

“Those He Predestined He Also Called” (Romans 8:30): Aquinas on the Liberating Grace of Conversion

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IN THE *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*, THOMAS AQUINAS articulates his most developed understanding of both the absolute primacy of grace and the proper instrumental activity of the free will in the journey of the predestined rational creature to beatitude.¹ In the non-competitive causation of the creature’s movement to supernatural perfection, God’s grace causes the free will to use its freedom for excellence, participating in his plan of divine providence through a cooperative journey of progressive deification that constitutes the moral life. But what about the will that is *uncooperative*, turned away from God, and needing to be turned back to begin, or begin again, its journey to salvation? That is, what about every human will damaged by and in love with sin, before the healing and elevation of grace? In the beginning of the journey, Thomas thinks, the will seduced away from God by sin is moved by the divine help toward God’s goodness without moving itself and with no preparation or merit on the part of the sinner. Yet even here, Thomas says, this extrinsic turning of the unwilling will is no case of divine coercion; rather, Thomas understands this as the liberating beginning of an ongoing process of conversion, in which the free will plays an increasingly significant role in meriting and ultimately enjoying the perfection of beatitude. Ongoing conversion is necessary because of the ever-present temptation of sin. Yet, those whom God predestines he also calls (Romans 8:30), again and again, away from the slavery of sin and back to the freedom to move towards himself as the truly good end. Thomas’s thought on the ongoing conversion of the moral life of the predestined is shaped by many scripture texts. After outlining his teaching on the grace of conversion in the *Summa*, I draw from Thomas’s biblical commentaries and other

¹ In the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas frames the question of conversion within his larger picture of the human person’s journey by grace to union with God in eternal life—the “advance of the rational creature to God” ST I q. 2 prol. All translations of ST are based on *S. Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici Opera Omnia Iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita*, vols. 4–12 (Rome: Leonine Commission, 1888–1906). All translations from Latin are my own unless otherwise noted.

works to examine his use of a few scriptural texts that he often addresses together in discussions of conversion, from Lamentations 5:21, John 6:44, and Romans 6:23, 8:15 and 8:30. I argue that Thomas's reflection on these texts deeply informs his mature account of conversion as a progressive journey powered by grace from beginning to end, through moral struggle towards freedom and final beatitude for God's adopted children.

THE LIBERATION OF THE WILL BY GRACE (*SUMMA THEOLOGIAE* I-II, Q. 109)

Thomas touches on the question of conversion and the free will in the *Summa* in several places where he considers the work of grace, both as an infused habit and as the supernatural motion of divine *auxilium*. In ST I-II q. 109, he argues for the prevenience of grace at every stage of the moral life. The articles of this question sketch out the human person's continual need for grace, especially after original sin, in the journey to eternal life. In the movement of the predestined beginning with initial conversion away from sin, through the hurdles of repeated sin and further avoidance of sin, to final perseverance, the healing and elevation of grace is required to do supernatural and even, for fallen humans, most natural good.² Quoting Romans 6:23, "the grace of God is life everlasting," and the *Glossa Ordinaria* on that text, Thomas explains that without the gift of grace, one cannot perform works meritorious of eternal life (ST I-II q. 109 a. 5 *sed contra* and ad 2). Habitual grace prepares the will "to operate rightly and to enjoy God," perfecting one to the divine image by bestowing a participation in the divine nature; it therefore makes the free will the cooperating principle of supernaturally meritorious works (ST I-II q. 109 a. 6, q. 110 a. 4, q. 112 a. 2, q. 114 a. 3). In a. 6, Thomas argues further that one cannot even prepare oneself to receive habitual grace without another prevenient gift of grace, "a gratuitous gift of God who moves the soul inwardly or inspires the good wish." This gift of interior divine motion initially turns the will away from sin and towards God, preparing one to receive habitual grace. It is a special instance of God's helping grace, or *auxilium*, which Thomas associates in multiple places with the prompting or *instinctus* of the Holy Spirit, a gift that enables one to comply freely with God's will under the New Law of liberty.³

This grace of divine motion is necessary because we cannot prepare or turn ourselves on our own, Thomas insists in q. 109. In the *sed contra* of a. 6, he quotes John 6:44: "It is written, 'No one can come to me unless the Father, who has sent me, draw him'. But if one could

² On the last point, see ST I-II q. 109, a. 2.

³ The life of the New Law can be called a life of liberty from the very beginning insofar as we "comply freely" with the interior *instinctus* of the Holy Spirit's grace. See ST I-II q. 108, a. 1 ad 2.

prepare himself, he would not need to be drawn by another. Hence one cannot prepare oneself without the help of grace” (ST I-II q. 109 a. 6). Therefore, as the first Mover, God prepares the soul to receive habitual grace by “a gratuitous help [*auxilium*] of God interiorly moving the soul, or inspiring the good intention.” God

converts just men to himself as to a special end, which they intend, and to which they desire to adhere, according to Psalm 72: “It is good for me to adhere to my God.” And therefore, it cannot be that one is converted to God without God converting him. Now to prepare oneself for grace, is as it were to be converted to God, as he who has his eye converted away from the light of the sun, prepares himself to receive the sun’s light by converting his eyes towards the sun. Whence it is clear that one cannot prepare oneself to receive the light of grace, except through the gratuitous help [*auxilium*] of God moving interiorly (ST I-II q. 109 a. 6).

