

The Sacramental Consummation of the Moral Life According to St. Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

This paper shows the theological vision of Aquinas' moral theology by exploring the intimate connectedness of his moral thought in the *prima secundae* of the *Summa theologiae* with his sacramental theology and Christology in the *tertia pars*. While some have disputed the theological and Christological character of Aquinas' moral thought, both the structural presentation of the *Summa* and the key role grace plays in his treatment of the moral life point to the importance of the sacraments, which, empowered by the Holy Spirit, communicate the grace of Christ's Passion to men, who by themselves cannot act to attain their end in God because of God's infinity and man's sinfulness. The paper proceeds by exploring Aquinas' moral writings on man's end, habits and human action, and law and grace to a discussion of why man needs a savior. The paper then discusses the Passion of Christ the savior and its function in forgiving sin and opening the way to the infinite God in heaven for finite men, and concludes with a discussion of the importance of the Sacraments in the moral life as the instruments through which the effects of Christ's Passion are transmitted to men.

Keywords

Aquinas, Moral Theology, Christology, Sacramental Theology, Grace

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between the sacramental life and the moral life in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, most particularly in his writing in the *secunda pars* and *tertia pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*. In doing so, three basic questions must be answered: What is the moral life? What are the sacraments? How are they linked? I will argue that the moral life, for Aquinas, consists in the direction of man to his end, which itself consists in the happiness of contemplating God in eternal life. Man is incapable of reaching this end on his own for two reasons: the infinite God, who is man's end, is not a proper object for the action of finite men.

In other words, man's actions are inadequate to attain God. Also, man is sinful. Sin primarily consists in the violent re-ordering of human actions away from man's proper end, who is God. Such a disorder is not repairable by man. As such, man needs a savior for the relief of his sinful condition and to make his actions adequate to his proper end of God himself. The savior, who is Christ, does not simply act for himself but also acts for his followers. The sacraments, therefore, communicate Christ's saving acts to the members of his Church, thereby allowing them to act for their proper end by uniting themselves to Christ's saving act in his passion and death. As John Paul II says in his encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, "the celebration of the Eucharist is at the centre of the process of the Church's growth." Further, he says, "The Apostles, by accepting in the Upper Room Jesus' invitation: "Take, eat", "Drink of it, all of you" (*Mt* 26:26–27), entered for the first time into sacramental communion with him. From that time forward, until the end of the age, the Church is built up through sacramental communion with the Son of God who was sacrificed for our sake."¹ The sacramental building up of the Church is nothing other than the forgiveness of his sins, the re-ordering of his actions to redress the disorder of sin and to make his actions, through grace, adequate to his supernatural end in God.

There have been some who have accused Aquinas of marginalizing Christ in his ethical writings. For example, Livio Melina states,

Saint Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa theologiae* ... proposed a very different form of ethics consistent with the classical tradition and centered on the virtues. It was a profoundly theological ethics, beginning with the fact that the formal perspective is always that of Christian revelation: the last end is to be grasped as supernatural, the human acts that prepare it are placed in the perspective of merit, and the virtues become integrated in the dynamic of love, which is their mother and form. However, the explicitly Christological reference, while present, is very slight, we must frankly admit that the centrality of Christ for morality is not very evident in the moral theology of Aquinas. It is in this direction, however, that Vatican Council II and recent magisterium of the Church invites us to proceed.²

Melina is a formidable and learned scholar who is not at all hostile to Aquinas. Still, my contention is that he misreads Aquinas on this point. I seek to demonstrate the theological vision of Aquinas' ethics and the crucial centrality of Christ in his exposition of the moral life. Christology and moral theology are united in the *Summa theologiae* by Aquinas' sacramental theology.

¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, #21.

² Livio Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: for a renewal of moral theology in light of Veritatis splendor*. William E. May, trans. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p. 116.

I. The Moral Life and Man's End

A. Man's End

Aquinas states in the prologue to the first question of the moral part of the *Summa theologiae*, "We shall consider first the last end of human life; and secondly, those things by means of which man may advance towards this end, or stray from the path: for the end is the rule of whatever is ordained to the end."³ As he states later in the *sed contra*, "Now the end is the principle in human operations."⁴ Aquinas follows Aristotle in affirming that all things act for an end. That he begins the moral part of his *Summa* with a question about whether man acts for an end is suggestive. Unlike some clunkier versions of Thomistic ethics that begin from man's nature and attempt to deduce his ends from a static contemplation of man's quiddity, Aquinas first asks whether men act for an end. As the argument in Question 1 progresses, Aquinas steadily refines what he means by human action for an end. Man is not unique in acting for an end, since all things do so (a. 2); human acts are specified by their ends (a. 3), there is only one end in human life, toward which all other ends are subordinated and toward which all human acts are ordered (a. 4–5); they will whatsoever they will for the sake of the last end (a. 6); and all men share the same end, that is, the human species has a teleological integrity.

