

# St Thomas Aquinas and the Motion of the Motionless God

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In the last Sunday homily that he delivered before his death in March, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador spoke of the turbulence and changes convulsing his country, but also pointed out to his people their source of stability and balance in the midst of a changing world: 'May we have one thing firmly anchored in the soul: our faith in Jesus Christ, the God of history. He does not change.'<sup>1</sup> His words echo the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the poetry of the mystics, and the daily prayer of the Church. The Second Vatican Council teaches that 'beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, yes, and forever.'<sup>2</sup> St. Teresa of Avila spoke in her poetry of the God who 'never changes' and 'alone suffices'.<sup>3</sup> The Church prays that in the midst of life's changes God may 'strengthen us through his immutability'.<sup>4</sup> The common insight in all of these examples is that the God of Christian faith is a God who does not change.

In our own time, there are many who do not share that insight. They fail to see how an unchanging God can be the object of our Christian faith, hope, love, and prayer. Their concern can perhaps be best addressed by returning to the teaching of that theologian who is recognised both by those who defend and by those who question the doctrine of divine immutability as the best representative of the authentic teaching of the Church on this subject: St. Thomas Aquinas.

St. Thomas mentions divine immutability in almost all of his major works. Convinced of the unity of truth, Thomas feels free to draw upon not only such Christian sources as Scripture, Church Councils, and patristic works, but also upon the teachings of pagan philosophers in his discussions of God's changelessness. In this article, we will review Thomas' major arguments for divine immutability, pointing out the distinctiveness of the basic insight that animates them. We will then consider the various ways in which Thomas allows that motion may also be predicated of God. In this context, we will indicate how Thomas' trinitarian theology and Christology involve the motion of the motionless God.

### *I. The question of fittingness.*

Before considering Thomas' argument for divine immutability, it is appropriate to ask why Thomas finds it desirable to predicate immutability of God in the first place. To a number of contemporary religious thinkers this predication appears singularly undesirable. To them an unchanging deity is at best an embarrassment and quite possibly an abomination. How can an unchanging God be a God of love? Does not immutability imply indifference and apathy? How can such a God be anything but 'cold, static and passionless', 'totally devoid of life and love'? How can we speak of an impassible God without 'making God a demon'?<sup>5</sup> To answer these concerns, we must consider in what ways immutability has positive connotations and in what ways it has negative connotations. It is only the positive connotations of immutability that we will want to predicate of God since no quality found in us is predicated of God 'except in the way that it is praiseworthy in us'.<sup>6</sup> We can get at the way that immutability is to be predicated of God by considering the example of how change or lack of change may be desirable in human friendship.

If a friendship is viewed in terms of its capacity to grow deeper and more solid, change can be seen as good and desirable. Here the friendship is considered as perfectible, and it is through change that it will be perfected. Lack of change in this instance implies stagnation or failure to grow in love. If the same friendship, however, is viewed precisely in terms of the depth and solidity that it has already achieved, change may appear undesirable. For the friendship is seen as having achieved some degree of perfection, and change can imply loss or diminishment of the perfection already attained. The simple fact of the matter is that for changeable creatures, change itself is ambiguous: it can be either good or bad.

Only to a being that has in itself no actual perfection but merely a potential for perfection would all change (to the extent that any change implies at least some actuality and perfection) be unconditionally good. There is, of course, no such existing being since any being, to the extent that it exists, has at least the perfection of its own existence. But there is in all existing corporeal beings a principle of pure potency which the scholastics call 'prime matter'. This principle cannot exist by itself, but it can be considered in itself, and when so considered it is a principle to which any change whatsoever is good and desirable.

