

Sin as an Offense against God: Aquinas on the Relation of Sin and Religion

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GARY ANDERSON'S *Sin: A History* provides us with two key biblical conceptions of sin: burden and debt.¹ He argues that debt gradually surpassed burden as the primary biblical concept for sin. Anderson does an excellent job demonstrating the presence and implications of the debt concept in the Old and New Testaments. I would like to pursue the question further by asking why it is that the notion of debt is so applicable in our relation to God. I propose that in order to fully understand sin as debt, it is necessary also to recognize sin as personal offense. This recognition is related to the notion of debt in so far as it entails not fulfilling a fundamental obligation or debt that we owe to God. Sin creates a debt because in the act of sin one refuses to fulfill the personal obligation of recognizing and honoring God as Creator and governor of the world. That the Church thinks of sin in such a manner can be seen from this quote from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Sin is an offense against God: "Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight." [Ps 51:4] Sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become "like gods," [Gen 3:5] knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus "love of oneself even to contempt of God." [Augustine, *De civ. Dei* 14, 28] In this proud self-exaltation, sin is diametrically opposed to the obedience of Jesus, which achieves our salvation. [Phil 2:6–9]²

¹ Gary Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

² CCC §1850.

Sin is a personal offense against God, an act of disobedience, revolt, and contempt, which can be seen as the opposite of virtuous obedience, the obedience manifested by Christ.

While the Bible may not use the words “personal offense” to name sin, this reality is clearly implied.³ Thomas Aquinas supports such a view of sin, not only through the principles of his moral theology, but also through his biblical exegesis both within the *Summa theologiae* and in his scriptural commentaries. He lays out the foundation for sin as a personal offense by recognizing the fundamental need to honor God through particular religious actions and through a general obedience to his moral law. Failure to do so is an irreligious act, even an act of idolatry.⁴ In fact, Aquinas recognizes idolatry as the origin of all sin, which characterizes sin in its contempt for God. In sin one turns away from God and toward a created good. This is the essence of idolatry and also the essence of sin. Aquinas grounds this teaching particularly on two passages of Scripture: the Decalogue (Exodus 20) and Wisdom (of Solomon) 13–14. His interpretation of these passages reveals that the debt accrued by sin arises from the fact that one does not render a prior debt to God to honor and obey him. To be just, one must be in a right relationship with God. Furthermore, if one does not give God the proper honor due to him, this honor will become idolatrously translated to a created object through sin. Sin is a personal and religious offense, and one that was corrected by another personal and religious act: the honor and obedience of Christ on the Cross.

In order to understand sin, it is necessary first to understand the order of justice that God has instilled within creation. Creatures have a twofold dependence upon Him. First, they depend on God for their very existence. Secondly, they depend on him for the perfection of their being, especially in the case of human beings, whose final end exceeds the

³ There are certain passages where this understanding is brought out more clearly through honor. Malachi 1:6 is one example: “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear?” (RSV, Second Catholic Edition). Another from the New Testament is John 8:49: “Jesus answered, ‘I have not a demon; but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.’”

⁴ In his commentary on Romans, N. T. Wright makes clear that this notion of sin has Jewish origins. “Paul saw no reason to dissent from the Jewish insight that regarded ‘sin’—living in a less-than-fully-human fashion, missing the mark as regards God’s intention for his human creatures—as the result of worshipping something other than the creator” (*Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, vol. 10, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002], 430).

proportion of their nature. In both cases this dependence creates a debt. In fact, Aquinas sees this relation to God as the origin of all debt. He makes this clear when speaking about gratitude, where he states: "The nature of the debt to be paid must vary according to various causes giving rise to the debt, yet so that the greater always includes the lesser. Now the cause of debt is found primarily and chiefly in God, in that He is the first principle of all our goods."⁵ Everything that we have and everything we are depend on God, and so in return we owe him everything.