In answer to objections that since we have free will, it seems that we can turn to God by our own power, he replies, “Man’s turning to God is by free-will, and thus we are bidden to turn ourselves to God. But free-will can only be turned to God, when God turns it, according to Jeremiah 31:18: ‘Convert me and I shall be converted,’ and Lamentations 5:21: ‘Convert us, O Lord, to you, and we shall be converted’” (ST I-II q. 109 a. 6 ad 1).

In this article, Thomas repudiates a common scholastic position he had held in his early *Scriptum* on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, that *facienti quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam*: “to those who do what is in them”—that is, who take the first step towards God by doing their best—“God will not deny grace.”⁴ Through his reading of Augustine’s later anti-Pelagian writings, quoted numerous times in q. 109, Thomas came to recognize this opinion as Pelagian, (or semi-Pelagian), developing an understanding of the all-encompassing and dynamic work of grace as an effect of predestination, both enabling (by habitual grace) and preveniently setting into motion (by auxiliary grace) supernaturally good human action throughout life’s journey towards the end of beatitude.⁵ Henri Bouillard notes that this shift takes place sometime before Thomas wrote the *Summa contra Gentiles*, where he rejects the *facienti quod* position as Pelagian.⁶ From the time of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, too, Thomas makes use of a principle from Aristotle’s *Eudemian Ethics* (known to him as the *Liber de bona fortuna*) that he employs in q. 109, that although the human will is free, there must be

⁴ See Joseph Wawrykow, *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 54–56.

⁵ Henri Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce chez S. Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), 113–114.

⁶ Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce*, 113–114.

a higher extrinsic principle (God) to move it into act in the first place, whether to do natural or supernatural good, especially in the state of fallen nature.⁷ In response to an objection that “if one does what is in him God will not deny him grace,” and that “what is in us, is what is in our power,” Thomas answers that:

One can do nothing unless moved by God, according to Jn. 15:5: “Without me, you can do nothing.” Hence when one is said to do what is in him, this is said to be in his power insofar as he is moved by God (ST I-II q. 109 a. 6 ad 2).

In his commentary on John 15:5, Thomas says that by these words Christ “silences the mouths of the proud, especially of the Pelagians,” who in “trying to assert our free will...really toppled it” (*Super Ioan.*, ch. 15, lect. 1).⁸ This is so because we cannot even use our free will without the help of God. In his mature works, Thomas presents a carefully balanced picture of the absolute primacy of the divine initiative and the genuine, but secondary, causality of the human will in both natural and supernatural action.

If God’s help is always needed to move the will to do good, that is even more the case for the will damaged by sin. Thomas takes seriously the enslavement of sin, that persists in its effects to some extent even after conversion and justification, exposing one to the attacks of temptation due to the weakness of the flesh. In q. 109 a. 9, Thomas argues that even after the gift of habitual grace, one always needs the help of God moving one to act righteously not only because the divine motion must precede every creaturely act but because of the condition of human nature after the fall, “For although healed by grace as to the mind, yet it remains corrupted and poisoned in the flesh, whereby it serves ‘the law of sin’ (Romans 7:25).” The darkness of ignorance also remains in the intellect, requiring the guidance and protection of God, “who knows and can do all things” (ST I-II q. 109 a. 9). God does not give us habitual grace so that we will no longer need his help; grace is not meant to make us self-sufficient. God gives us the dignity of acting as genuine secondary causes in the journey to salvation in order to free us from the slavery of sin so that we can live in the freedom of the children of God.

Therefore, Thomas is always careful to maintain in the *Summa* that, on the one hand, God’s movement of the person cannot fail to turn them to himself to receive the gift of grace yet, on the other, that this is not coercion but liberation. In q. 112, he quotes Augustine *On the Predestination of the Saints* (14):

⁷ Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce*, 123ff.

⁸ All citations of the *Commentary on John* are based on *S. Thomae Aquinatis Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, ed. R. Cai, 6th ed. (Turin: Marietti, 1972).