If, on the other hand, there is a being which is itself unbounded perfection, infinite love and infinite life—which has no potentiality for further perfection since there is no perfection or degree of perfection that it does not already possess eternally in infinite fullness—for such a being all change will necessarily represent diminishment of love, diminishment of life. For such a being, immutability is unconditionally good. But,

according to St. Thomas in ‘the five ways’, it is precisely this being that ‘we call God’.<sup>7</sup> We cannot, of course, comprehend this Being. The fact that we cannot understand infinite, unchanging Love should not surprise us, however, if we remember how often the nature of even our limited human love eludes our grasp. Rather than seek to remedy our lack of understanding by reducing God to the level of a changeable creature, we should simply admit our own limitations. While it is true that we creatures are in some way like God, the deeper truth remains that ‘God is in no way like us’.<sup>8</sup> It is precisely to point out and maintain that deeper truth of God’s transcendent perfection that St. Thomas presents his arguments for divine immutability.

## *II. St. Thomas’ arguments for divine immutability.*

His arguments for divine immutability are best understood as ways of affirming God’s perfection in being. From his earliest discussions of divine immutability in his *Commentary on the Sentences* to his treatment of the subject in the mature theology of his *Summa theologiae*, the context and import of his discussion of divine immutability are always his interest in God’s perfection in being.

In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Thomas argues that Peter Lombard’s concern in raising the issue of divine immutability is to discuss those things that pertain ‘to the perfection of divine being insofar as it is perfect being’. Perfect being, since it implies the exclusion of potentiality, must be immutable. Unlike the being of the creature, that involves potentiality, divine being abides ‘unchangingly’.<sup>9</sup>

The same insight informs Thomas’ discussion of divine immutability in his *Summa theologiae*. There, God’s unchangeableness is established initially in the ‘first way’ of showing that God exists and is then discussed at greater length in an article exclusively devoted to the subject.<sup>10</sup> The first way argues from the fact that some things are in motion to the existence of a ‘first mover which is moved by no other’. Since motion involves the actuation of a potency and since no being, to the extent that it is potency, can actualize itself, each being that is in motion must depend in some way on another for that motion. The one upon which it depends, if it is also in motion, must likewise depend on something else for its motion. The series of movers, however, cannot be infinite or else there will be no first mover and thus no motion in any subsequent member of the series. There must therefore be a first mover that is moved by no other. This mover is identified as God.

This argument, taken from Aristotle, is often used by St. Thomas—sometimes to show God’s immutability, sometimes to show God’s existence, and sometimes to show both. In the *Commentary on the Sentences*, for instance, a form of this argument is used to show only that

God is immutable.<sup>11</sup> In the *Compendium of Theology*, the same argument is used initially to show only that God exists. God's immutability is then demonstrated in a separate chapter.<sup>12</sup> In the *Summa contra gentiles*, a lengthy discussion of the argument is taken as establishing at once both God's existence and his immutability. No further discussion of divine immutability as such is needed. Rather, God's immutability can be used at once as a 'principle' in the discussion of other divine attributes.<sup>13</sup> The treatment of divine immutability in the *Summa theologiae* is like that of the *Summa contra gentiles* in that divine immutability is understood to be established by the demonstrations of God's existence: 'all things that are changeable ... must be traced back to some first principle which is immovable and necessary through itself as has been shown.'<sup>14</sup> The treatment, however, is also like that of the *Compendium* in that a separate article is provided which is concerned exclusively with divine immutability. A separate discussion of divine immutability was necessary in the *Compendium* since immutability was not established in the article showing God's existence. It was not necessary in the *Summa contra gentiles* since immutability was established in the demonstration of God's existence. Why is it, then, that in the *Summa theologiae*, where divine immutability is taken as established in the arguments for God's existence, that a separate article, devoted exclusively to divine immutability, is added?