There are two main responses to one's debt to God. One is a direct response, the other more indirect. The direct response is worship, which Aquinas describes in the following terms while commenting on Hebrews 7: "the main reason for rendering worship to God is to signify that whatever a man has, he received from God and that he depends on Him for his entire perfection."⁶ The twofold debt must first be recognized in order to thank God for the gifts received and to acknowledge the need for yet greater assistance in gaining perfection. Worship brings dependence upon God to the forefront of the mind by producing signs and acts that should order one toward Him. This worshipful recognition must however be followed by further action. Aquinas therefore points to a more indirect way of rendering the debt to God. He states that "in order that a man will some particular good with a right will, he must will that particular good materially, and the Divine and universal good, formally."⁷ Every act must be directed toward God, recognizing him as origin and end, thus giving him due honor. The virtue which characterizes this disposition is obedience, which "proceeds from reverence," and "whereby we condemn our own will for God's sake."⁸ Aquinas describes the crucial role of obedience when speaking of Christ's subjection to the Father: "Human nature is especially subject to God through its proper act, inasmuch as by its own will it obeys His command."⁹ The fact that obedience is man's proper act signifies that life is meant to be lived in conformity

⁵ *Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 106, a. 1, corpus. English translation from the 1920 English Dominican Province translation (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947).

⁶ *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher, O.P., ca. 7, lec. 1 (unpublished translation available at the *Nova et Vetera* website [www.nvjjournal.net] under Resources).

⁷ ST I-II, q. 19, a. 10, corpus. In the reply to the second objection in question 100 of the same part, article 10, he further states: "The precept of charity contains the injunction that God should be loved from our whole heart, which means that all things would be referred to God. Consequently man cannot fulfill the precept of charity, unless he also refer all things to God."

⁸ ST II-II, q. 104, a. 3, ad 1, corpus.

⁹ ST III, q. 20, a. 1, corpus.

with God's will. Our will must become aligned to his. Therefore, both worship and obedience are the just responses we make to God for the debt we owe him.

The first response is explicitly religious, whereas the second is only implicitly so. Nevertheless, Aquinas makes clear the relation between the two types of responses through the pivotal role of the virtue of religion. Religion, which is a potential part of the virtue of justice, actually holds the place as the highest moral virtue for Aquinas. Although it is subordinate to the theological virtues, it directs all other moral virtues so that their proper acts become offerings of reverence to God. He describes this as follows:

Religion has two kinds of acts. Some are its proper and immediate acts, which it elicits, and by which man is directed to God alone, for instance, sacrifice, adoration and the like. But it has other acts, which it produces through the medium of the virtues which it commands, directing them to the honor of God, because the virtue which is concerned with the end, commands the virtues which are concerned with the means.¹⁰

Religion does not solely offer acts of worship, but as a general virtue it is meant to direct other virtues so that their proper acts become religious. Through the mediation of the virtue of religion, all of one's acts are meant to honor God, fulfilling the debt toward him through direct worship and obedience.

These two come together in the chief act of religion, which is sacrifice. Through the act of sacrifice, something is offered to God as a sign that He is the origin and end of all things. Aquinas says that this outward act serves as a sign that "represents the inward spiritual sacrifice, whereby the soul offers itself to God."¹¹ Worship seeks to acknowledge dependence upon God and obedience seeks to conform the will to Him. These two elements come together most perfectly in the religious life. Aquinas says this is the purest form of religion, because one actually makes a sacrifice of one's very life or what he calls an immolation of the will.¹² He describes this in his defense of the mendicant life in *De perfectione*:

The vow which, of all the three religious vows, belongs most peculiarly to the religious life, is that of obedience. This is clear for several reasons.

¹⁰ ST II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad 1.

¹¹ ST II-II, q. 85, a. 2, corpus.

¹² "Against Those Who Attack the Religious State and Profession," in *St. Thomas and the Mendicant Controversies: Three Translations*, trans. John Proctor, O.P., ed. Mark Johnson (Leesburg, VA: Alethes Press, 2007), 1.

First, because, by obedience man sacrifices to God his own will. . . . Secondly, because it is by his own will that a man makes use either of his body or his goods: therefore, he who sacrifices his own will, sacrifices everything else that he has. Again, the vow of obedience is more universal than is that of either poverty or chastity, and hence it includes them both.¹³

The vow of obedience is the height of religion in that one's will is completely given over to the service of God, and one thereby renders to him all that one has and does. This is the model of ordering the will to God, even if not all attain it.