Augustine says, “By God’s good gifts, whoever is liberated, is most certainly liberated.” Hence if God intends, while moving, that the one whose heart he moves should attain to grace, he will infallibly attain to it, according to John 6:45: “Everyone that has heard of the Father, and has learned, comes to me.” (ST I-II q. 112 a. 3)

Without God’s help, on the other hand, our free-will, wounded by sin, would fail to turn to God, would exercise its freedom wrongly to do evil, and so would be responsible for its own final loss of freedom, its eternal loss of God. Here, Thomas quotes Hosea 13:9: “Your destruction is your own, O Israel; your help is only in me” (ST I q. 23 a. 3; I-II q. 112 a. 3 ad 2). God’s infallible foreknowledge of the ordination of the predestined to eternal life does not destroy their free will but enables it to act meritoriously under grace so as to reach the end (ST I q. 23 a. 5).⁹

Therefore, God’s turning of the will to himself does not destroy but enables the will’s freedom. If our free-will is bent towards evil, as we falsely think evil is good and are attracted to it, we simply cannot pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps and turn ourselves around; we are, in effect, trapped in a delusion. Thomas says elsewhere in the *Summa* that we still have *natural* liberty in this state—that is, we are free from external coercion to choose good or evil—but we have lost *true* freedom, “freedom from fault and unhappiness” (that is, the true freedom Adam enjoyed before the Fall) (ST I q. 83 a. 2., *corpus* and ad 3).¹⁰ Only God, in his mercy, can pick us up and re-orient us towards the true good. This is why in initial conversion and justification, God alone is the mover of the will, re-directing it to the truly good end, and the will is simply moved without moving itself. This gift of divine motion is operating *auxilium*, which is at work “especially when the will, that hitherto willed evil, begins to will good” (ST I-II q. 111 a. 2).¹¹ On the other hand, with our wills re-oriented to the right end by

⁹ See Thomas Joseph White, OP, “Catholic Predestination: The Omnipotence and Innocence of Divine Love,” in *Thomism and Predestination: Principles and Disputations*, ed. Steven A. Long, Roger W. Nutt, Thomas Joseph White, OP (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2016), 115, where he expresses well how, in the graced free choice of the true good, the human person acts as “a finite creature dependent in all that it is qua free agent upon the transcendent creative gift of God, and as a creature stimulated in its inmost ontological core by God’s wholly interior, nonviolent pre-motions.”

¹⁰ On the related notion of “freedom for excellence,” see Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 354–399.

¹¹ On the development of Thomas’s teaching on operating and co-operating *auxilium*, see Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000, rpt., 2005), 404–438. Also see Joseph Wawrykow, *God’s Grace and Human Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 34–55,

God, we can actively cooperate in carrying out the good intention, though still with the help of God moving us. This moving grace is cooperating *auxilium*, in which the will is moved by God and also, as a secondary cause, moves itself. Thomas quotes Augustine again, who makes a similar distinction in his anti-Pelagian work *On Grace and Free Will*: “God operates that we may will; and when we will, he cooperates that we may perfect.”¹² God helps us to will the good by operating grace and helps us to cooperate in freely assenting to and carrying out that good as well. This cooperation of our free-will, assisted by grace, allows us to truly merit eternal life.

SCRIPTURAL SOURCES

It is clear that Thomas’s thought on these matters was deeply shaped by reflection on Scripture, as well as by Augustine’s anti-Pelagian writings. So, I turn now to closer examination of a constellation of Scripture texts in the passages above that emerge with frequency in Thomas’s teaching on conversion as liberation.

Lamentations 5:21

One significant scriptural text in Thomas’s accounts of conversion is a verse from Lamentations 5:21: “Convert us, O Lord, to you, and we shall be converted,” a text which does not appear at all in Thomas’s early *Scriptum* on the *Sentences* but, like Augustine’s anti-Pelagian works and the principle from the *Eudemian Ethics*, is seen with increasing frequency from the time of the *Summa contra Gentiles*. In his later works, he employs Lamentations 5:21 as an authority to exclude “Pelagian” errors.¹³ In the *Summa*, in addition to the treatise on grace, he refers to it in ST I q. 23, a. 5 on predestination. Here, he argues that it is Pelagian to hold that our merits are in any way the cause of predestination, concluding that the effect of predestination not only includes the grace given to us after initial conversion, which enables us

266–273; Lawrence Feingold, “God’s Movement of the Soul through Operative and Cooperative Grace,” *Thomism and Predestination: Principles and Disputations*, eds. Steven A. Long, Roger W. Nutt, Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2016), 106–91.

¹² Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, 17.33.

¹³ For instance, on 2 Timothy 2:4, he explains that one should be “modest in admonishing” false teachers because it is “God the Father [who] is able to lead them to repentance.” Here, he says, “Pelagius’s error is excluded, who said that the gifts of grace come from our works. But this is seen to be false, because even the beginning of good works, namely, repentance, is given by God: Lam 5:21: ‘Convert us, O Lord, to you, and we shall be converted’” (*Super II Tim.*, ch. 2, lect. 4). All citations from Thomas’s commentaries on the Pauline letters are based on *S. Thomae Aquinatis Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, vols. 1–2, ed. R. Cai, 8th ed. (Turin: Marietti, 1953). In addition to the works discussed below, Lam 5:21 appears in *De veritate* q. 24 a. 15 ad 1; *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3.149.6; *Quodlibet* I q. 4 a. 2; I-II q. 109, a. 6 ad 1; *Super Matt.* [rep. Leodegarii Bissuntini], ch. 25, lect. 2; ch. 26, lect. 7.