There is reason to think that Thomas' concern in that article is not simply to show that God is immutable (since that fact was already established in the arguments for God's existence), but rather to show how God's immutability is related to and indicative of his perfection in being. Just as the discussion of divine simplicity had to be complemented with a discussion of divine perfection lest divine simplicity be mistaken for that creaturely mode of simplicity that implies imperfection, so the immutability of God, established originally in the 'first way', had to be explained in terms of God's perfection lest it be mistaken for that stagnating sort of immutability sometimes characteristic of the creature.<sup>15</sup>

God is the source and summit of all perfection. That which is most perfect in any creature is its act of existing (*esse*): 'the act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections'.<sup>16</sup> As the summit of all perfection, God is recognized as pure, unbounded 'to-be': *ipsum esse subsistens*. Because God is pure *esse*, he is absolutely simple, wholly perfect, and purely actual. God's simplicity, perfection, and pure actuality are the premises for Thomas' major arguments for divine immutability both in the *Summa theologiae* and in many other works.<sup>17</sup> Since these premises follow upon the fact that God is pure *esse*, the conclusion that God is immutable likewise points to God's perfection in being as *ipsum esse subsistens*. Far from wishing to attribute to God the stagnant sort of

immutability that is sometimes found in creatures, Thomas intends, by predicating immutability of God, to show the dynamic perfection of unbounded actuality that is proper to God as subsistent *esse*.

In the *Summa theologiae*, in I, 9, 1, Thomas argues first that since God is the first being, he must be pure act (*actus*, which some commentators here translate as 'actuality') without any potency since potency is posterior to act. Since everything that changes is in some way in potency, God can in no way be changed. Notice that in establishing that God is pure act Thomas refers to not the fact that God is the first mover, but to the fact that God is the first *being*. That God is the first mover was the conclusion of the 'first way'. That God is the first being is the conclusion of the 'fourth way'. It is more complicated to argue from the fact that God is the first being to the fact that God is pure act than to argue to this from the fact that God is first mover. The fact that Thomas chooses this more complicated form of argument indicates his desire to establish a connection between perfection in act and perfection in being. The perfection in act that he has in mind here is the unbounded and infinite perfection of the pure being of *ipsum esse subsistens*. This is quite different from the determinate perfection of pure act as pure form that was characteristic of Aristotle's unmoved mover. For Aristotle, act is in itself indeterminate: it is a formal principle that determines prime matter. For St. Thomas, act is in itself an unbounded or unlimited principle. Only in creatures is act limited by potency. God, the first being, is unbounded act limited by no potency—the 'infinite and unlimited sea of substance'.<sup>18</sup> This is the unbounded perfection from which divine immutability flows.

Secondly, Thomas argues that since God is absolutely simple and since all change implies composition, God must be unchangeable. Here again, Thomas' argument is informed by an analysis of being which is much more profound than that of Aristotle. For Aristotle, the most profound sort of composition was the composition of substantial form and prime matter. St. Thomas, while recognizing this kind of composition, sees the more profound order of composition between essence and existence. Aristotle saw the distinction between mutable and immutable being according to the order of form in his analysis of substantial and accidental changes and so came to recognise the existence of the unmoved mover. Thomas sees the distinction according to the order of existence. In terms of this order, the distinction is not just between those beings which have potency for some sort of change and the being (or beings) which have no such potency, but is rather between 'the being to whom the act of existence may be attributed by essence and the beings to which it may be attributed only by participation'.<sup>19</sup> In God there can be no composition since his essence is his existence. Because the essence of the creature is distinct from its existence, the creature,

considered in itself, may at some time cease to exist. In this sense, all creatures are changeable, and God alone is immutable.

The connection between divine immutability and divine perfection in being is established most clearly in Thomas' third argument. Anything that changes acquires something through that change and attains something it did not possess before. Because God is 'subsisting to-be (*esse*) itself, none of the perfection of being (*essendi*) can be lacking in him'. He is thus himself perfect and infinite, 'comprehending in himself all the fullness of perfection of all to-be (*esse*)'.<sup>20</sup> Since there is nothing that he can acquire—nothing that he does not (already) eternally possess in infinite fullness—he must be completely immutable.