Rendering one's debt to God has positive effects on the soul. First of all, when speaking of religion, Aquinas states that "we pay God honor and reverence, not for His sake (because He is of Himself full of glory to which no creature can add anything), but for our own sake, because by the very fact that we revere and honor God, our mind is subjected to Him; wherein its perfection consists, since a thing is perfected by being subjected to its superior."¹⁴ Religion, by relating us properly to God, opens us up to our very perfection. Further, when speaking of obedience, he relates this perfection in more detail: "[The] virtue and rectitude of [the] human will consist chiefly in conformity with God's will and obedience to His command."¹⁵ Through obedience the will conforms to God, which makes it just: possessing the rectitude and virtue intended for it through God's ordering. Worship and obedience together bring this rectitude of interior justice by giving what is due to the One to whom the greatest and most important debt is owed. This is not a cold transaction but occurs within the context of a personal relationship. Therefore, Aquinas explains, obedience to God, particularly as a response to His divine law, seeks "to establish man in friendship with God."¹⁶ To summarize: God has created us and ordered us to himself, and a debt has thereby been created that is repaid by worship and obedience, which in turn foster an intimate relationship with God.

It is important to remember, as we move to a discussion of sin, how God revealed this order to humanity. The nature of one's debt to God has the force of law, the breach of which constitutes sin. Therefore, the key scriptural passage that Aquinas turns to in order to make clear the just ordering to him can be seen in his commentary on the Decalogue. There are two main places where he treats the Ten Commandments: first, *prima*

¹³ "On Perfection," in *St. Thomas and the Mendicant Controversies*, 11.

¹⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 7, corpus.

¹⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 104, a. 4, ad 2.

¹⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 99, a. 2, corpus.

secundae partis question 100 on the moral precepts of the Law and secondly, *secunda secundae partis* question 122 on the precepts of justice. In the latter question, Aquinas makes clear that “religion . . . is the chief part of justice,” and so the Decalogue begins with this most fundamental point: “the first thing necessary was, as it were, to lay the foundation of religion, whereby man is duly directed to God, Who is the last end of man’s will.”¹⁷ The Decalogue manifests God’s just order for human action. The ordering of the precepts points to the foundational role of honoring God.¹⁸ All other precepts follow from the initial establishment of a right relationship with God. Without a just relationship to God, no true justice is possible.

Aquinas explains in question 100 of the *prima secundae partis* the enumeration of the first three precepts that relate directly to God. He does so by comparing God, who is governor of Creation, to the head of a political community: “Now man owes three things to the head of the community: first, fidelity; secondly, reverence; thirdly, service.”¹⁹ The first two precepts prescribe fidelity and reverence respectively by forbidding actions contrary to them. They seek to prohibit the soul from offending God by acting in a manner contrary to his honor. The third commandment concerns service by specifying how to worship God by setting time aside for his honor on the Sabbath.

The first precept, however, is the most foundational. Aquinas describes it as follows: “Fidelity to his master consists in his not giving sovereign honor to another.”²⁰ It prohibits the sin most contrary to God: idolatry. If religion is the key moral virtue, which orders us to God as the source of our perfection, then idolatry presents the key stumbling block to achieving moral perfection. Aquinas describes one of the primary purposes of the Decalogue through its role in removing this detrimental sin: “Hence it behooved man, first of all to be instructed in religion, so as to remove the obstacles to true religion. Now the chief obstacle to religion is for man to adhere to a false god.”²¹ Adhering to a false god entails putting one’s end in a created object instead of justly turning to God. If

¹⁷ *ST* II–II, q. 122, a. 1, corpus; a. 2, corpus.

¹⁸ Aquinas explains this as follows: “Now the end of human life and society is God. Consequently it was necessary for the precepts of the decalogue, first of all, to direct man to God; since the contrary to this is most grievous. Thus also, in an army, which is ordained to the commander as to its end, it is requisite first that the soldier should be subject to the commander, and the opposite of this is most grievous; and secondly it is requisite that he should be in coordination with the other soldiers” (*ST* I–II, q. 100, a. 6, corpus).

