



Reconnecting Sacrament and Virtue: Penance in Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*

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Abstract

Catholic moral theology today, especially virtue ethics, often bears little connection to the sacraments; Catholic ethicists largely do not discuss the sacramental life when they address issues of morality or concepts of virtue. Given this disconnect, Thomas Aquinas's consideration of penance in the *Summa Theologiae* provides an important way to reconnect virtue to sacrament, as well as to emphasize virtue in relation to God. Penance is both a virtue and a sacrament inasmuch as it involves acts of the will. As a virtue, penance is a species of justice, an act of the will choosing according to right reason in aiming to amend for offenses against God. The acts of the virtue of penance, especially contrition, confession and satisfaction, constitute the matter of the sacrament of penance. Hence the sacrament presupposes the virtue even though the sacrament is a cause of grace whereas the virtue is an effect of grace. Penance as sacrament and virtue are virtually inseparable. A reclamation of penance as virtue and sacrament in the field of Catholic moral theology highlights the role of grace and hence connection of virtue to God, while also re-grounding virtue ethics in the sacramental life, especially through the sacrament of penance.

Keywords:

Aquinas, penance, sacrament, virtue, Catholic moral theology

Servais Pinckaers notes that one mistaken tendency of Christian ethics has been to base moral theology on Thomas's treatise on the virtues in isolation from his consideration of the final end and the sacramental life.¹ In so doing, virtues devolved into mere obligations. The failure to meet these obligations was labeled as "sin," and required confession in the sacrament of penance. Hence it was that the

¹ My sincere thanks to John Inglis, Jana Bennett, and Jeffrey Morrow for comments on earlier drafts of this piece.

confessional came to be seen as a tribunal; the sacrament tended toward the juridical. More concerned with exacting a suitable punishment for the crimes committed, the priests often failed at adequately conveying the mercy of God's forgiveness.²

Numerous medieval penitentials were designed in order to help confessors judge and minister properly within the confessional, a necessity for often uneducated priests, given Lateran IV's 1214 instruction that the faithful receive the sacrament at least once a year. These penitentials carefully consider and evaluate sins based on the gravity, repetition, context, etc., and they prescribe penances based on the circumstances of the sins. Some, such as John Gallagher in *Time Past, Time Future*, consider these penitentials to be the beginnings of moral theology as a specific field of theology.³

In being tied to the sacrament of penance, moral theology was inherently practical from the beginning. It was connected to the lives of people, particularly to the sacramental lives of the people. Lateran IV's instruction to receive both the sacraments of penance and of Eucharist was a primary concern in the development of the penitentials, but the overriding concern was eternal salvation. While this came through baptism, Lateran IV wanted to communicate that sin after baptism could be forgiven and that the sinner might still merit eternal life.⁴

Moving ahead about 700 years, however, moral theology reflects a different problem than the juridical focus on the sacrament of confession that portrays virtues in terms of obligations. Instead, virtues seem completely disconnected from the sacramental life. Although some recent works in moral theology convey a concern for relating the ethical life to the sacramental life, in large part ethicists do not exhibit a concern for addressing sacraments when making claims about morality.⁵

This is often found specifically in those who focus on virtue ethics; virtue appears as disconnected from the practice of sacraments as

² Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. from 3rd ed. by Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995 [1985]).

³ John A. Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future: An Historical Study of Catholic Moral Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).

⁴ Lateran IV, in Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Volume One: Nicaea I to Lateran V* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990).

⁵ A few works that do relate sacraments to morality include: Jana Marguerite Bennett, *Water is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singlehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); M. Therese Lysaught, "Eucharist as Basic Training: The Body as Nexus of Liturgy and Ethics," in *Theology and Lived Christianity*, ed. David Hammond (Mystic, Connecticut: Bayard, 2000), pp. 257–286; and William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

crucial for the moral life. Scholars may work persistently on Thomas's treatise on the virtues without considering its connection to the rest of the *Summa*, particularly the sacramental life and the final end of beatitude. Consider, for example, Jean Porter's 1990 work entitled *Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas*. Porter notes a fragmentation of Christian ethics and contends that Thomas's *Prima Secundae* and the *Secunda Secundae* offer a unified moral theory for Protestants and Catholics alike.⁶ With this focus, Porter immediately excludes any consideration of the sacraments, found in the *Tertia pars*, from her discussion of Thomistic virtue. Hence it is not surprising that Porter also notes that she will bracket the more properly theological components, focusing her reconstruction on the more philosophical components.⁷