Here again Thomas is referring to the conclusion of the 'fourth way' of showing that God exists—the way that concluded to God as the most perfect being, the ultimate source of being in all other things. Had Thomas been interested simply in establishing the attribute of divine immutability, he might have achieved his purpose much more easily and directly by referring to the conclusion of the 'first way': God is the mover that is moved by nothing and is therefore evidently immovable. The arguments he does give reveal that, far from adding superfluous demonstrations for a divine attribute already established in the first way of showing God's existence, Thomas is here predicating immutability of God as a way of proclaiming God's perfection in being.

### *III. The motion of the motionless God.*

The suggestion that this article of the *Summa theologiae* (I, 9, 1) is intended as a proclamation of God's perfection in being may be confirmed by examining the replies to the three objections. In these, the same concern for divine perfection is evident. The result, however, is not an affirmation of divine immutability, but the discovery of three different ways in which motion, insofar as it implies no imperfection, may also be predicated of God.

Motion may be understood either in the broad sense or in the strict sense of the term. Taken in the broad sense, motion includes such operations as thinking and knowing. It is an action which remains in the doer of the act. Such motion is commonly called 'immanent motion'. In itself, it implies no potentiality or imperfection. Taken in the strict sense, motion does not remain in the doer, but rather passes in some way from the doer to the receiver of the act. Such motion is called 'transient motion'. It includes such actions as hammering, heating, etc. Such motion belongs both to the doer and the receiver of the act and may be considered on the part of either. Considered on the part of the doer, it is called 'action'. In this sense, it does not necessarily imply potency or imperfection. Considered on the part of the receiver, it is called

'passion'; that is, the receiver is a passive recipient. In this sense, the sense of 'being moved', motion implies potency (or potentiality) and imperfection by definition. It is spoken of by Thomas as 'the act of a being in potency insofar as it is potency.'<sup>21</sup> This definition might be paraphrased: 'the actualisation of some potentiality in a being which is open to receiving something it does not yet possess.'

The first objection is concerned with immanent motion or motion in the broad sense of the term. It is based on a statement of St. Augustine that God in some way 'moves himself'. Since whatever moves itself is in some way movable, God must be somehow movable. Thomas explains that the motion involved here is motion in the broad sense. Augustine is considering knowing, willing, and loving as sorts of motion. Such motion, far from suggesting imperfection, rather reveals the superabundant perfection of divine life and is thus predicable of God. It is only motion that implies potency and imperfection that must be denied of God.

The immanent actions of knowing and loving play an essential role in Thomas' discussion of the Trinitarian God of Christian faith.<sup>22</sup> He compares the procession of the Son (the Word) from the Father to the procession of the mental word (concept) in our immanent action of human knowing. As the procession of the mental word in itself implies neither potency nor motion in the strict sense of the term, so the procession of the Son involves neither potency nor motion. As the mental word proceeds from yet remains in the knower, the Son proceeds from yet remains in the Father. As the intellect in its act of understanding is made one with the object understood, the Son is one with the Father, and his procession implies no diversity. As the mental word is a likeness of the object conceived, the Son is the likeness of the Father. For this reason, his procession is called 'generation'.

The procession of the spirit may be compared to the activity of willing or loving. In the action of love, the thing loved is in the lover by way of a certain inclination or impulse insofar as the lover is, by love, inclined toward the beloved. The one proceeding according to love in the Trinity is accordingly called 'spirit' since this name 'implies a certain vital movement and impulse'.<sup>23</sup>

When the Trinity is thus considered in terms of immanent action, the three divine persons are seen not as a static triad, but as a dynamic life—a never-ceasing yet ever-changing activity of knowledge and love. For this reason, the Christian God proclaimed by St. Thomas is no static, solitary self-contemplator, but a most blessed Trinity of unbounded wisdom, love, and life.