It is important to let the import of Aquinas' argument sink in, because it forms the dramatic tension of the *secunda pars*: everything that a man does is for the sake of his end. For human moral life, the end is all-important. Although Questions 2 and 3 are inquiries into what, specifically, man's end consists in, Aquinas is not interested in prolonging suspense as to in what man's last end really consists. At the end of Question 1, Aquinas dispels the mystery: "For man and other rational creatures attain to their last end by knowing and loving God."⁵ Happiness, therefore, to which all of man's actions are oriented, consists in knowing and loving God, "Since happiness means the acquisition of the last end" (I-II.1.8c). Everything a man does is ordered toward knowledge and love of God.

As Aquinas says in the prologue to Question 1, the rest of the *secunda pars* is about the ways in which man advances toward this

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.1 prologue. "Ubi primo considerandum occurrit de ultimo fine humanae vitae; et deinde de his per quae homo ad hunc finem pervenire potest, vel ab eo deviare, ex fine enim oportet accipere rationes eorum quae ordinantur ad finem."

⁴ Ibid. I-II.1sc. "Sed finis est principium in operabilibus ab homine."

⁵ Ibid. I-II.1.8c. "Nam homo et aliae rationales creaturae consequuntur ultimum finem cognoscendo et amando Deum."

end or strays from the path. Aquinas studies human acts as those acts that properly are ordered to man's end as a rational and therefore volitional creature. He then speaks of those human acts in terms of the interplay between the rational and volitional powers of the soul. This interplay is critical for Aquinas' ethics since there are ways in which the intellect prompts the will to act, and the will prompts the intellect to operate. Human acts turn out to be a matter of close cooperation between reason and will, in which the reason must guide and shape the will and its intentions, but in which also the will must motivate the reason. As determined in Question 4, happiness consists in an operation of the intellect, but it also necessarily fulfills the will by delighting the will completely so that it rests, fully in act.

In his discussion of the goodness and evil of human acts, it turns out that human acts are good when they are ordered toward their proper ends, with respect to a proper object, using correct means, done in right circumstances. Any defect in these requirements has the effect of derailing the human act, of disordering the act so that it cannot achieve its end. At this point, Aquinas moves to a discussion of the passions; this transition can be dizzying for ethicists trained in a post-Kantian milieu.⁶ The passions incline toward objects. They can either incline toward proper objects, or toward improper objects. Those inclinations are therefore either good or evil, insofar as they incline toward either proper or improper objects. A properly ordered man will have a reason that functions properly, able to discern truth from falsity and able to guide the will in particular circumstances toward proper objects, a will which has been rationally formed to tend toward proper objects for the man, and passions that incline toward proper objects in a manner ordered by reason.

B. Habits and Human Action

Aquinas then moves to a discussion of habits, which are dispositions to act in certain ways. Habits can be good (virtues) or bad (vices), and can be intellectual or moral. Virtues perfect the soul and its powers, while vices inhibit the soul and its powers from attaining their end. The virtues are either natural or theological. Natural virtues order man to his proper natural end, which is an imperfect contemplation of God according to his natural abilities. It is imperfect both because of his finite situation and because of his sinfulness. His finite situation makes it impossible, as he makes clear later (I-II.109.5)

⁶ For Kant, man's inclinations are opposed to his freedom. Human passions therefore must never influence moral decision making. Aquinas, on the other hand, distinguishes between passions that incline toward objects rationally or irrationally, depending upon whether they are ordered properly to man's true end or not.

for him to merit eternal life in which to contemplate God forever uninterruptedly, and his sinfulness inclines his affections away from God and spiritual things toward lower things. The theological virtues perfect the soul and its powers by making man's actions adequate to the attainment of God as his end. They are gifts; that is, man is unable either to cultivate the theological virtues on his own, or to merit them by his natural actions, but only to receive them by grace. Similarly the Gifts, Beatitudes, and Fruits of the Holy Spirit, which further perfect man, can only be had from God gratuitously.⁷ The graces of the theological virtues, Gifts, Beatitudes, and Fruits do not leave natural man behind, but rather perfect natural man. They trickle down through his entire being, elevating him and making him fit to act for his true end.

Just at this height of the moral life, however, Aquinas introduces a note of discord: sin. Sin makes man radically unfit to act for God, his true and proper end. God providentially orders man to his end in two basic ways: internally and externally. Internally, God orders man through the powers of his soul, which are naturally ordered toward man's end and naturally cultivable in perfection with respect to acting for man's end. Externally, God orders man through his law. A law governs actions by educating as to which actions are proper and good, and which actions are not, and by punishing wrong actions. God's eternal law is the law by which God orders all things, including man, to their ends. The eternal law is the universal teleological ordering in which man finds himself. His place in the eternal law is given and intelligible, but because he is endowed with freedom of the will, he can violate his order by sinning. Sinning, as Aquinas makes clear, is nothing other than "a bad human act"⁸ which is "contrary to the eternal law."⁹ As Aquinas explains further, "The eternal law first and foremost directs man to his end, and in consequence, makes man to be well disposed in regard to things which are directed to the end: hence when [Augustine] says, *contrary to the eternal law*, he includes aversion from the end and all other forms of inordinateness."¹⁰

There are three goods of nature according to Aquinas: nature's principles, such as the soul and its powers; man's inclination to virtue; and the gift of original justice. Man's soul and its powers are preserved after sin. That is, man does not become irrational or lose his free will or passions. Original justice is utterly removed by sin,

⁷ See, for instance, *ibid.* I-II Q68–70.