to freely merit further grace and, ultimately, glory, but also includes preparation for the first grace itself, “For this does not happen without divine help either, according to the prophet Jeremiah (Lamentations 5:21): ‘Convert us, O Lord, and we shall be converted.’” In an article on the virtue of penance, Thomas makes it clear that this verse refers to the initial movement of operating *auxilium*, which, turning us to God, makes it possible for us to cooperate with him. In the acts of penance, he says, “We cooperate with God operating, the first principle of which acts is the operation of God in turning the heart, according to Lamentations 5:21, ‘Convert, us, O Lord,’ etc.” (ST III q. 85 a. 5). Thomas employs this verse from Lamentations to insist that God is always the first cause of salvation and that his predestinating plan encompasses the whole journey of the predestined to glory, from their preparation for initial conversion through sequential gifts of grace that empower them to cooperate meritoriously to the end with his will to bring them to eternal life.

Besides references in the *Summa*, Thomas also uses Lamentations 5:21 in his Scripture commentaries to underline that God’s grace works the first movement of conversion. For instance, Lamentations 5:21 appears several times in his *Commentary on John*, notably in conjunction with texts from Romans, and here we see more clearly how Thomas understands the divine *auxilium* of conversion in the context of love, freedom, and divine adoption. In his discussion of John 1:12 (“He gave them power to be made the sons of God”), Thomas explains that only sanctifying grace can cause us to become sons of God by being made like God; here he quotes Romans 8:15: “You did not receive a spirit of slavery...but the spirit of adoption of sons.” While justification requires the exercise of the free will’s power in consent, the will,

if it is to be moved to receive grace, needs the help [*auxilium*] of divine grace, not habitual grace, but moving grace. For this reason God gives power by moving the free will of man to consent to the reception of grace: “convert us, O Lord,” that is, by moving our will to your love [*ad amorem tuum*], “and we will be converted” (Lam 5:21). And in this sense we speak of an interior call, of which it is said (Rom 8:30), “those whom he called” by interiorly instigating the will to consent to grace, “he justified,” by infusing grace. (*Super Ioan.*, ch. 1, lect. 6, no. 154)

Here, with reference to Romans 8:30, Thomas adds to the notion of an initial motion of divine *auxilium* the idea that, in conversion, God calls the will of the predestined interiorly towards his love, giving the desire, and the power, to consent to his grace.

For Thomas, in fact, conversion, understood as “every movement of the will towards God,” continues into beatitude. In a question on

the grace of the angels, he describes a threefold conversion of the will to God:

The first is by the perfect love of God; this belongs to the creature already enjoying God; and for this conversion, consummate grace is required. The second conversion is that which merits beatitude; and for this there is required habitual grace, which is the principle of merit. The third conversion is that by which anyone prepares himself to have grace; for this no habitual grace is required; but the operation of God, converting the soul towards himself, according to Lamentations 5:21: "Convert us, O Lord, to you, and we shall be converted." (ST I q. 62 a. 2 ad 3; cf., I q. 93 a. 4)

Lamentations 5:21 signifies for Thomas that in his plan of providence for the predestined, God never ceases to constantly and mercifully turn and draw the elect to himself, helping them with operating and cooperating grace from the moment of their initial conversion towards him through their perfect union with him in eternal life.

John 6:44

Another frequently cited text is John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father, who sent me, draws him." In his commentary on this verse, Thomas reflects on how the divine motion of God in conversion involves not the compulsion of coercion but the freedom of attraction.

The Father drawing us does not imply coercion, because there are some ways of being drawn that do not imply compulsion. Consequently the Father draws men to the Son in many ways, using the different ways we can be drawn without compulsion. (*Super Ioan.*, ch. 6, lect. 5, no. 935)

There is a difference between drawing and dragging. God turns our will to the good end by making us see that it *is* the true and good end. As in the commentary on John 1:12, Thomas distinguishes an exterior and interior call, the former involving external persuasion, and the latter, the hidden prompting of the will by grace.¹⁴ The Father draws some externally by "persuading them with reason"; others, he draws by "attracting or captivating them," both by the paternal greatness and by "a wonderful joy and love of the truth, who is the very Son of God himself." Internally, the Father "draws many to the Son by the *instinctus* of a divine action, moving their heart from within to believe" (*Super Ioan.* ch. 6, lect. 5, no. 935).¹⁵

¹⁴ See *Quodlibet II* q. 4 a. 1 co.; *Super Gal.*, ch. 1, lect. 4.