The second objection involves action, i.e. transient motion considered on the part of the agent or doer. The objection springs from the scriptural teaching that 'Wisdom is more movable than all movable



things.' (*Wis.* 7:24.) Since God is wisdom itself, God must be movable. Thomas explains that motion is predicated of divine wisdom insofar as divine wisdom is the efficient and exemplar cause of all things. Since every agent 'effects something similar to itself to the extent that it is an agent', divine wisdom produces creatures that are somehow similar to itself, 'diffusing its similitude even to the most remote things'.<sup>24</sup> Since creatures participate in divine being and goodness in varying degrees, there is said to be a sort of procession or motion of divine wisdom into all things. Such motion implies neither imperfection nor potency and is thus attributable to God.

It is in terms of this motion that Thomas explains the divine activity of creating and governing the universe. The missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit, particularly the visible mission of the Son (the Incarnation), are also discussed in terms of this motion.<sup>25</sup> Aware of this sort of motion, Thomas agrees with the fifth-century mystic Dionysius that God can be said 'to be moved (*moveri*)' and to be made 'outside himself (*extra seipsum*)' in his ecstatic love for his creatures.<sup>26</sup>

The third objection is concerned with motion that, like transient action considered on the part of the receiver, implies potency and imperfection. The objection is based on a certain scriptural passage which apparently attributes such motion to God: 'Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.' (*Jas.* 4:8.) Thomas explains that while motion implying perfection is certainly involved here, this motion really belongs not to God, but to the creature. It is applied to God metaphorically or 'by transference'. In our relationship with God, we are the ones who change—who grow cold and then warm again, who wander away and come back. This motion on our part is sometimes described (and possibly also experienced) as a change in God. Such description involves the rich language of metaphorical expression which is particularly apt for discussing religious experience. Since this expression is metaphorical, it does not imply any imperfection in God. Any such possible imperfection or growth in perfection really belongs only to us. For this reason, motion may be predicated of God in such metaphorical usage.

Thus in the interest of proclaiming God's perfection in being, Thomas presents three arguments why motion must be denied of God as well as three ways in which motion may be affirmed of God. It was in view of such arguments for divine immutability that ancient philosophers, as if compelled 'by truth itself', concluded that God cannot change.<sup>27</sup> It was in view of those ways that motion is predicable of God that Christians 'made bold to proclaim for the sake of the truth' that God is 'outside of himself' in his providential love for his creatures.<sup>28</sup> Sharing a common insight into divine perfection, both the philosopher and the Christian would be able to join with St. Thomas in 'praising the motion of the motionless God'.<sup>29</sup>



Predicating motion of God in this way does not contradict but rather complements the predication of immutability. Both are authentic expressions of Christian faith. While one Christian may be led by religious experience to attribute to God the motion of 'drawing near to us', another may well be led by the experience of God's abiding faithfulness to affirm divine immutability. This was perhaps the insight that found expression in the last sermon of Archbishop Romero. It is certainly the insight of Thomas Aquinas, who saw the psalmist's affirmation of God's covenant faithfulness to his people as a proclamation of divine immutability:

He (the psalmist) shows the immutability of God in that God did this for (their) forefathers and again, because his power is not diminished, he is also able to do greater things. Therefore he says, 'You are yourself my King and my God', who are not diminished. The care of human beings belongs to you (now) as (it also did) then. Thus he says, 'my King', who defends and governs, 'and my God', who provides for me.<sup>30</sup>

As a fifth-century Christian mystic once praised the God who is 'outside of himself' in his love for his creatures, so a sixteenth century Christian mystic praised the God who 'never changes' and 'alone suffices'. If we twentieth-century theologians tend to find the first acceptable and the second questionable or incomprehensible, we would do well to look again to that thirteenth-century theologian who was able to see both affirmations as pointing to the same one reality of divine perfection, to the God both of faith and of reason who reveals his name as 'I am'.

