways," and proceeds to offer examples of each.⁸⁵ Although he does not say so explicitly, the examples that he selects clearly correspond to the paradigmatic acts of the three moral virtues that are called cardinal.⁸⁶

First, Aquinas proposes that one offers his body as a sacrifice "when he exposes his body to suffering and death for God's sake." Such an act is manifestly an expression of fortitude, the virtue that perfects the irascible appetite to hold firm to the good in the face of death.⁸⁷ Thus, the martyr who endures execution bravely out of infused fortitude or the soldier who sacrifices his life for the commonwealth out of acquired fortitude can be said to offer his body to God as a living sacrifice if his act of fortitude is commanded by the virtue of religion. Moreover, because Aquinas typically selects examples that illustrate a virtue in its most perfect exercise—that is to say, in the most extreme cases—it is also reasonable to infer that he would also regard other acts of fortitude, even those that do not result in death, as instances of offering one's body as a living sacrifice, albeit in a less complete manner.⁸⁸ In such cases, one might be willing to endure bodily harm for the sake of what is good and noble and to do so in order to render fitting worship to God.

Second, Aquinas suggests that one offers his body as a sacrifice "when he weakens his body by fasts and watchings in the service of God." With this example, Aquinas again implicitly invokes the exercise of virtue, since in his discussion of religious vows he insists that "the mortification of one's own body, for instance by vigils and fasting, is not acceptable to God except insofar as it is an act of virtue."⁸⁹ The specific practices of fasting and watchings,

⁸⁵ Aquinas, *Super Rom* 12, lec. 1, no. 959. See also Geoffrey Wainright, "Rendering God's Glory: St. Paul and St. Thomas on Worship," in *Reading Romans with St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 262–73.

⁸⁶ On the difference between moral virtues and cardinal virtues, see William C. Mattison III, "Thomas's Categorization of Virtue: Historical Background and Contemporary Significance," *Thomist* 74, no. 2 (2009): 189–235. The virtue of prudence is also implicated in Aquinas's discussion when he observes that Paul's characterization of the living sacrifice of the body as a "reasonable service" demands that one "be discreet presenting your bodies to [G]od as a sacrifice whether by martyrdom or abstinence or any other just work." Each of these sacrifices of virtue must be modulated according to the end to which they are ordered, namely, the worship and honor of God, and more specifically, the offering of the internal sacrifice of devotion. See Thomas Aquinas, *Super Rom* 12, lec. 1, no. 963. See also *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 2, ad 3.

⁸⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 125, aa. 2–3.

⁸⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 123, a. 4.

⁸⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 2, ad 3.

which are drawn from 2 Cor 6:5, belong to a set of spiritual exercises that Aquinas recommends for the “taming of carnal concupiscence.”⁹⁰ Thus, they are properly aligned with the cardinal virtue of infused temperance, which moderates the desire for sensual pleasures according to the rule of divine law.⁹¹ These ascetical practices, when directed to the worship of God, become not merely acts of self-denial, but also acts of sacrificial worship by offering the mortification of one’s flesh to the honor of God.

Finally, Aquinas asserts that the body is presented to God as a sacrifice when it is used “to perform acts of justice and of divine worship.” Here, he appeals not only to the elicited acts of religion, but also to works of justice more broadly. Justice, Aquinas observes, is the cardinal virtue concerned not with the internal regulation of the passions (as are fortitude and temperance), but rather with external operations. In this way, justice is a quintessentially embodied virtue. It involves the actual rendering of what is due to another. Thus, to use one’s body to enact equality among persons or within society is in some sense to offer one’s body as a living sacrifice.

For Aquinas, the Pauline injunction to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice” offers a teaching about “how grace should be used, a subject pertaining to moral instruction.”⁹² His exegesis therefore brings into clear relief the profoundly sacrificial character of the life of holiness, and he makes plain that the Christian offers this spiritual sacrifice principally through the exercise of the moral virtues. The acts of the moral virtues, when commanded by the virtue of religion, both concretely signify and interiorly facilitate the offering of one’s very self to God in devotion and prayer. As one progressively cultivates a stable intention to refer one’s works of virtue to God in sacrifice, the virtuous person herself becomes a “living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.”⁹³

⁹⁰ *Summa contra gentiles* III, ch. 132, no. 16.

⁹¹ *ST* II-II, q. 147, aa. 1–2. See also q. 143, a. 1.