¹⁹ *ST* I–II, q. 100, a. 5, corpus.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *ST* II–II, q. 122, a. 2, corpus.

religion is meant to honor God, idolatry offends the God who is the source and perfection of human life.

This leads us to the second major scriptural passage: Wisdom 13–14. In explicating the detrimental role of idolatry in the moral life, Aquinas turns particularly to Wisdom 14:27, which reads: “For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil.” It is a crucial passage because it specifies idolatry as the most devastating and contagious sin. Aquinas uses this passage in his commentary on First Corinthians, in which he writes:

[Paul] makes special mention of the sin of idolatry . . . first, because it is a very grave sin to introduce another God, just as one would sin very gravely against a king by introducing another king into his kingdom. . . . Secondly, because from the sin of idolatry all other sins arise, according to Wisdom (14:27): “For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil.”²²

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas takes up Wisdom 13 and 14 in article four of the question on idolatry (II–II, q. 94). He explicates the meaning of Wisdom 14:27 in particular as follows: “Again, idolatry is stated to be the cause, beginning and end of all sin, because there is no kind of sin that idolatry does not produce at some time, either through leading expressly to that sin by causing it, or through being an occasion thereof.”²³ Sin occurs when one’s will turns from God and toward a created object, which one honors by directing one’s will inordinately toward it. Thus, idolatry can be taken as symbol of sin itself. It is the most grievous sin because it most directly offends God (just as religion is the highest moral virtue because it directly honors God).

When idolatry is understood simply as sin, it can be seen to rupture the moral life, by placing one at enmity with the only One who can lead us to perfection. Such enmity can be contrasted with the friendship created by obedience. Aquinas vividly explains this:

On the part of the sin itself . . . idolatry is the most grievous sin. For just as the most heinous crime in an earthly commonwealth would seem to be for a man to give royal honor to another than the true king, since, so far as he is concerned, he disturbs the whole order of the commonwealth, so, in sins that are committed against God, which

²² *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. Fabian Larcher, O.P., ca. 12, lec. 1 (unpublished translation available at the *Nova et Vetera* website [www.nvjjournal.net] under Resources).

²³ *ST* II–II, q. 94, a. 4, ad 1.

indeed are the greater sins, the greatest of all seems to be for a man to give God's honor to a creature, since, so far as he is concerned, he sets up another God in the world, and lessens the divine sovereignty.²⁴

His use of the words, "disturbing order" and even "lessening the divine sovereignty" should be seen in the context of God's just order of the world to which obedience must respond. "Giving God's honor to a creature" directly contradicts the religious response to our debt to honor God. Thus, we see idolatry as the perfect contrast to religion: offense versus honor and rebellion against God's order rather than obedience.

We also see a similarity between religion and idolatry in that idolatry contains both direct offenses and indirect ones. Commenting on Second Corinthians, Aquinas speaks of idolatry in a direct sense by contrasting the believer and unbeliever: "In you it is the habit of justice; in them it is the habit of iniquity. But the higher justice is to render to God what is his, and this is to worship him. Hence, since you worship God, the habit of justice is in you. But the greatest iniquity is to take from God what is his and give it to the devil."²⁵ Idolatry is characterized by the choice of earthly goods above God. This is characteristic of all sin, yet idolatry more directly bestows divine honor upon this earthly good. Idolatry is the greatest iniquity because the act of idolatry deprives God of the honor that is justly His and gives it to something or someone undeserving of it.

²⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 94, a. 3, corpus. Here Aquinas sees idolatry as the gravest sin of all, because it directly disdains God. However, just as a connection between religion and obedience was recognized above, so could a connection between idolatry and pride be posited. One worships God out of obedience to Him and this act creates greater affection and thus make one obey more willingly. Similarly, one refuses to worship and obey God out of pride, which leads to idolatry and sin, and this contempt in turn creates an even greater prideful independence. This close relation between idolatry and pride can be seen from the fact that pride is also categorized as the most grave and contagious of all sins. Concerning pride, Aquinas states that "pride denotes aversion from God simply through being unwilling to be subject to God and His rule." He continues: "Wherefore aversion from God and His commandments, which is a consequence as it were in other sins, belongs to pride by its very nature, for its act is the contempt of God. And since that which belongs to a thing by its nature is always of greater weight than that which belongs to it through something else, it follows that pride is the most grievous of sins by its genus, because it exceeds in aversion which is the formal complement of sin" (*ST II-II*, q. 162, a. 6, corpus). Recall that both pride and idolatry are the essence of all sin, as one turns one's will in pride away from God and idolatrously toward a created object.

²⁵ *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. Fabian Larcher, O.P., ca. 6, lec. 3 (unpublished translation available at the *Nova et Vetera* website [www.nvjournal.net] under Resources).

It shows contempt for the one to whom thanks, worship, service, and obedience are due. The severity of the sin is based on the principle laid out by Aquinas that “the greater the good the graver the sin. From this point of view a sin that is against God is most grievous.”²⁶ Idolatry helps us to understand sin in general, because it is sin’s most extreme form. Idolatry scorns God by turning to a creature. This is in essence the nature of sin itself.

Let us now turn to a more indirect understanding of idolatry. Just as obedience is an indirect form of religion, by which all actions are directed to God’s honor, so disobedience to God’s law is an indirect form of idolatry. Aquinas states that “to sin against God is common to all sins, in so far as the order to God includes every human order.”²⁷ Every sin is an offense against God, even if it is not intentionally so. By turning away from God and choosing one’s own will above His, one places either the object of sinful action or even one’s own will in the place of God. Whereas obedience is essentially religious in nature, sin is essentially idolatrous in nature. Speaking of the cause of sin, Aquinas states: “Accordingly then, the will lacking the direction of the rule of reason and of the Divine law, and intent on some mutable good, causes the act of sin directly, and the inordinateness of the act, indirectly, and beside the intention: for the lack of order in the act results from the lack of direction in the will.”²⁸ Sin stems from the will’s lack of direction, which results in a lack of order. This helps us to understand Aquinas’s point, discussed above, concerning how sins follow from idolatry and how idolatry brings about a loss of God’s sovereignty. First, the primary cause of sin is a lack of order in the will. The proper order of the will entails willing God in every action, which honors him as the origin and end of human life. When the will lacks this direction to God, it is not in conformity with its origin. It is not following the just order that God instilled within it. It is also turning from its end, the source of its perfection. It turns to a mutable good in preference to God—the very essence of idolatry. It makes that mutable good the measure and purpose of its action, thus destroying the order of justice in the soul. When the will turns from God and the soul thereby becomes disordered, God’s sovereignty is diminished, because his rightful claim of dominion over the soul is not recognized. Sin seeks to break God’s rule over life: it rejects him as father, benefactor, and governor. It attempts to replace his just order with the chaos of one’s earthly desires. It sets up an idol, an image of one’s disorder, to rule over the life of the soul.

²⁶ *ST* II–II, q. 118, a. 5, corpus.

²⁷ *ST* I–II, q. 72, a. 4, ad 1.

²⁸ *ST* I–II, q. 75, a. 1, corpus.

We said above that the primary act of religion consists in sacrifice. Similarly, the primary act of idolatry is a sacrifice made to an idol. Aquinas states: "Now just as this divine worship was given to sensible creatures by means of sensible signs, such as sacrifices . . . so too was [worship] given to a creature represented by some sensible form or shape, which is called an 'idol.'"²⁹ Sacrifice to an idol is a visible sign that one's will has been cut off from the proper ordering of the will to God. Rather than offering back to their Maker the visible things that were received as a gift, in idolatry one elevates the visible to the level of the divine. The epitome of a true sacrifice is a religious vow of obedience, by which one's whole self is offered God in an attempt to hand over oneself completely to him. We might be able to see a negative parallel in Aquinas's exposition of the sin against the Holy Spirit. Although one does not, by a vow, explicitly give oneself over to idolatry, one's will is hardened against the work of the Holy Spirit, Who orders the soul to God. Aquinas speaks of the sin in this way: "One may sin through certain malice, by contemptuously rejecting the things whereby a man is withdrawn from sin. This is, properly speaking, to sin against the Holy Ghost."³⁰ Thus it is possible to see how an inordinate attachment to the things of the world could close one's will to God and His work within the soul. The sin against the Holy Spirit is the most extreme form of idolatry and sin, the most extreme rejection of one's true origin and end in God.