¹⁵ If this sounds rather Augustinian, it is not surprising. Thomas is drawing from Augustine's *Tractates on John* 26.4, on this same Gospel verse, where Augustine argues

Like Augustine, Thomas refers to John 6:44 very often in the context of discussions about the necessity, gratuity, and attraction of God's initial call for the predestined, to whom a share in divine sonship will be communicated. In his commentary on Romans 8:30 ("those he predestined, he also called"), Thomas refers to the same constellation of texts as he does in q. 109 a. 6 to underline the primacy of grace and again distinguishes between an external call, through preaching, and the interior call of God's *auxilium*, necessary to respond; the interior call is a motivating attraction,

a certain *instinctus* of the mind by which man's heart is moved by God to assent to the things of faith or virtue.... This call is necessary because our heart could not turn itself to God if God himself had not drawn us: "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (Jn 6:44) and "convert us to yourself, O Lord" (Lam 5:21). Furthermore, this call is efficacious in the predestined, because they assent to the call: "Everyone who has heard and has learned from the Father comes to me" (Jn 6:45). (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 707)

The operative auxiliary grace of conversion moves by freely drawing, not dragging, one onwards; this is the beginning of a cooperative journey for the predestined, who are justified in the assent of their free will to grace, turning towards God's goodness and away from sin (See ST I-II q. 113 a. 3).¹⁶

Thomas's references to God's interior call as an *instinctus* in these texts underlines too the role of the Holy Spirit, who leads the children of God (Romans 8:14). Servais Pinckaers has shown the increasing significance of the notion of the Spirit's *instinctus* in Thomas's mature treatments of the moral life, especially to describe the Spirit's action in the operation of the gifts which assist every believer to live a life according to the Spirit by cooperating with God.¹⁷ In his commentary

that if each is drawn by his own pleasure, "how much more strongly should we say that those whose delight is in the truth, whose delight is in happiness, whose delight is in justice, whose delight is in eternal life, are drawn to Christ, because each of those is Christ." Translation in *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1–40*, trans. Edmund Hill, OP (New York: New City Press, 2009), 452–453. Thomas included this text from Augustine in his *Catena on John*, ch. 6, lect. 6.

¹⁶ In ST I-II q. 113, a. 3, Thomas again quotes John 6:45, to argue that learning requires assent to the teacher, so that "no one comes to the Father" by justifying grace without a movement of the free will." Although justification is the effect of an initial operating grace instigating one to give up sin, it results in the cooperation of the free will with God (ST I-II q. 113, prol).

¹⁷ Servais Pinckaers, "Morality and the Movement of the Holy Spirit: Aquinas's Doctrine of *Instinctus*," *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, ed. John Berkman and Craig Titus, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, Craig Titus, Michael Sherwin, and Hugh Connolly (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 385–95. For an insightful discussion of the development of Thomas' use of the notion of *instinctus*, in relation to his doctrine on the gifts of the Holy Spirit,

on Romans, Thomas explains that to be “led by the Spirit of God” means to be “ruled by a leader and director” so that one is “not only instructed by the Holy Spirit about what to do, but his heart is also moved by the Holy Spirit.” The inclination of the spiritual man to do good comes “not chiefly from his own will, but from the *instinctus* of the Holy Spirit” as director. Yet, this does not take away his freedom, for “the Holy Spirit causes the very movement of the will and of free choice” in him (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 3, no. 635).

Romans 6:23, 8:15, and 8:30

A third scriptural source central to Thomas’s accounts of conversion is evidently Paul’s Letter to the Romans, with its teaching on the freedom given to God’s predestined adopted children, led by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Thomas makes so many references to Romans in this context that it is difficult to choose the most important. He refers numerous times in the *Summa*, as we have already seen, to Romans 6:23 (“The grace of God is life everlasting”), in connection with discussions of conversion and the cooperative attainment of eternal life, for which “God’s mercy,” he says, “is the first cause,” and the merit won by our free-will the subsequent cause (ST I-II q. 114 a. 3 ad 2).¹⁸ Romans 6:23 is the culminating verse of Paul’s extended contrast of servitude to sin versus servitude to God. In Romans 6:22, Paul begins to bring this contrast to a head: “but now, being made free from sin and become servants to God, you have your fruit unto sanctification, and the end, everlasting life.” On this verse, Thomas comments:

Just as in the state of sin, one is a servant of sin which he obeys, so in the state of justice one is a servant of God and obeys him willingly...but this is true freedom and the best form of servitude, because by justice a human is inclined to what befits him [ie, as human], and is turned away from what is fitting to concupiscence, which is especially bestial. (*Super Rom.*, ch. 6, lect. 4, no. 513)

Service of God by willing obedience is the best kind of servitude because it makes one do what is especially human—properly using one’s reason and will. This servitude, under the dominion of grace rather than of sin, is the true freedom given by the Son, who makes the children of God “free indeed” (John 8:36).¹⁹

but also to preparation for justification, see James Stroud, “*Instinctus* and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit: Explaining the Development in St. Thomas’s Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 8, Special Issue No. 2 (2019): 60–79.