Daniel Harrington and James Keenan's joint effort entitled *Jesus and Virtue Ethics*, meanwhile, emphasizes Scripture in relation to virtue. The authors state in their introduction that "following Thomas Aquinas . . . we take virtue ethics to be a comprehensive approach to all of Christian life, not simply an exercise in character formation divorced from Christian faith and life."⁸ Yet despite this Thomistic focus and concern for Christian life, their mention of sacraments is confined to two paragraphs.⁹

This article will address the tendency to approach virtue in isolation from the sacraments by arguing that Thomas's conception of penance as both virtue and sacrament represents a promising way to reestablish, in the field of Catholic moral theology, first, a connection between the virtues and the sacraments, and secondly, a connection to God. Thomas's contribution here can be seen as twofold according to his effort to distinguish between the sacrament and the virtue. First, as will be seen, Thomas often does *not* clearly make distinctions between penance the sacrament and penance the virtue. This apparent ambiguity illustrates the difficulty in trying to separate the sacrament from the virtue. Given this, a reclamation of penance indicates an important natural unity between the sacramental life and the virtuous life.

Secondly, to the extent that penance as a virtue and penance as a sacrament are distinguishable, we see another possible contribution, namely, that penance illustrates the important role of grace. One time

⁶ Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p. 31. A philosophical approach perhaps also explains why Alasdair MacIntyre's landmark works in virtue ethics also make no mention of sacraments.

⁷ Porter, *Recovery of Virtue*, p. 32.

⁸ Daniel Harrington and James Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges Between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2002), p. xiv.

⁹ Harrington and Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics*, p. 190.

that Thomas does clearly distinguish between penance as a sacrament and penance as a virtue is when he is describing sacrament and virtue in relation to grace. Whereas penance is a sacrament, it is a cause of grace, but inasmuch as penance is a virtue, it is more of an effect of grace.¹⁰ And yet, as Thomas describes it, penance as a sacrament presupposes penance as a virtue, which has its beginnings in God's turning the sinner's heart toward God. The relationship here between the virtue and the sacrament seems to be cyclical because it relies upon God's grace. Given this, a recovery of penance enables a helpful way to reconnect moral theology to God and the final end of sharing in the Triune life.

This article will proceed in three parts. First, I will briefly describe the historical context for Thomas's treatment of penance in the *Summa Theologiae*. The second, more substantial, part will be expositional in nature in order to give an account of Thomas's understanding of penance as a virtue as presented in questions 85–89 of the *Tertia pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*. Here it will be seen that for Thomas, penance is a virtue under the species of justice because it is an act of the will, choosing according to right reason, in its intention to amend for offenses against God. In the third part, I will return to the conversation that began this article, namely, how thinking of penance as both a sacrament and virtue represents an important contribution to the sometimes ungrounded field of Catholic moral theology, particularly as pertains to virtue ethics. As noted above, this contribution is twofold, namely, reconnecting the moral life to the sacramental life, and reconnecting moral theology to God.

Historical Context

Thomas's historical context in writing of penance as a virtue can and should be considered in regard to both the practices of the time and the theology of the time. Given the scope of this piece, however, I will not dwell on this at great length, but will note two important points. First, the acts of the virtue of penance were not uncommon as practices during the time of Thomas, and they were tied to the sacrament of penance. Fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage etc. all served as penitential practices and were part of the medieval culture.¹¹ Secondly, in regard to the theology of the time, the conception of penance as a virtue was accepted by numerous theologians. Peter Lombard's

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all citations from the *Summa* are from *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica*, complete English edition in five volumes, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1948 [1911]).

¹¹ For an excellent discussion of penitential practices during the Middle Ages, see Katherine Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Sentences, Bonaventure's commentary on the *Sentences*, and Albert the Great's work on virtues all examined penance as a virtue.