- 1 'Homilia del 23 de marzo de 1980', published in *Nadie muere para siempre*, (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1983), p. 155.
- 2 *Gaudium et Spes*, nr. 10, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, W. Abbot, S.J., ed., (New York, 1966), p. 208.
- 3 St. Teresa of Avila, 'Nade te turbe', in *Obras completas* (Madrid, 1965), Vol. 2, p.960.
- 4 See evening prayer for Wed. evening of Week I in *Liturgia Horarum* (Vatican, 1972).
- 5 J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, R. Wilson and J. Bowden, tr. (New York, 1974) p. 222, 274; W. Stokes, 'Whitehead's Challenge to Theistic Realism', *New Scholasticism* 38 (1964) 7; K.J. Woolcombe, 'The Pain of God', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 20 (1967) 139; Joseph Hallman, 'The Emotions of God in the Theology of St. Augustine', *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 51 (1984) 5—6.
- 6 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros sententiarum* (Sent.) IV, d. 46, Q. 2, a. 1, qc. 1, ad. 2. (All translations are mine.) A discussion of the connotations of immutability and Thomas' awareness of them may be found in my *The Unchanging God of Love: A Study of the Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on Divine Immutability in View of Certain Contemporary Criticism of this Doctrine* (Fribourg, Switzerland, 1986). See also Illtyd Trethowan, *Process Theology and the Christian Tradition* (Still River, Mass., 1985).

- 7 *Summa theologiae* (ST) I, Q. 2, a. 3, co.  
8 ST I, 4, 3, ad. 4.  
9 *Sent.* I, 8, 3, 1, *exp. text.*  
10 ST I, 2, 3, co.; ad. 2; Q. 9, 1.  
11 *Sent.* I, 8, 3, 1, sc. 2.  
12 *Compendium* I, c. 3–4.  
13 *Summa contra gentiles* (SCG) I, c. 13–14.  
14 ST I, 2, 3, ad. 2.  
15 See ST I, 3, prologue.  
16 *De potencia* (*De pot.*) Q. 7, 2, ad. 9.  
17 On simplicity, see *Sent.* I, 8, 3, 1, ad. 3; ad. 4; *In Dionysii de divinis nominibus* (*In de div. nom.*) IX, lect. 2, nr. 816–817. On perfection, see *Sent.* I, 3, 1, 1, *div. text.*; I, 8, 3, 1, *exp. text.*; *In librum Boethii de trinitate* (*De trin.*) Q. 5, 4, co.; *De pot.* Q. 3, 5, co. On pure actuality, see *Sent.* I, 8, 3, 1, *exp. text.*; a. 1, co.; *De trin.* Q. 5, 4, co.; *De pot.* Q. 6, 6, co.  
18 John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa* I, 9 (PG 94, 836), quoted in ST I, 13, 11, co.  
19 L.-B. Geiger, OP, ‘Saint Thomas et la métaphysique d’Aristote’, in *Aristote et saint Thomas d’Aquin*, P. Moraux, et. al., eds., (Louvain, 1957), p. 206.  
20 ST I, 4, 2, co.; Q. 9, 1, co.  
21 ST I–II, 31, 2, ad. 1, quoting Aristotle, *De Anima* III, 7 (431a 6). See also ST I, 9, 1, ad. 1.  
22 See ST I, 27, 1–4; Q. 42, 5.  
23 ST I, 27, 4, co.  
24 ST I, 4, 3, co.; Q. 9, 1, ad. 2.  
25 ST I, Q. 43, aa. 1–3; a. 5; III, 1, 1, ad. 1; *Sent.* I, 15, 1, 1, ad. 1; ad. 4; Q. 4, a. 1, co.; d. 16, 1, 1, ad. 1; SCG II, c. 1, nr. 2–3 (marietti, nr. 853–854); IV, c. 23, nr. 4 (Marietti, nr. 3594). See also Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Change?* (Still River, Mass., 1985), esp. chapter 3.  
26 *In de div. nom.* IX, lect. 4, nr. 840–841; IV, lect. 10, nr. 437; ST I, 20, 2, ad. 1.  
27 ST I, 9, 1, co.  
28 ST I, 20, 2, ad. 1.  
29 *In de div. nom.* IX, lect. 4, nr. 841.  
30 *In psalmos* XLIII, nr. 2.