⁹² Aquinas, *Super Rom* 12, lec. 1, no. 953.

⁹³ In his recent defense of religious life as a state of perfection, Gregory Pine, O.P., seizes upon this insight to argue that “vows have the effect of drawing all the acts of a vowed person’s properly moral life into the more noble and dignified character of religion” (“Religious Life as a State of Perfection,” *Nova et Vetera* [English] 19, no. 4 [2021]: 1181–214). It is certainly true that the profession of religious vows does bring about the effect of transforming the acts of the other virtues into acts of religion, but as we have seen, Aquinas does not think that this transformation is unique to the act of vows, but rather to the command of religion as such. What *is* unique about religious vows in relation to the moral life, however, is their comprehensiveness and their fixity. While the lay person who has not professed vows may exercise the virtue of religion to command her other virtuous deeds to the end of divine worship, all the virtuous deeds

The Sacrifice of Virtue and the Eucharistic Sacrifice

Aquinas's insights about the commanding role of the virtue of religion lay the groundwork for a more complete understanding of the Eucharist's place as the summit of the Christian life, insofar as they suggest that the Christian's life of virtue serves as a crucial preparation for and constitutive element of her own active participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice. While much recent Thomistic scholarship on the virtue of religion emphasizes its character as a natural virtue in order to affirm the impulse to worship God as a naturally human one, Aquinas holds that there also exists a supernaturally infused form of religion which operates within the context of grace, and it is this form of the virtue that links the Christian moral life to the Eucharist.

In his treatment of Aquinas's account of religion, Hütter notes that, in the life of grace, "the person receives the infused virtue of religion . . . by way of the infusion of sanctifying grace. Yet sanctifying grace itself is received in turn in virtue of an instrumental cause that imprints a seal or character on the soul."⁹⁴ Here, Hütter recognizes an important but relatively underdeveloped link in Aquinas's thought between the virtue of religion, by which human beings worship God, and sacramental character, by which Christians are ontologically capacitated to participate efficaciously in Christian worship. In other words, sacramental character empowers the baptized to exercise the virtue of religion in a specifically Christian way. Aquinas explains what is distinctive about the mode of exercising the virtue of religion that sacramental character facilitates when he asserts that the character that Christians receive in baptism is "specifically the character of Christ, to whose priesthood the faithful are likened by reason of the sacramental characters, which are nothing else than certain participations of Christ's priesthood, flowing from Christ himself."⁹⁵ For Aquinas, sacramental character conforms Christians to Christ precisely in his priestly office, and thereby elevates their practice of the virtue of religion to a sharing in Christ's priesthood.

This connection between the virtue of religion and sacramental character, which Aquinas suggests but not does elaborate, is further developed in the documents of the Vatican II, especially through the Council's recovery of the *triplex munus* as a structuring principle for explicating the nature and mission

that flow of one who has professed vows automatically assume the character of worship by virtue of those vows. Aquinas clearly favors the religious state as an optimal context for investing one's acts of virtue with the character of a sacrifice, but this should not suggest that such offering is thereby limited to those who have professed vows.

⁹⁴ Hütter, *Bound for Beatitude*, 270.

⁹⁵ *ST* III, q. 63, a. 3.

of the Church in *Lumen Gentium*.⁹⁶ Christopher Ruddy has argued that *Lumen Gentium* presents a “doxological ecclesiology” which foregrounds the priority of the Church’s holiness both as a foundational aspect of the Church’s very identity and also as the vocation of her members.⁹⁷ *Lumen Gentium* frames this universal call to holiness in Christological terms, insisting that Christ “himself stands as the author and consummator of this holiness of life” (§40). The vocation to holiness is thus a summons to become more and more perfectly “transformed into the image of Christ” (§50). This process begins at baptism when Christians are sacramentally conformed to Christ, and *Lumen Gentium* describes this baptismal configuration in terms of being endowed with a participation in Christ’s threefold office of priest, prophet, and king.⁹⁸

Of particular importance is *Lumen Gentium*’s emphasis on the priestly *munus* in which all Christians share: “The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood” (§11). The Council establishes a firm connection between this priestly identity of the baptized and the act of sacrifice, which is a paradigmatically sacerdotal work. Drawing on Paul’s admonition in Rom 12, the Council fathers propose that “all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (§10). All the Christian faithful are thus called and empowered to exercise their baptismal priesthood by offering a spiritual sacrifice to God which consists of nothing less than their very selves. More concretely, *Lumen Gentium* explains that the faithful “exercise [their] priesthood . . . in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity”

⁹⁶ On the link between Aquinas’s account of sacramental character and the theology of *Lumen Gentium*, see Arielle Harms, “In Search of a Faithful Development of the Thomistic Account of Sacramental Character: An Examination of Thomas Aquinas, Matthias Scheeben and *Lumen Gentium*,” *Heythrop Journal* 58, no. 1 (2017): 899–907; Roger W. Nutt, “Configuration to Christ the Priest: Aquinas on Sacramental Character,” *Angelicum* 85, no. 3 (2008): 697–713.