The Dominicans and Penance in the 13th Century

At the time Thomas began to write about the sacrament of penance, it was carried out in the form of private confession, a repeatable practice which had developed in the monasteries of Scotland, Ireland, and England. This form of penance incorporated elements of the earlier public penance, which served the function of readmitting grave sinners to the ecclesial community and hence the Eucharistic table.¹² The Fourth Lateran Council of 1214 sanctioned this practice that had existed since the tenth century, where the faithful were instructed to confess during Lent in preparation for their reception of the Easter Eucharist.¹³

The sacrament would have been particularly important to Thomas, as it was for all Dominicans, because of mandates from Pope Honorius III, who first allowed Dominic's band of local preachers to become the Order of Preachers (O.P.) in 1217. Four years later this group was also entrusted by Honorius with the mission of hearing confessions, in addition to their preaching service.¹⁴ Numerous texts emerged in order to prepare the Dominicans both to preach and to hear confessions; among the many texts were the *Summa de casibus* of Raymond of Pennafort and the *Summa vitiorum* and *Summa virtutum* of Willelmus Peraldus.¹⁵ These works prepared the Dominicans to evangelize about the virtues while also guiding them in the pastoral skills associated with hearing confessions.

The sacrament of penance, therefore, was tied concretely to the lives of everyday Christians. The laity received the message of virtues through preaching, and they applied it to their own lives in the context of the sacrament of penance. While the virtues and human actions mattered, there was also an assumption of the failure that comes through sin and hence the need for sacramental grace to strengthen and renew people after their sins and in preparation for their reception of the Eucharist. Striving for virtue and partaking of the sacrament of penance were complementary activities, and this was an age of penitential practices. Fasting, almsgiving, and various sacrifices were promoted as ways of disciplining the body and atoning for one's sins.

¹² Eric Luijten, *Sacramental Forgiveness as a Gift of God: Thomas Aquinas on the Sacrament of Penance* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), pp. 8–10.

¹³ Luijten, *Sacramental Forgiveness*, pp. 18–19.

¹⁴ Leonard E. Boyle, *The Setting of the Summa theologiae of Saint Thomas* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982), p. 1.

¹⁵ Boyle, *Setting of the Summa*, p. 2.

Influences on Thomas's Consideration of Penance

Secondary sources point to numerous influences on Thomas's treatment of penance as a virtue. In addition to the various Dominican summas arranged by his predecessors that were a part of Thomas's own training, Peter Lombard's *Sentences* was of great importance. According to Marcia Colish, it was Lombard who first referred to penance as a virtue – specifically he referred to it as a virtue of the mind. She notes that no canonist nor scholastic theologian of or prior to his time referred to penance as a virtue of the mind; the closer affinity is to monastic authors such as Bernard of Clairvaux.¹⁶ The context for Lombard's claim that penance is a virtue arose out of the theological discussions regarding the form that the sacrament of penance should take in regard to repeatability. In arguing that a single, solemn penance (a one-time affair) should be superseded by a repeatable private penance the Lombard was emphasizing the spiritual healing and spiritual growth that comes from the grace of the sacrament.¹⁷ In other words, repeatable penance is better able to fight against vice, and, conversely, better able to assist in the recovery and the strengthening of virtue. For the Lombard, penance the virtue is interior and expressed exteriorly in the sacrament of penance.

By the time of Thomas, the debate surrounding repeatability was more or less settled as the sacrament assumed the form of private, repeatable penance promoted by Lateran IV. In his *Scriptum super Sententiis*, Thomas hence agrees with the Lombard's position that penance is a sacrament and a virtue, but, since this work is a commentary, Thomas's thoughts here are structured around the Lombard's work. Thomas's later work in the *Summa Theologiae* on penance replicates much of that found in the *Scriptum*, but the structure and content better indicate Thomas's conception of how everything fits together, as will be described in the expositional part of this paper.¹⁸

Bonaventure, in his commentary on the *Sentences*, seems to take up Peter the Lombard's claim about the sacrament of penance as something which is repeatable. Thus Bonaventure writes of penance as a sacrament and virtue.¹⁹ What is most important to note here

¹⁶ Marcia L. Colish, *Peter Lombard*, Vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. 601.

¹⁷ Colish, *Peter Lombard*, p. 602.

¹⁸ Luijten, *Sacramental Forgiveness*, p. 29. Colish notes that Peter the Lombard was a staunch contritionist, that is, he believed forgiveness happened when the person was truly contrite, rather than in the verbal confession or in the satisfaction (the penance). This throws emphasis on an interior act while detracting from the role of the priest, what would come to be known as the "form" of the sacrament. With an emphasis on contrition, the actual sacrament is not of great importance, but is more of a formality. Thomas, however, seems to differ from the Lombard on this point.

¹⁹ Some scholars note that Gratian's *Decretum*, a work of canon law, was influential on Thomas's consideration of penance. In writing Question 84 of the *Tertia pars* on

regarding the theology of penance at the time is that the practice of repeatable penance cleared the way for seeing penance as a virtue, and hence, by the time of Thomas, penance as a virtue was not a contested issue anymore than was the repeatability of the sacrament.