⁸ "actus humanus malus."

⁹ *Ibid.* I-II.71.6c. "contra legem aeternam."

¹⁰ *Ibid.* I-II.71.6ad3. "Lex aeterna primo et principaliter ordinat hominem ad finem, consequenter autem facit hominem bene se habere circa ea quae sunt ad finem. Et ideo in hoc quod dicit contra legem aeternam, tangit aversionem a fine, et omnes alias inordinationes."

which has the effect of subjecting man to the corruption and mortality of other physical bodies against which the gift of original justice originally protected man. Man's inclination to virtue is diminished by sin (although not destroyed). He says, "Human acts produce an inclination to like acts Now from the very fact that a thing becomes inclined to one of two contraries, its inclination to the other contrary must needs be diminished. Wherefore sin is opposed to virtue, from the very fact that a man sins, there results a diminution of that good of nature, which is the inclination to virtue."¹¹ Virtue, in other words, disposes man to act for his end, who is God. Sin disposes man to act against his end, which therefore diminishes his disposition to act for his true end. Man also incurs the debt of punishment, which he is not able to pay himself. As Aquinas says in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, "Sin . . . constitutes an obstacle to beatitude; it not only induces a kind of disorder in the soul by seducing it from its due end, but it also offends God to whom we look for the reward of beatitude, in that God has custody of human acts."¹²

C. Law and Grace

The discussion of sin sets up the treatise on law. As stated above, law's purpose is to direct man to his end by educating him as to what actions are good (that is, ordered to his end) and which are bad (that is, that inhibit acting for his end) and punishing bad actions. As Aquinas puts it, "It is by law that man is directed how to perform his proper acts in view of his last end."¹³ All law is by way of specification from the eternal law. The natural law specifies the eternal law so far as God uses the natural law to direct man to his natural end. The human law specifies the natural law with respect to the particular political community in which he lives. But man is not ordered to a merely natural end, and so he needs a further type of law, the divine law, which specifies the eternal law for man insofar as he is directed to the supernatural end of beatific vision of God. Aquinas affirms that there are two types of divine law: Old and New, corresponding to the Old and New Testaments.

¹¹ Ibid. I-II.85.1c. "Actus enim humanos fit quaedam inclinatio ad similes actus, ut supra habitum est. Oportet autem quod ex hoc quod aliquid inclinatur ad unum contrarium, diminuatur inclinatio eius ad aliud. Unde cum peccatum sit contrarium virtuti, ex hoc ipso quod homo peccat, diminuitur bonum naturae quod est inclinatio ad virtutem."

¹² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV.54.8. "Peccatum . . . impedimentum affert beatitudini, non solum inordinationem quandam animae inducens secundum quod eam ab ordine debiti finis abducit, sed etiam Deum offendens, a quo beatitudinis praemium expectatur, secundum quod Deus humanorum actuum curam habet."

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.91.4c. "Per legem dirigitur homo ad actus proprios in ordine ad ultimum finem."

The New Law is, as Aquinas says, “chiefly the grace itself of the Holy Spirit, which is given to those who believe in Christ.”¹⁴ In Aquinas’ view, following Augustine, the Old Law was an external pronouncement, “*set forth in an outward fashion, that the ungodly might be afraid; here, i.e., in the New Testament, it is given in an inward manner, that they may be justified.*”¹⁵ One can thus already see that the centrality of Christ to the moral life is presupposed. The New Law is distinct from the natural law because it directs man to his supernatural end; it is distinct from the Old Law because it actually justifies man. “There are two ways in which a thing may be instilled into man. First, through being part of his nature, and thus the natural law is instilled into man,” Aquinas says. “Secondly, a thing is instilled into man by being, as it were, added on to his nature by a gift of grace. In this way the New Law is instilled into man, not only by indicating to him what he should do, but also by helping him to accomplish it.”¹⁶ If the New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit, now Aquinas must move to speak of grace.