Just as we saw the effects of religion in the soul, so we can see the effects of idolatry. First, turning from God causes disorder. It causes disorder in the soul because through idolatry the soul is cut off from the source of justice. When the soul becomes thus cut off from God, a more general disorder results. If one does not have a just relationship with God, it is not possible to have justice with others. Aquinas explicates this while commenting on Job: "Moreover, men acting against the piety of divine religion not only despise divine judgments, but also deny them or assert that they are unjust."³¹ Idolatry leads to an inversion of justice. It perverts the soul, so that one begins to think that what is just is actually unjust, and one begins to despise God and one's duties toward neighbor. This state of being cut off from God wreaks havoc on the soul. Commenting on Romans 1, Aquinas explicates this state as he describes the character of idolatry:

²⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 94, a. 1, corpus.

³⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 14, a. 4, corpus.

³¹ *Commentary on the Book of Job*, trans. Brian Mullady, Thomas Aquinas' Works in English, dhspriority.org/thomas/, ca. 34, lec. 1.

The human mind is free of futility, only when it leans on God. But when God is rejected and the mind rests in creatures, it incurs futility. . . . [Paul] mentions the ignorance which followed, when he says, *were darkened*, i.e., by the fact that it was darkened *their mind became senseless*, i.e., deprived of the light of wisdom, through which man truly knows God. For just as a person who turns his bodily eyes from the sun is put in darkness, so one who turns from God, presuming on himself and not on God, is put in spiritual darkness.³²

The soul cut off from God by idolatry becomes futile and dark. It cannot see where it has come from or where it is going and consequently cannot move in the right direction, toward God as end. This is the most serious consequence of idolatry, which Aquinas describes in book four of the *Summa contra Gentiles*. He states: "For, since the perfect beatitude of man consists in the enjoyment of God alone, as shown above, necessarily every man is kept from participation in the true beatitude who cleaves as to an end to these things which are less than God."³³ Those who turn their back on God and refuse to recognize Him as origin and end through worship and obedience cannot share His life. This is the just response of God to the debt of sin.

Fortunately this is not the end of the story. Continuing in the same chapter from the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas recognizes the Incarnation as God's definitive response to idolatry. After describing man's descent into idolatry, he juxtaposes this descent with the effects of the Incarnation: as a "consequence of God's Incarnation" we see "a large part of mankind passing from the cult of angels, of demons, and all creatures whatsoever, spurning, indeed, the pleasures of the flesh and all things bodily, and dedicating itself to the worship of God alone, and in Him looking only for the fulfillment of this beatitude."³⁴ God has not simply placed the order of His justice within human nature through the natural law, nor has he simply written it on stone, but he has manifested it by his very presence. He has given us the ultimate example of honor and obedience by offering himself to the Father on behalf of mankind on the Cross. This has merited righteousness or justice for all of mankind, pulling it out of both direct and indirect idolatry.

³² *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Fabian Lacher, O.P., ed. Jeremy Holmes, cap. 1, lec. 7 (unpublished translation available at the *Nova et Vetera* website [www.nvjjournal.net] under Resources).

³³ *Summa contra Gentiles*, trans. J. F. Anderson, Vernon J. Bourke, Charles J. O'Neil, and A. C. Pegis (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), lib. 4, cap. 54, n. 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Translation slightly altered.