There is, however, a difference of sources for when Thomas considers penance as a sacrament in contrast to his consideration of penance as a virtue. In regard to penance as sacrament, Thomas relies heavily on the words of the Fathers and Scripture. When he turns to penance as a virtue, however, it is Aristotle that provides the authority. Servais Pinckaers attributes this influence to St. Albert the Great, who made a commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics* that was recorded by his student Thomas.²⁰ This Aristotelian virtue framework communicated by Albert was to be very important in Thomas's construction of his treatise on the virtues in the second part of the *Summa* as well as in his consideration of penance as a virtue.

A Note on the Placement of Penance as Virtue in the *Summa*

Servais Pinckaers suggests that it is the Aristotelian virtue framework that determined Thomas's placement of penance as a virtue within the *Summa*. Although 53 virtues are considered in the treatise on the virtues, the virtue of penance is only discussed within Thomas's treatment of the sacraments. Such an Aristotelian organization, according to Pinckaers, made it difficult for Thomas to include specifically Christian virtues such as penitence and humility, the latter of which he joined to modesty and categorized under the virtue of temperance.²¹

Leonard Boyle notes that it was the *Secunda secundae* which gained popularity; of existing manuscripts of the *Summa* it accounts for 37% of the texts, whereas the *Tertia pars* is only 18%.²² Boyle also finds that the *Secunda secundae* was circulating before Thomas had advanced in his work on the *Tertia pars*. This means that the many people who encountered Thomas's treatise on the virtues in isolation from the rest of the *Summa* did not find penance

penance, Thomas appears to have borrowed many of Gratian's Scripture quotations in supporting his claims, and there is somewhat of a legalistic or juridical framework in play. Although Thomas's claim that penance is a species of justice indicates, to some extent, this legalistic understanding, Question 84 concerns penance specifically as sacrament, which is why I will not consider Gratian's influence at length. For information regarding Gratian's influence, see: James W. Moudry, *The Influence of the Patristic 'Auctoritates' of Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Doctrine of Penance in the Summa Theologiae* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1963), p. 82.

²⁰ Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 219.

²¹ Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 228.

²² Boyle, *Setting of the Summa*, p. 23.

listed as a virtue. So also today, those who concentrate their work on the *Secunda secundae* will not have to address the virtue of penance.

On the other hand, our current access to the entire *Summa* allows for a broader perspective; we can now examine the *Summa* in a more complete form. Such an investigation indicates that Thomas's conception of virtues must be situated within the context of a larger theological whole, beginning with the questions of God in the *Prima pars* and including consideration of the sacraments in the *Tertia pars*. In this light, penance as a virtue's placement in the midst of the treatment of sacraments immediately connects it to a larger theological context and need not detract from its importance as a virtue. The virtue finds its perfection in the sacrament, where God's grace and mercy is experienced in forgiveness. While the virtue's location within the *Summa* may have prevented its consideration among the virtues in the past as well as today, it is precisely this placement within the sacraments that makes penance so appealing as an opportunity for reconnecting sacrament and virtue.

Penance as Virtue in Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*

At first glance, the idea of penance as a virtue seems peculiar in that none of the other sacraments are labeled as virtues. How then, can Thomas argue that penance is both sacrament and virtue? In this section I will present Thomas's argument concerning penance in the *Tertia pars*, relying primarily on Questions 85 and 86 and drawing from others where necessary. In this section I will discuss how, for Thomas, penance is a virtue—a species of justice—because it is an act of the will choosing according to right reason in aiming to amend for offenses against God. Within this discussion, Thomas's conception of the acts of the virtue of penance will arise; contrition, confession and satisfaction—the key elements of the sacrament of penance—are all examples of acts of the virtue of penance, as can be ascertained from the foreshadowing in the *Summa* and the hints provided in the *Scriptum*.²³ These acts can be performed outside of the sacrament, but not with the same effect of sacramental forgiveness.²⁴

²³ By “foreshadowing,” I mean, for example, that Thomas will make reference to contrition as an act of the virtue of penance in the *Summa*, although he never systematically considers the acts of penance in the *Summa*. The compilers of the *Summa*'s “Supplement,” drawing upon the *Scriptum* dedicate space to considering contrition, confession, and satisfaction as acts of the virtue of penance which are performed in the sacrament of penance.