According to Aquinas man is naturally capable of loving God above all things.¹⁷ Still, man is not capable without grace either to fulfill the commandments of the law¹⁸ or to merit everlasting life.¹⁹ He cannot fulfill the commandments because “the commandments of the law can be fulfilled, not merely as regards the substance of the act, but also as regards the mode of acting, i.e., their being done out of charity. And in this way, neither in the state of perfect nature, nor in the state of corrupt nature can man fulfill the commandments of the law without grace.”²⁰ Without charity, which can only be had by grace, man is incapable of fulfilling the law. Man cannot merit eternal life because “everlasting life is an end exceeding the proportion of human nature, as is clear from what we have said above (Q. 5 A. 5). Hence man, by his natural endowments, cannot produce meritorious works proportionate to everlasting life; and for this a higher force

¹⁴ *bid.* I-II.106.1c. “Principaliter lex nova est ipsa gratia spiritus sancti, quae datur Christi fidelibus.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.* I-II.106.2c. “Extrinsecus posita est, qua iniusti terrerentur, hic, scilicet in novo testamento, intrinsecus data est, qua iustificarentur.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.* I-II.106.1ad2. “Dupliciter est aliquid inditum homini. Uno modo, pertinens ad naturam humanam, et sic lex naturalis est lex indita homini. Alio modo est aliquid inditum homini quasi naturae superadditum per gratiae donum. Et hoc modo lex nova est indita homini, non solum indicans quid sit faciendum, sed etiam adiuvans ad implendum.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.* I-II.109.3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* I-II.109.4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* I-II.109.5.

²⁰ *Ibid.* I-II.109.4c. “Possunt impleri mandata legis non solum quantum ad substantiam operis, sed etiam quantum ad modum agendi, ut scilicet ex caritate fiant. Et sic neque in statu naturae integrae, neque in statu naturae corruptae, potest homo implere absque gratia legis mandata.”

is needed, viz., the force of grace. And thus without grace man cannot merit everlasting life.”²¹ Nor can man even prepare himself, by himself and without grace, to receive grace.²² In a state of corrupt nature, man cannot even avoid sinning, although he can avoid sinning while still in possession of original justice.²³

The questions on the New Law and on grace are clearly the climax of the *prima secundae*. The *prima secundae* proceeds first by asking what man’s end is. Man’s end is God, Aquinas answers. From the beginning of the *prima secundae*, then, there is a problem: how is a finite creature able to attain this infinite end? Aquinas answers this question by taking the reader through a discussion of human acts for that end, which are a matter of intellect and will acting in orderly fashion, making use of properly educated passions. The soul and the powers of the soul are perfected for their actions by virtuous habits. Further, gratuitously given theological virtues enable man to act for the sake of his supernatural end. This is how man acts for his true end.

Then, Aquinas throws a twist into the narrative: sin undoes man’s ability to act in a way that is ordered to God. Thus damaged, man needs law, and especially divine law, to be re-ordered to God. Further, man needs grace in order to fulfill the law and merit eternal life, in which alone man can be happy. Grace is the *sine qua non* of the moral life. It perfects and elevates the entire person. Even the natural virtues are transformed by grace into infused virtues that then become capable of perfecting the soul and its powers so as to order man’s actions toward God. For example, the supreme act of courage is martyrdom for Aquinas, an act unthinkable without the infusion of grace, and especially the infusion of charity, which gives martyrdom its form.

But, whence grace? Servais Pinckaers points out that many have criticized Aquinas for failing to include a discussion of Christ and the Church in his moral treatise. “Does not then the *Summa* plainly separate dogma from morality,” he asks, “in such a way that we might envisage an account of moral theology without needing to speak of Christ or the Church?”²⁴ This objection fails to see the unity of the entire *Summa*. As Pinckaers continues,

²¹ Ibid. I-II.109.5c “Vita autem aeterna est finis excedens proportionem naturae humanae, ut ex supradictis patet. Et ideo homo per sua naturalia non potest producere opera meritoria proportionata vitae aeternae, sed ad hoc exigitur altior virtus, quae est virtus gratiae. Et ideo sine gratia homo non potest mereri vitam aeternam.”

²² Ibid. I-II.109.6.

²³ Ibid. I-II.109.8.

²⁴ Servais Pinckaers, ‘The Body of Christ: The Eucharistic and Ecclesial Context of Aquinas’ Ethics’, in John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus, ed., *The Pinckaers Reader* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), p. 28.

The response principally resides in the organic character of the *Summa theologiae*, the different parts of which are profoundly unified. There is no real separation between the moral part of the *Summa* and its two dogmatic parts; the doctrine of the Trinity, in particular on the Word and on the Holy Spirit, found in the *prima pars*, pertains to the morality set forth in the *secunda pars* that we can thus identify as Trinitarian and spiritual. In a parallel way, the doctrine of the *tertia pars* on Christ and the mystical Body is intimately linked to Aquinas' moral teaching, which we can call Christological and ecclesial. Thus we can say that all the virtues studied in the *secunda secundae* form a dynamic whole; they are directed to Christ through faith, hope, and charity.²⁵

Further, many philosophical accounts of Aquinas' ethics completely ignore this unity, leaving the moral life incomplete. Mark Johnson points out,

It turns out we need this theological context like one needs a bridge: to cross it to get to the other side, at which point we no longer need it. And so, as concerns morals, we cross the bridge in order to get to the interesting stuff: natural law, primary and secondary precepts, human law, action theory, virtue, synderesis, double-effect, habits, mental states, intention. My question: where is everything else? Where is the Cross? Where is Easter? Where are miracles, visions, prayer and fasting, mortal and venial sin, forgiveness and grace, the sacraments? Where is Christ, invoked in the closing sentence of the moral part of the *Summa theologiae*, which asks that he, who promises us the meal of divine enjoyment and eternal rest for our souls, lead us to the same?²⁶

The key is to be found in two places: in the article introducing the New Law and in the last two sentences of the *secunda pars*, as Johnson indicates. The New Law is, recall, "The grace of the Holy Ghost, which is given *through faith in Christ*."²⁷ This does not specify how Christ is important for the moral life yet, but it does make clear the critical Christological character of Aquinas' moral thought.