⁹⁷ Christopher Ruddy, “‘In My End Is My Beginning’: *Lumen Gentium* and the Priority of Doxology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2014): 144–64.

⁹⁸ On the history and debate surrounding the Council fathers’ application of the *triplex munera* to the People of God in *Lumen Gentium*, see Ormond Rush, “The Offices of Christ, *Lumen Gentium* and the People’s Sense of the Faith,” *Pacifica* 16, no. 2 (2003): 137–52. Additionally, the theme of the *triplex munus* is developed in the years leading up to the Council by Yves Congar, who attempts to connect Aquinas’s account of religion and sacramental character, among other things, to the priestly office of the baptized (*Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity*, trans. Donald Attwater [Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957], 112–21).

(§10). Here, we see yet another indication of the link between the exercise of the baptismal priesthood and the Christian moral life, as particular acts of virtue—whether the self-denial expressed in temperance or the works of mercy expressed by charity—assume the character of a priestly offering. Yet, the Council goes even further, insisting that “all those works which are those of the Christian man” constitute the means by which the baptized “may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light” (§10). *Every* act of the Christian moral life has the potential to be transformed into a sacrifice. Thus, *Lumen Gentium* suggests that the priestly consecration conferred at baptism occupies the same kind of architectonic and commanding role that Aquinas attributes to the virtue of religion.

The Council fathers do not limit the faithful’s exercise of their baptismal priesthood to the domain of the moral life, however. Bernhard Blankenhorn rightly observes that, without minimizing the role of the ordained priest who offers the Eucharistic sacrifice *in persona Christi capitis ecclesiae*, the Council “integrated the theme of sacrifice with its promotion of the laity’s conscious, active participation in the liturgy.”⁹⁹ Describing the participation of the lay faithful in the celebration of the Eucharist, *Lumen Gentium* states that “taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, [the faithful] offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with it. Thus, by reason of the offering and through Holy Communion all take part in this liturgical service” (§11). The Council fathers here echo the teaching of Pope Pius XII in his 1947 encyclical on the sacred liturgy, *Mediator Dei*. Acknowledging that the lay faithful can be said to “offer” the Eucharistic sacrifice insofar as they “offer the sacrifice by the hands of the priest . . . [and] in union with him,” he goes on to note that, “in order that the oblation by which the faithful offer the divine Victim . . . may have its full effect, it is necessary that the people add something else, namely, the offering of themselves as a victim” (§98). For Pius, as for the Council fathers, the self-oblation of the baptized—their becoming themselves a living sacrifice offered to God—constitutes a critical element of their own properly priestly service in the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice.¹⁰⁰

The language of “self-offering” and “self-oblation” is not left ambiguous,

⁹⁹ Bernhard Blankenhorn, O.P., *Bread from Heaven: An Introduction to the Theology of the Eucharist* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 100.

¹⁰⁰ Among recent scholarly treatments of the Eucharist, the one that pays the most significant attention to the participation of the faithful in the *offering* of the Eucharistic sacrifice is Lawrence Feingold, *The Eucharist: Mystery of Presence, Sacrifice, and Communion* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2018), esp. chapter 11.

however, as if it were merely to consist in some vague thought or desire to dedicate oneself to God. Rather, *Lumen Gentium* clarifies precisely what is entailed in the Eucharistic self-offering of the baptized:

All their works, prayers, and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Together with the offering of the Lord’s body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. (§34)

In this respect, the whole of the Christian’s life is brought with her to the altar at which the Eucharist is celebrated. Likewise, *Mediator Dei*, reflecting on the words of the Church’s liturgy, elaborates on the character of the faithful’s self-oblation in relation to the Eucharistic sacrifice using the language of virtue even more explicitly:

“At this . . . altar let innocence be in honor, let pride be sacrificed, anger slain, impurity and every evil desire laid low, let the sacrifice of chastity be offered in place of doves and instead of the young pigeons the sacrifice of innocence.” While we stand before the altar, then, it is our duty so to transform our hearts, that every trace of sin may be completely blotted out, while whatever promotes supernatural life through Christ may be zealously fostered and strengthened even to the extent that, in union with the immaculate Victim, we become a victim acceptable to the eternal Father. (§100)

These passages clearly highlight the Eucharist’s identity as the summit of the Christian life. The Christian’s ongoing struggle to root out vice and grow in virtue, which is manifested concretely in the acts of virtue that she performs, becomes a kind of preparation for the Eucharist, insofar as they shape the Christian’s very self into a fitting oblation to be offered to God conjointly with the sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharistic celebration. The practice of the Christian moral life, in other words, facilitates the Christian’s actual and fruitful participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

To view the Eucharist as the celebration in which the faithful unite the sacrifice of their moral life, expressed concretely through their acts of virtue directed to the honor of God, to the liturgical sacrifice of the Eucharist, which is both the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the

Church, overcomes any dichotomous understanding of the relationship between the Eucharist and ethics. What emerges from these reflections is not a back-and-forth between liturgy and morality, but rather a dynamic rhythm that marks the whole shape of the Christian's life. David Fagerberg identifies this dynamism when he describes the narthex of the church building as the "membrane" between what Jean Corbon calls the "celebrated liturgy" offered in the sacred space of the sanctuary and the "lived liturgy" enacted in the profane sphere of ordinary life.¹⁰¹ Fagerberg writes that the Christian crosses this membrane of the narthex

in a dialectical rhythm on a regular basis. We cross it when we go to assist at the sacrifice of the Mass, bringing along with us what we have gathered throughout the week in order to place everything at the foot of the altar. And we cross it again when we obey the presider's command, *Ite missa est*, bringing along with us the graces we have received in the mysteries in order to place ourselves at the service of charity.¹⁰²

From the grace communicated in the Eucharist flows the whole of the Christian moral life expressed paradigmatically in the works of the virtues, and those same works are returned to God as acts of worship in the offering of the Church's Eucharistic sacrifice. This cyclical dynamism situates the Eucharist truly as both source and summit of the Christian life in a way that shows the baptized continuously drawing strength from the Eucharist as the fount of grace and returning to it as the occasion of joining the worship they offer through their acts of virtue to Christ's act of self-oblation to the Father in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Conclusion

The ongoing renewal of moral theology, especially with its turn to virtue ethics, seeks to present the moral life as an ongoing process of conversion and growth in holiness and to integrate the moral life more adequately with other aspects of Christian doctrine and practice. A central aspect of this renewal is a more complete articulation of the connection between the moral life and the liturgical and sacramental life, including and especially the Eucharist. I have argued that, although moral theologians and liturgical

¹⁰¹ Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988, 199–205.

¹⁰² David W. Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World: On Mundane Liturgical Theology* (Kettering, OH: Angelico, 2016), 97.

scholars have developed helpful ways of thinking the moral life as “flowing from and nourished by that inexhaustible source of holiness and glorification of God which is found in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist,” there has been relatively less attention paid to understanding how the “moral life has the value of a ‘spiritual worship’” that is ordered to active participation in the Eucharistic celebration (*Veritatis Splendor* §107).

This essay has argued that Aquinas’s account of the virtue of religion, coupled with the recent emphasis in magisterial teaching on the priestly *munus* of the baptized, provides resources for Catholic virtue ethics to conceptualize how the moral life possesses a latreutic character and, by extension, a Eucharistic orientation. As chief among the moral virtues, religion can command the acts of the other moral virtues and order them to the worship of God, thereby transforming the life of virtue into a living sacrifice offered to God. Moreover, the Christian’s life of virtue, already ordered in each of its acts to divine worship by religion, also serves as preparation for his active participation in the Eucharistic celebration. Formed in the practice of the virtues and habitually disposed to offer his virtuous actions to God, the virtuous agent himself become a fitting sacrifice to be offered to God together with the sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist. In this way, the Eucharistic celebration comes to be seen more clearly not only as the source from which the moral life flows, but also as the summit to which that same life of virtue is directed. By attending more carefully to the bidirectional nature of the relationship between the Eucharist and virtue ethics, it becomes possible to discern and to appreciate more fully the “Eucharistic form of the Christian life” (*Sacramentum Caritatis* §82). N·V