²⁴ One may write out a confession, for example, and this will be an act of the virtue of penance although it will not merit sacramental absolution.

“An Act of the Will” – Penance as Virtue and Sacrament

In the first article of Question 85, Thomas considers the question “Whether penance is a virtue?” Thomas first notes that when a person repents, she deplores something she has done. This sorrow or sadness can be understood as two ways. First, it denotes “a passion of the sensitive appetite.”²⁵ In this sense, penance is not a virtue, but a passion, which we might best understand in today’s language as emotion; penance interpreted thus is a feeling of sorrowful regret.

Understood in the second way, however, penance is a virtue because it is an act, rather than a feeling. That it is “an act of the will” implies choice, and choosing according to right reason denotes virtue, according to Aristotle’s *Ethics*. Right reason in the case of penance means the person is aware that he should grieve for sins and attempt to remove them. Hence Thomas says that penance can name either a virtue or an act of the virtue. For example, the individual act of fasting as satisfaction in repenting for a sin is an act of the virtue of penance, and hence this act of fasting can be referred to as “penance.” Meanwhile, habituated acts of penance indicate the virtue of penance. Someone who regularly performs acts of penance, such as confessing sins, can be said to have the virtue of penance.²⁶

This concept of penance as act is crucial. It allows Thomas to say that penance is a virtue, consisting of habituated acts of penance, but it also enables him to say that penance is a sacrament wherein human acts constitute the matter of the sacrament. Thomas’s Reply to Objection 1 of Question 85 is particularly important in spelling this out. In line with Thomas’s earlier discussion of sacraments in general, the sacrament of penance consists of both form and matter. In the case of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, the matter of the sacrament is something tangible: water for baptism and bread and wine for the Eucharist. In the case of the sacraments of matrimony and penance, however, the “matter” is human acts: the saying of the vows for matrimony and the contrition, confession and satisfaction for penance.

In Question 86, regarding the effects of penance as regards the pardon of mortal sin, this issue of form and matter arises again in the context of discussing whether forgiveness of guilt is an effect of penance. As a sacrament, penance produces its effect—the forgiveness of sin—by the form and matter of the sacrament. The priest serves as the formal part of the sacrament, while the acts of the penitent which pertain to the virtue of penance serve as the material element. Here Thomas repeats his claim that penance is a virtue in so far as it is

²⁵ III 85.1.

²⁶ Thomas notes that someone without sin may also have the virtue of penance but no reason to perform an act of penance.

a principle of certain human acts.²⁷ This means that the human acts which are the matter of the sacrament come from, or are motivated by, the virtue of penance.

Thomas writes that the forgiveness of sin is the effect of penance as a virtue, but still more of penance as a sacrament. In other words, penance as a virtue implies only that which serves as the material element of the sacrament, namely the human acts of the penitent. The sacrament of penance, on the other hand, contains both matter—the human acts pertaining to the virtue—and form. Hence the sacrament is even more a cause of the forgiveness of sin than the virtue alone, though both involve human acts. This point is well illustrated by Thomas’s mention of both the ungodly (for example, the Ninevites) and those that followed the Old Law (Jews), in comparison with those under the New Law (Christians).

First, Thomas notes that under the Old Law, there were penitential acts and a call for repentance. At one point he even refers to this as a “sacrament,” although it would not have had the form of the sacrament of penance “as practiced in the Church,” which Thomas describes at great length in Question 84.²⁸ Secondly, Thomas notes that in the case of the ungodly, penance may be the first virtue that is apparent. In both this case and the former case of the Jewish people, penance as a virtue is part of the natural law, but yet also presumes some kind of faith (as in the case of the Ninevites), and hence, even without the formal sacrament, the penitent can receive some real, although imperfect, forgiveness of sins.

And yet, Thomas finds that the sacrament of penance was suitably instituted in the New Law. Penance is perfected by that which is done by the priest in the formal element of the sacrament. Of course, “God alone absolves from sin and forgives sins authoritatively; yet priests do so ministerially.”²⁹ The sacrament of penance is hence necessary for all those who are in sin. The acts of external penance associated with the sacrament—contrition, confession and satisfaction—do not need to last until the end of life, but, on the other hand, human beings should repent habitually and continually, by never doing anything contrary to penance that will destroy the habitual disposition.³⁰ Although this comes from Thomas’s consideration of penance as a sacrament, the language here once more reflects an understanding of virtue. Reception of the sacrament is repeatable but not continual, but the phrase “habitual disposition” indicates penance as a virtue in the penitent who receives the sacrament.