The turn from the idolatry of sin back to a right relationship with God through worship and obedience happens in two main ways. The first is through penance, the second through the Eucharist. In the fourth book of his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas links penance to worship, seeing them both through the lens of justice:

Anyone who has been created by God is a debtor through the fact that he receives anything from Him. And for this reason one renders a debt of honor to God by latria or religion. In another way man is a debtor from the fact that he has sinned against God. And thus one renders the debt of penance to God. Therefore, just as religion is placed as a part of justice by Cicero . . . so even penance must be placed as a part of justice.³⁵

When through contrition we recognize that we have fallen short of justice, then through penance we pledge ourselves to make amends for this failure.³⁶ Thus, even when we fail to give God the proper honor and obedience that we owe Him, God allows us, through the merits of Christ, to render the debt of penance.³⁷

Even more wonderfully, God has enabled us to share directly in the most perfect act of justice, that of Christ on the Cross. He does so through the Eucharist. Matthew Levering summarizes this point in Aquinas very aptly: “We can love as Christ loved because the Eucharist inflames our charity and enables us radically to offer our lives to God in Christ, thereby sharing in Christ’s (cultic) justice.”³⁸ Christ is the only one who could ever render God his due. We ourselves are incapable of this act on our own, but by sharing in Christ’s own cultic justice we can render God fitting worship and obedience. Christ has performed the greatest act of worship through His sacrifice on the Cross, which simul-

³⁵ *Scriptum super Sententiis Magistri Petri Lombardi*, ed. R. P. Maria Faianus Moos, O.P. (Paris: Lethielleux, 1933), lib. 4, d. 14, q. 1, a. 1, qc 5. In his defense of the mendicant life, Aquinas also links worship and penance, as seen in *De perfectione*, 11, where he states: “Since, then, a holocaust is a perfect sacrifice, a man who makes the religious vows (thereby offering, of his own will, a holocaust to God), makes perfect satisfaction for his sins.” Those who are most dedicated to religion (in the religious life), and thus render the debt of honor owed to God, also render the debt of penance most fully.

³⁶ Gary Anderson looks at one particular way in which one atones for sin in chapter 9 of *Sin*, entitled “Redeem Your Sins with Alms,” 135–51.

³⁷ Aquinas emphasizes that it is “by faith” that “Christ’s power is united to us. . . . Therefore the power of the sacraments which is ordained to the remission of sins is derived principally from faith in Christ’s Passion” (*ST III*, q. 62, a. 5, ad 2).

³⁸ *Sacrifice and Community: Jewish Offering and Christian Eucharist* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 102.

taneously is the great act of obedience, in which He immolated His will out of love for the Father.³⁹ In doing so, God has provided the fitting remedy to sin, which by its very nature pulls us away from him and toward a creature in his place.

Sin is a personal offense to God, directly contrary to the just rendering of the debt that we owe him as God. However, God's power in directing us toward himself as end is manifested in Christ, who draws us beyond our attachment to passing creation and into the life to come. This religious view of sin and redemption in Aquinas largely supports the view taken by Gary Anderson, though Aquinas provides a broader context within which to understand them. As Anderson makes clear, debt is a crucial way of understanding sin. However, the debt of sin should not be seen solely through the lens of punishment for breaking a commandment. Rather, debt should be understood as something more positive: our very lives are owed in debt to God. We fulfill our very purpose of existence by responding obediently to that debt with acts of worship and other virtuous acts. Failing to fulfill this prior debt creates a new, negative debt of punishment, for which atonement must be made through penance, which finds its efficacy in the redemption of Christ.⁴⁰ Even though all fall short of perfectly rendering the debt owed to God, the life of Christ dwelling in the soul through grace enables the soul to act justly before God. It is the worship and obedience of Christ that both models and enables the proper response to the debt that all owe to God. **N V**

³⁹ Cf. *ST* III, q. 81, a. 1; q. 48, a. 3.

⁴⁰ The sacraments communicate Christ's grace to enable a proper moral response and worship of God. Aquinas states: "The sacraments of the New Law . . . contain in themselves a power flowing from Christ . . . incarnate and crucified" (*ST* I-II, q. 102, a. 3, corpus). And further: "The Passion is communicated to every baptized person, so that he is healed just as if he himself had suffered and died" (*ST* III, q. 69, a. 2, corpus).