The last sentences of the *secunda pars*, the moral section of the *Summa*, says, "To those indeed who take this sweet yoke upon themselves He promises the refreshment of the divine fruition and the eternal rest of their souls. To which may He Who made this promise bring us, Jesus Christ our Lord, Who is over all things God blessed

²⁵ Ibid. 28–29.

²⁶ Mark Johnson, 'The Penitent Thief and the Eucharist', lecture given at Ave Maria University in Naples, FL: Feb. 2 2007. My thanks to Prof. Johnson for allowing me to use these previously unpublished remarks.

²⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-I.106.1c, my emphasis.

forever.”²⁸ These sentences have a form of a prayer. For happiness in eternal life, Aquinas affirms with this prayer, one must turn to Jesus Christ the savior. This is precisely what Aquinas does in the next part of the *Summa*.

II. The Necessity for a Savior in the Moral Life and the Efficacy of Christ’s Passion

The moral life is about attaining man’s end. The opening lines of the *tertia pars*, therefore, affirm the proper unity of moral and Christological inquiry:

Forasmuch as our Savior the Lord Jesus Christ, in order to *save His people from their sins* (Matt. i. 21), as the angel announced, showed unto us in His own Person the way of truth, whereby we may attain to the bliss of eternal life by rising again, it is necessary, in order to complete the work of theology, that after considering the last end of human life, and the virtues and vices, there should follow the consideration of the Saviour of all, and of the benefits bestowed by Him on the human race.²⁹

The object of the moral life is to attain bliss in eternal life. The major impediment to eternal life is human sinfulness. Christ both removes human sinfulness, as Aquinas here affirms, and shows men how to attain eternal life. As Pinckaers says, the prologue to the *tertia pars* “intimately ties the morality set forth in the *secunda pars*, including its perspective of the last end and the virtues, to the doctrine on Christ and his work of salvation proposed in the *tertia pars*; this is done since Christ revealed himself, in his own person, as the way to truth that leads to full beatitude.”³⁰

Even more specifically, Pinckaers points out, “Christ is not only the preacher and the model of the moral life; he is, in person, the veritable way of salvation and flourishing. This link is actualized by the sacraments, grouped around the Eucharist, which builds the Body of Christ, the Church. The entire *tertia pars* is connected to the *secunda pars*: the person of Christ, the incarnate Word, becomes the source

²⁸ Ibid. II-II.189.10ad3. “Quod quidem suave iugum super se tollentibus refectionem divinae fruitionis repromittit, et sempiternam requiem animarum. Ad quam nos perducatur ipse qui promisit, Iesus Christus, dominus noster, qui est super omnia Deus benedictus in saecula. Amen.”

²⁹ Ibid. III prologue. “Quia salvator noster dominus Iesus Christus, teste Angelo, *populum suum salvum faciens a peccatis eorum*, viam veritatis nobis in seipso demonstravit, per quam ad beatitudinem immortalis vitae resurgendo pervenire possimus, necesse est ut, ad consummationem totius theologicis negotii, post considerationem ultimi finis humanae vitae et virtutum ac vitiorum, de ipso omnium salvatore ac beneficiis eius humano generi praestitis nostra consideratio subsequatur.”

³⁰ Pinckaers, ‘Body of Christ’, 29.

and the object of the virtues and of the gifts.”³¹ Christ is the way of salvation and flourishing, through the sacraments, which build up the Body of Christ. Morality is therefore ordered to a Christological-Ecclesial-Sacramental consummation. How?

Christ’s Passion accomplishes both of the tasks Aquinas sets for Christ’s saving mission: removal of the obstacle of sin and revelation of the way to eternal life, which revelation is not a mere speculative datum but effective, since it is communicated in the Church through the sacraments. Aquinas puts the reasons for the necessity of the Passion for the moral life succinctly in Question 46:

In the first place, man knows thereby how much God loves him, and is thereby stirred to love Him in return, and herein lies the perfection of human salvation,³² “secondly, because thereby He set us an example of obedience, humility, constancy, justice, and the other virtues displayed in the Passion, which are requisite for man’s salvation.”³³ Finally, “Thirdly, because Christ by His passion not only delivered man from sin, but also merited justifying grace for him and the glory of bliss.”³⁴

Christ delivered man and merited justification and glorification for man because of who Christ is as the God-Man. As Aquinas explains, “There is a twofold efficient agency—namely, the principal and the instrumental. Now the principal efficient cause of man’s salvation is God. But since Christ’s humanity is the *instrument of the Godhead*, as stated above (Q. 43, A. 2), therefore all Christ’s actions and sufferings operate instrumentally in virtue of His Godhead for the salvation of men. Consequently, then, Christ’s Passion accomplishes man’s salvation efficiently.”³⁵ In other words, no mere man could have acted as mankind’s savior.