¹⁸ See ST I q. 12, a. 4; q. 62, a. 2; I-II q. 109, a. 5; q. 114, a. 2; II-II q. 24, a. 2; III q. 52, a. 7; III q. 86, a. 3 ad 5.

¹⁹ See *Super Ioan.* ch. 8, lect. 4, no. 1209.

At the very outset of his commentary on Romans, referring to Paul's introduction of himself as a servant (or subject) of God, Thomas says,

It is praiseworthy for a person to be subjected to his salvation and the spiritual anointing of grace, because a thing is perfect to the extent that it is subjected to its perfection.... Yet this seems to conflict with John 15:15: "No longer do I call you servants but friends." But one should say that there are two kinds of servitude. One is the servitude of fear, which does not befit saints: "You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of the adoption of sons" (Rom 8:15). The other is the servitude of humility and love, which does befit saints. (*Super Rom.*, ch. 1, lect. 1, no. 21)

Thomas makes clear here with his reference to John 15:15 that the servitude of humility and love which is fitting to the adopted children of God is in the end the free and willing obedience of those whom Jesus calls "friends," those to whom he has "made known everything that he has heard from the Father" (John 15:15).²⁰ This servitude, Romans 8:15 tells us, is the glad self-offering of the child and of the lover of God, conformed to the Son by the Holy Spirit in knowledge and love of God.

In his commentary on Romans 8:15, following his argument that the Spirit's *instinctus* leads spiritual people in freedom, Thomas analyzes the difference between slaves and sons in the ongoing conversion of the moral life. The Holy Spirit produces two effects in us, fear and love, "but fear makes slaves; love does not" (*Super Rom.* ch 8, lect. 3, no. 638). Servile fear of punishment is not entirely unpraiseworthy; it is from the Holy Spirit but is defective. The newly converted most often have a mixed kind of fear, initial fear. They fear punishment but also separation from God, out of love. Initial fear and the more perfect filial or chaste fear are distinguished by the degree to which one loves God. Filial fear is the Spirit's gift of fear, flowing from charity, which Christ had in perfection. It makes one fear above all to be separated from God, so it helps one to be docile to the Spirit's

²⁰ In his commentary on John 15:15 (*Super Ioan.* ch. 15, lect. 3), Thomas repeats this idea and draws from Augustine's *Tractates on John* 85.3, where Augustine, himself referring to Romans 8:15, distinguishes between two kinds of fear and two kinds of servitude: "Because he gave us the power to become sons of God, let us be not servants, but sons, in order that in some way, marvelous and ineffable, but yet true, we are able to be servants that are not servants, servants of course because of the pure fear that belongs to the servant entering into the joy of his Lord, but not servants because of the fear that must be cast out, to which belongs the servant not remaining in the house forever. But let us know that the Lord makes it happen that we are [both] such servants [and yet] not servants." Translation in *Tractates on the Gospel of John 55–111* (Fathers of the Church Patristic Series), trans. John Rettig (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 139.

prompting to gladly obey the Father.²¹ Just as the fear of punishment makes slaves, “charity’s love produces the freedom of sons” (*Super Rom.* ch 8, lect. 3, nos. 639–641). Beginners do not yet enjoy the full freedom of sons produced by a more perfect love of God but have begun on a journey of increasing freedom as Christ’s joint heirs and friends. The more one advances in perfection in the moral life, under the Spirit’s guidance, the more one becomes willing servant, child, and friend of God.

A final key text for Thomas’s thought on conversion is Romans 8:30 (“those he predestined, he also called. And whom he called, he also justified. And whom he justified, he also glorified”). Thomas refers to this verse especially where he considers how God’s predestination of the saints is carried out in time from the first call of grace to the final end of glorification. The execution of the divine plan to order some to salvation takes effect in them by their “calling and magnification,” according to Romans 8:30 (ST I q. 23, a. 2). The predestined rational creature is directed towards eternal life like an arrow by an archer, and the effect of predestination includes all the grace that will call, transform, and move her on through a cooperative journey of good works to beatitude (ST I q. 23, a. 1, a. 2, a. 5).²² In his commentary on Romans 8:30, Thomas outlines this sequence of predestination’s effects in the saints in more detail. Predestination “begins to be carried out with the calling of the person,” both externally by preaching and internally by the *instinctus* of grace, God converting and drawing us to himself efficaciously. Those whom God calls by an initial gift of interior motion, he justifies by the infusion of (habitual) grace; although justification can be frustrated in those who do not persevere, “in the predestined it is never frustrated.” God magnifies or glorifies his chosen ones first by “growth in virtue and grace” and finally by “exaltation to glory” (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 707–709). This scriptural exegesis complements and deepens Thomas’s description in the *Summa* of the working of operating and cooperating grace on the journey to beatitude.

By placing Thomas’s exegesis of this verse into its context in his Romans commentary, we gain an even richer view of his appreciation of the difficult but blessed nature of this journey, on account of which God’s goodness should “stupefy us with astonishment” (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 711).²³ In his *divisio* of verses 8:28–35, Thomas presents the text as an argument by Paul to demonstrate how the Holy

²¹ See ST II-II q. 19; III q. 7, a. 6.