Christ’s death destroys death. This destruction of death thereby frees man from death, as well. “Christ’s death is said to have destroyed in us both the death of the soul, caused by sin, according to Rom. iv. 25: *He was delivered up* (namely unto death) *for our*

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Primo enim, per hoc homo cognoscit quantum Deus hominem diligit, et per hoc provocatur ad eum diligendum, in quo perfectio humanae salutis consistit.”

³³ “Secundo, quia per hoc dedit nobis exemplum obedientiae, humilitatis, constantiae, iustitiae, et ceterarum virtutum in passione Christi ostensarum, quae sunt necessariae ad humanam salutem.”

³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.46.3c. “Tertio, quia Christus per passionem suam non solum hominem a peccato liberavit, sed etiam gratiam iustificantem et gloriam beatitudinis ei promeruit.”

³⁵ Ibid. III.48.6c. “Duplex est efficiens, principale, et instrumentale. Efficiens quidem principale humanae salutis Deus est. Quia vero humanitas Christi est divinitatis instrumentum, ut supra dictum est, ex consequenti omnes actiones et passiones Christi instrumentaliter operantur, in virtute divinitatis, ad salutem humanam. Et secundum hoc, passio Christi efficienter causat salutem humanam.”

sins: and the death of the body, consisting in the separation of the soul, according to 1 Cor. xv. 54: *Death is swallowed up in victory,*” Aquinas states (III.50.6c).³⁶ Eternal life is one of the main conditions for happiness, and is therefore one of the main goals of the moral life. Christ’s Passion allows man to have eternal life. Recall, no man could have merited eternal life, because no man has the ability to act proportionately for eternal life on account of his limited, finite nature. Christ, who is God, has no such limitations.

As Aquinas makes clear in I-II.85.5, death is the result of sin. Christ must have conquered sin, therefore, in order to have defeated death. This happened, as Aquinas says, because “Christ’s Passion is the proper cause of the forgiveness of sins in three ways. First of all, by way of exciting our charity,”³⁷ “Secondly, Christ’s Passion causes forgiveness of sins by way of redemption,”³⁸ and “Thirdly, by way of efficiency, inasmuch as Christ’s flesh, wherein He endured the Passion, is the instrument of the Godhead, so that His sufferings and actions operate with Divine power for expelling sin.”³⁹ Christ’s Passion, it is now clear to see, was not simply for himself, but for all men. Aquinas explains, “Grace was bestowed upon Christ, not only as an individual, but inasmuch as He is the Head of the Church, so that it might overflow into His members; and therefore Christ’s works are referred to Himself and to His members in the same way as the works of any other man in a state of grace are referred to himself.”⁴⁰ Because Christ is the head of the Church,⁴¹ his merits belong to all those who are members of the Church.

The merits of Christ’s passion, which, as stated above, include remission of sins, justification, and glorification, are therefore Christ’s primarily, but are accorded to Christ as head of the Church. Therefore, the members of the Church participate in the merits of Christ’s passion. It remains for Aquinas to tell how this is accomplished. He explains, “Since Christ’s Passion preceded, as a kind of universal cause of the forgiveness of sins, it needs to be applied to each

³⁶ “Et ideo per mortem Christi dicitur esse destructa in nobis et mors animae, quae est per peccatum, secundum illud Rom. IV, traditus est, scilicet in mortem, propter delicta nostra; et mors corporis, quae consistit in separatione animae, secundum illud I Cor. XV, *absorpta est mors in victoria.*”

³⁷ “passio Christi est propria causa remissionis peccatorum, tripliciter. Primo quidem, per modum provocantis ad caritatem.”

³⁸ “Secundo, passio Christi causat remissionem peccatorum per modum redemptionis.”

³⁹ Ibid. III.49.1c. “Tertio, per modum efficientiae, in quantum caro, secundum quam Christus passionem sustinuit, est instrumentum divinitatis, ex quo eius passiones et actiones operantur in virtute divina ad expellendum peccatum.”

⁴⁰ Ibid. III.48.1c. “Christo data est gratia non solum sicut singulari personae, sed in quantum est caput Ecclesiae, ut scilicet ab ipso redundaret ad membra. Et ideo opera Christi hoc modo se habent tam ad se quam ad sua membra, sicut se habent opera alterius hominis in gratia constituti ad ipsum.”