²² See *Super Eph.* ch. 2, lect. 3 *Super Matt.* (rep. Petri de Andria), ch. 4, lect. 2; *Super Ioan.*, ch. 15, lect. 3; *Super I Cor.*, ch. 1, lect. 1.

²³ In “Aquinas on Romans 8: Predestination in Context,” in *Reading Romans with Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), Matthew Levering provides a thorough examination of Aquinas’s exegesis of Romans 8:30 within the context of his

Spirit “helps us with respect to external events, directing them to our good.” First, Paul states his proposition about “the greatness of the benefit conferred on us by the Holy Spirit, namely, that ‘all things work together for good’” for “those who love God” and who “according to his purpose are called to be saints” (8:28). Paul proves his argument in the verses from 8:29–8:34, beginning at “For whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son,” drawing his conclusion when he says, “Who then will separate us from the love of Christ?” (8:35) (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 695).

Predestination’s effects described in Romans 8:30 are therefore an argument in support of the proposition that “all things work together for good” for the predestined. Discussing this proposition, Thomas gives a brief explanation of God’s permission of evil in order to bring about the greater good especially of the just. Penal evils suffered help them to grow in virtue, but even their own sins “work together for their good,” for this good

consists not only in the amount of one’s love but especially in perseverance until death.... Furthermore, because one has fallen, he rises more cautious and humble; hence, the Gloss adds that this makes them progress, “because they return to themselves more humble and wiser,” for they have learned they should fear exulting about themselves, as if making any claim about themselves or trusting in their power to endure. (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 698)

The sins of those called to be saints are not ultimately disastrous but encourage filial fear in them, becoming part of a holy history in which they rise by falling. Paul’s proof of the claim that all things work together for the good of the saints is that “No one can harm those whom God moves forward [*promovet*; seemingly, a reference to the motion of divine auxilium]. But God moves forward the predestined who love him” (the minor premise). Therefore “nothing can harm them, but everything results in their good” (the major premise).

The minor premise that God moves the predestined forward is proved by considering first how God moves them from eternity by his foreknowledge and predestination, in 8:29 (“whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son”), and then how God moves them in time, by predestination’s effects in them, in 8:30 (“whom he predestined he also called,” etc.) (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 701). Predestination’s effect is not only eternal life, Thomas

commentary on Romans 8, a context that Levering describes as “a rich portrait of human transformation through the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit,” which “makes clear that predestination is about God’s eternal plan of deification” (208). The deification and ultimate glorification of the saints, in spite of their failures and sins along the way, is an astonishing manifestation of God’s goodness.

explains, but “under predestination falls every benefit divinely prepared for man from eternity; hence...all the benefits bestowed on us in time have been prepared for us from eternity” (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 703). The foremost effect of predestination, for the sake of which all grace is given, is to conform us to the image of the Son so that we might share in his sonship by adoption, his right to the eternal inheritance, and his splendor, “by the light of wisdom and grace” (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 704). It is for this that we are called, justified, and glorified (8:30).

The major premise that “nothing can harm those moved forward by God” (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 710) is clarified when Paul says, “What then shall we say? If God is for us, who can be against us?” (8:31). Nothing can nullify God’s gifts to his elect, Thomas argues: “What then shall we say? For in considering these things, we should be stupefied with astonishment ... what could we return to God for such great blessings?” (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 711). The predestined cannot be harmed by persecution, or the removal of their goods, for “God did not even spare his own Son” from tribulation, “but delivered him up for us all” (Rom 8:32), giving us all things along with him, “the highest things, namely, the divine persons to enjoy, rational spirits to live with, all lower things to use, not only prosperity but adversity as well” (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 714). Thomas nuances this Augustinian explanation with the thought that, for those whom God calls, even adversity is a gift to be used in order to reach God who alone can be enjoyed. Paul’s conclusion is that in every trial we conquer because nothing “can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”; here, he is speaking “in the person of all the predestined” about the certainty of predestination, which is “caused by the power of charity” (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 7, no. 734). Indeed, Thomas says, God bestows such great benefits on his saints that “when we consider them, such love of Christ burns in our hearts that nothing can extinguish it” (*Super Rom.* ch. 8, lect. 6, no. 722). For Thomas, then, Paul’s description of the journey of the predestined in Romans 8:30 is a central argument for the Apostle’s proposition that all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called to be saints, despite the difficulties posed by evil, even the evil of one’s own sin, along the way. Nothing in the end can frustrate God’s plan for the predestined and their final victory, even their own weakness, because of the power of grace.

In his sermon *Beatus Vir*, preached on the feast of St. Martin, Thomas demonstrates the fruits of this exegesis. He gives as his theme our need, like St. Martin, for divine help (*auxilium divinum*) in order “to arrive at the glory of highness” (*Beatus Vir*, 1). Thomas employs the three parts of Romans 8:30 to illustrate the “triple help” that God gives us to attain beatitude through successive stages in the progress

to holiness. First, “that God chastises us is a way to beatitude.” God calls us from afar when we are in sin:

The Apostle shows us the blessing of that calling when he says, “The ones he predestined he also called” (Rom 8:30). And St. Martin was called by the Lord and chastised; that is, removed from original sin and preserved from actual sin. (*Beatus Vir*, 2)

God’s chastisement, by inspiring fear, forgiving sins, and drawing us away from sin, is all accomplished by grace, and “is a sign of his love” (*Beatus Vir*, 2). His second help is to teach us, raising up our intellect and affections: “Someone who subjects his heart to divine inspiration learns; this pertains to justification. The Apostle says in Rom 8:30, ‘Those whom he called, he also justified’” (*Beatus Vir*, 2). God’s third help is that he “raises us up”: “This action of raising someone up pertains to the third blessing of God, namely, magnification. The Apostle says in Rom 8:30, ‘Those whom he justified, he also magnified.’” God magnified St. Martin by the holiness of his works, his miracles, and his fame (*Beatus Vir*, 2), the source of all St. Martin’s happiness in his ascent “from the low state of misery to a high state” (*Beatus Vir*, 3) was God’s help, described from beginning to end in Romans 8:30.

CONCLUSION: THE PRIMACY OF GRACE AND THE HOPE OF SALVATION

Thomas’s account of the ongoing conversion of the moral life is shaped by a catena of scriptural texts from the Old and New Testaments, from the Gospel and the Pauline letters, all of which, for him, underline the primacy of God’s grace and our need for divine help to attain the true freedom of salvation. The moral life of the predestined is a journey of conversion towards final happiness, not without struggle, but with certain hope of God’s gracious assistance for those who love him. The “grace of God is life everlasting” (Romans 6:23) because the initial gift of conversion, for the predestined, is just the beginning of the growth in freedom of the children of God, in a loving servitude that perseveres with filial fear against temptation, allowing hope even during moral and physical evil, as one presses on with increasing joy to victory in eternal life. This should cause us to burn with love for Christ and be astonished at God’s goodness.

Is Thomas’s vision of conversion as liberation still relevant today? The documents of Vatican II and the writings of recent popes underscore the way in which false understandings of the human person, and of human freedom, conspire to contribute to secularism and atheism in contemporary culture; these, along with a prevailing cryptopelagianism, undermine the proclamation of the Gospel. Yet the documents also underline the unquenchable desire for God and true freedom writ-

ten into the human heart.²⁴ Thomas provides a positive counterargument to modern misconceptions of freedom and human destiny. His teaching has ongoing relevance because it speaks profoundly to the human condition, God's mercy, the primacy of grace despite sin, the dignity of human freedom, and the hope of our salvation.

With this in mind, I give the last word—perhaps unexpectedly—not to Thomas but to the Renaissance poet and preacher John Donne, who was influenced by Thomas's teaching. Donne admired Thomas and knew his works, which still shaped the intellectual climate of Europe.²⁵ At the same time, the rise of skepticism and Donne's own conflicted relationship with Calvinism left him hesitant and inconsistent about the role of human reason and free will in salvation.²⁶ This tension appears in his Holy Sonnets, so there is some dispute as to whether they express despair or assurance about reason's role in salvation by grace.²⁷ I conclude with a speculative proposal about Thomas's possible influence on Donne: perhaps, at the end of Donne's famous Holy Sonnet XIV, we can read him as expressing not despair of reason but a Thomist confidence in the power of the grace of conversion to make wounded reason truly free again:

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you
 As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
 That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
 Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
 I, like an usurped town, to another due,
 Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,
 Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
 But is captived, and proves weak or untrue,
 Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
 But am betrothed unto your enemy,
 Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
 Take me to you, imprison me, for I
 Except you enthal me, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.²⁸ **M**

²⁴ For example, *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 1–10, 17; *Fides et Ratio*, nos. 1–5; Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Truth and Freedom," *Communio* 23, no. 1 (1996): 17–35; *Caritas in Veritate*, nos. 1–4, 70.

²⁵ John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008, repr. 2011), 232.

²⁶ Carey, *John Donne*, 231–262.

²⁷ Robert Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan* (Rochester, NY: Brewer, 2000), 16–17; Paul Cefalu, "Godly Fear, Sanctification, and Calvinist Theology in the Sermons and 'Holy Sonnets' of John Donne," *Studies in Philology* 100, no. 1 (2003): 71–86; John Stachniewski, "John Donne: The Despair of the 'Holy Sonnets,'" *ELH* 48, no. 4 (1981): 677–705; Lucio P. Ruotolo, "The Trinitarian Framework of Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 3 (1966): 445–446.

²⁸ John Donne, "Holy Sonnet 14," in *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed., A.J. Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1971, repr. 1996), 314–315.

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