⁴¹ See *ibid.*, *tertia pars* Q. 8 for a complete discussion of this.

individual for the cleansing of personal sins. Now this is done by baptism and penance and the other sacraments, which derive their power from Christ's Passion."⁴²

III. The Sacramental Consummation of the Moral Life

As indicated above, Christ's passion is the universal cause of man's salvation. The sacraments are particular, instrumental causes of salvation whereby the saving merits of Christ's passion are applied to believers. There are three reasons why the sacraments are fitting to be used as instrumental causes of man's salvation. The first is because of "the condition of human nature which is such that it has to be led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual and intelligible. Now it belongs to Divine providence to provide for each one according as its condition requires. Divine wisdom, therefore, fittingly provides man with means of salvation, in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs that are called sacraments."⁴³ Aquinas explains in the *prima pars*, following Aristotle, that man's knowledge is derived from sense, that is, "things corporeal and sensible."⁴⁴ This is where the sign value of the sacraments is so important. If the sacraments signified nothing but themselves, man would not be in any better position. Because of the economy of salvation, however, these particular signs signify spiritual things to man's benefit.

In addition to the proper, natural ordering of man's knowledge, in which man understands by way of the senses, man has also subjected his affections improperly to corporeal things, opposing them to God. "Consequently," Aquinas says, "it was fitting that God should provide man with a spiritual medicine by means of certain corporeal signs; for if man were offered spiritual things without a veil, his mind being taken up with the material world would be unable to apply itself to them."⁴⁵ God comes to man as he is, redirecting man's affections even through material things. Man, Aquinas says here, is

⁴² Ibid. III.49.1ad4. "Quia passio Christi praecessit ut causa quaedam universalis remissionis peccatorum . . . , necesse est quod singulis adhibeatur ad deletionem propriorum peccatorum. Hoc autem fit per Baptismum et poenitentiam et alia sacramenta, quae habent virtutem ex passione Christi."

⁴³ Ibid. III.61.1c. "Ex conditione humanae naturae, cuius proprium est ut per corporalia et sensibilia in spiritualia et intelligibilia deducatur. Pertinet autem ad divinam providentiam ut unicuique rei provideat secundum modum suae conditionis. Et ideo convenienter divina sapientia homini auxilia salutis confert sub quibusdam corporalibus et sensibilibus signis, quae sacramenta dicuntur."

⁴⁴ Ibid. I.76.5. "Corporalia et sensibilia."

⁴⁵ Ibid. III.61.1c. "Et ideo conveniens fuit ut Deus per quaedam corporalia signa hominibus spiritualem medicinam adhiberet, nam, si spiritualia nuda ei proponerentur, eius animus applicari non posset, corporalibus deditus."

too severely disordered to have his affections redirected by anything else than material things.

Third, were man not given material things toward which he could order his affections, he might be taken up with idolatry. As Aquinas puts it, "Man is prone to direct his activity chiefly towards material things. Lest, therefore, it should be too hard for man to be drawn away entirely from bodily actions, bodily exercise was offered to him in the sacraments, by which he might be trained to avoid superstitious practices, consisting in the worship of demons and all manner of harmful action, consisting in sinful deeds."⁴⁶

All of this ought to provide a caution: it is unwise and impossible to attempt to skip the instrumental, particular causes of salvation in the sacraments out of a desire directly to participate in the universal cause. Aquinas indicates in these above quotations that man is not ordered to do so. Certainly he is not ordered to do so after sin. Aquinas says, "God's grace is a sufficient cause of man's salvation. But God gives grace to man in a way that is suitable to him. Hence it is that man needs the sacraments that he may obtain grace."⁴⁷ Despising the *sacramentum* in favor of the *res* is not suitable to man, and is, in fact, damaging to the moral life.

It is clear that the sacraments confer grace, but they do not confer all graces. One needs to be disposed by grace, for example, to desire baptism; also, one can be saved (by martyrdom, for example) without ever receiving any sacraments. These are somewhat extraordinary cases. Aquinas would, no doubt, agree that the sacraments are the ordinary means by which God chooses to bestow grace. Nevertheless, the question must be answered, what sort of grace do sacraments confer? Aquinas says, "Now sacramental grace seems to be ordained principally to two things: namely, to take away the defects consequent on past sins, in so far as they are transitory in act, but endure in guilt; and further, to perfect the soul in things pertaining to Divine Worship in regard to the Christian religion."⁴⁸

Aquinas says that there are two principal sacraments: Baptism and Eucharist.⁴⁹ Baptism incorporates man into the Church, which, as

⁴⁶ Ibid. III.61.1c. "Ex studio actionis humanae, quae praecipue circa corporalia versatur. Ne igitur esset homini durum si totaliter a corporalibus actibus abstraheretur, proposita sunt ei corporalia exercitia in sacramentis, quibus salubriter exerceretur, ad evitanda superstitiosa exercitia, quae consistunt in cultu Daemonum, vel qualitercumque noxia, quae consistunt in actibus peccatorum."

⁴⁷ Ibid. III.61.1ad2. "Gratia Dei est sufficiens causa humanae salutis. Sed Deus dat hominibus gratiam secundum modum eius convenientem. Et ideo necessaria sunt hominibus sacramenta ad gratiam consequendam."

⁴⁸ Ibid. III.62.5c. "Gratia autem sacramentalis ad duo praecipue ordinari videtur, videlicet ad tollendos defectus praeteritorum peccatorum, in quantum transeunt actu et remanent reatu; et iterum ad perficiendum animam in his quae pertinent ad cultum Dei secundum religionem Christianae vitae."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Pinckaers says, “acts as the matrix of all the virtues.”⁵⁰ The Eucharist is the high point of the moral life on Earth. As Aquinas says, “Baptism is the beginning of the spiritual life,⁵¹ and the door of the Sacraments; whereas the Eucharist is, as it were, the consummation of the spiritual life, and the end of all the sacraments.”⁵²

Conclusion

The great distinction between Christian ethics and pagan or modern secular ethics is that the achievement of the end of the moral life is not within man’s power. As Johnson says, “In short, for the philosopher, beatitude is a product, while for the Christian it is a gift.”⁵³ Because of man’s finitude and sinfulness, he is incapable of acting in a way proportionate to his end, who is the infinite God. He needs the grace of the Holy Spirit, which communicates to him the merits of Christ’s passion, which has opened the gates of heaven, revealed the way of salvation, and provided the means to attain salvation. Christ’s passion makes available the graces of the theological and infused natural virtues, the Gifts, Beatitudes, and Fruits of the Holy Spirit. The means of communication God has chosen, in his wisdom fitting and suitable to man’s nature, are sensible signs of Christ’s passion, which effect what they signify. These sacraments incorporate man into the Church, of which Christ is the head, and thereby allow them to participate directly in Christ’s saving passion. The sacraments, as the instrumental causes of salvation, are therefore the high point of the moral life on earth, and will give way only to the full reality of the beatific vision in heaven. Matthew Levering has said it well in his book, *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*:

I have argued that Aquinas conceives of human salvation in terms of law and liturgy, Torah and Temple. Law and liturgy are ultimately one. As indicated by the ceremonial precepts, perfect fulfillment of the law—perfect holiness—is manifested by perfect worship, the true liturgy of praise. Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of Israel, takes up and transforms Israel’s Torah and Temple by his saving work, culminating in his Paschal mystery of suffering, death, and resurrection. As the Son of God, Jesus’ fulfillment of Torah and Temple is such that all human beings are enabled to share in the grace of the Holy Spirit that flows through his meritorious actions. This Eucharistic sharing is modeled

⁵⁰ Pinckaers, ‘Body of Christ’, 41.

⁵¹ Unlike many modern theologians, Aquinas does not separate the spiritual life and the moral life.

⁵² Ibid. III.73.3c. “Quia Baptismus est principium spiritualis vitae, et ianua sacramentorum. Eucharistia vero est quasi consummatio spiritualis vitae, et omnium sacramentorum finis.”

⁵³ Johnson, ‘Penitent Thief’, 4.

preeminently by the Virgin Mary and follows the pattern established by Christ in his path from suffering to glorification. As sharers in Christ's Paschal mystery, believers are incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body, in which human worship attains real communion with the divine Trinity. The interior transformation caused by this communion brings about, more and more fully, the transformation of the sinner into a holy 'temple of the Holy Spirit' who is able, in Christ, to be holy (fulfilling the law) and to worship the Trinity with perfect praise (fulfilling the temple).⁵⁴

The centrality of Christ in Aquinas' view of the moral life and hence the properly theological character of Aquinas' ethics ought by now to be clear. Romanus Cessario, in *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, says, "For the Christian believer conformity to Christ in the Church of faith and sacraments provides the only legitimate way to attain the 'truth of life.'"⁵⁵

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⁵⁴ Matthew Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), pp. 128–129. Levering's book provides an excellent Scriptural context for the argument I am making. He shows well the unity of the spiritual, liturgical, and moral life by connecting fulfillment of the law and perfect worship. The law and worship are problems in the Old Testament: none can fulfill the law and none can offer worthy worship. Christ's sacrifice does both and allows his followers, by participating in his Mystical Body the Church, through the sacraments, access to the grace needed to fulfill the law and unite themselves to Christ's perfect act of worship.

⁵⁵ Romanus Cessario, *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p. 21. Cessario continues: "Admittedly, certain scholastic theologians, including Aquinas, developed their tractates on the virtues without prolonged and repeated references to the uniquely Christian claim that moral perfection exists in anyone only to the extent that the person maintains a living relationship with Christ. In the case of Aquinas, the absence of frequent reference to Christ in the *secunda pars* happens simply because of his methodological presuppositions in developing the *Summa theologiae*. Still, any theologian who fully grasps the New Testament teaching on the gratuity of divine grace realizes that every meritorious deed performed by the believer derives its efficacy from God's goodness. And Aquinas surely realized this happens only through the mediation of Jesus Christ."