²⁷ III 86.6.

²⁸ III 84.1

²⁹ III 84.3, Reply Obj. 3.

³⁰ III 84.8–9.

The Virtue of Penance as a Species of Justice

In the above sections, we saw the importance of human acts of the will, such as contrition, confession, and satisfaction, in understanding penance both as a virtue (habituated human acts of penance) and as a sacrament (where human acts are the material part of the sacrament). Another important issue that Thomas considers in regard to penance as a virtue is whether this virtue is a species of justice. This would imply that the acts of the virtue of penance are in fact acts of the virtue of justice. Thomas notes several objections that seem to indicate that penance does not fall under the virtue of justice. First, penance seems to be a theological virtue, whereas justice is a moral virtue. Secondly, justice observes a mean whereas penance represents an extreme. Third, penance does not seem to fit under Aristotle's twofold division of justice as commutative and distributive. Lastly, penance seems to fit better under the virtue of prudence.

Thomas argues, however, that a sinner attempts to amend for a sin he has committed since it is an offense against God. In this sense, we can understand sin as a sort of debt owed to God. The sinner's desire to amend for the sin involves some kind of compensation, and this places it in the realm of justice, under the kind of commutation. In the relationship between two parties (God and the sinner), the sinner wants to make up for offenses against God. The virtue of penance is therefore a part of justice. And yet, we may notice that the two parties here, God and the sinner, are far from being equal. Can a sinner ever really amend for his sins? Can there ever be full compensation for this debt owed to God? Thomas answers this question by again drawing from Aristotle, when he notes that a thing may be just simply or relatively. In the case of the sinner's penance, justice is only relative justice because a man is subject to God as is a servant to his master. Although penance is an example of relative justice, it is still a species of this cardinal virtue.

Thomas can then answer the objections. First, in that justice is a virtue toward God, with the matter being human acts rather than God, penance is not a theological virtue. Secondly, although the mean of justice is equality between people, perfect equality cannot be established in all cases, as is the case between God and man. Penance may be described as excess rather than a mean, but ultimately it is sufficient because God accepts it. In regard to the third objection, the twofold division of justice, Thomas has already stated above that penance falls under commutative justice. Lastly, in regard to categorizing penance as a species of virtue, Thomas again insists that it is directly a species of justice, although it comprises things pertaining to all the virtues, namely, faith, hope, and love. As a moral virtue, penance also has a share of prudence, temperance, and fortitude. Thomas further notes, in the fourth article, that penance

as a virtue is subjected in the will, with its proper act consisting in trying to amend what was committed against God.

Fear, the Theological Virtues, and Penance

So far, we have established, first, that human acts are essential for understanding penance as a virtue and as a sacrament, and secondly, that penance as a virtue is a species of the virtue of justice, in reference to the relative justice between God and the human being. In this section we will turn to considering the role of the fear of God and the role of the theological virtues in describing penance as a virtue. This further points us in seeing penance as a distinctly Christian virtue that is valuable for the field of moral theology.

In the 5th Article of Question 85, Thomas considers the question of whether penance originates from fear. In short, the answer is yes, but Thomas's answer is more complex than just a simple yes. Once again, Thomas makes the distinction between the virtue and the acts of the virtue. As a habit, penance is infused by God immediately with the cooperation of the human being's actions. In regard to the acts of the virtue of penance that constitute cooperation with God, Thomas finds both servile and filial fear, although this fear actually begins with God's turning the heart, followed by an act of faith. In other words, God first allows the sinner to recognize the sin committed against God. It is this that evokes servile fear, the fear of punishment for the sin. Following this, there is hope, where the sinner desires to amend for the sin that she might be forgiven. Then there is a movement of charity; sin is now displeasing to man not just because of the potential for divine punishment, but for its own sake. The sinner loves God and hence is displeased by sins against God. This leads to filial fear.

Penance as motivated by fear may seem to have a negative tone in contemporary times. And yet, we see here a process that begins with God's turning of the heart toward God, leading to faith in God, the hope of attaining pardon, and, ultimately, the love of God. Hence the fact that penance results from servile and filial fear indicates that penance truly proceeds from the act of God in turning the heart. Thomas notes in his *Reply Obj. 3* that even the movement of fear comes from God's act in turning the heart.

This article about fear, with its mention of faith, hope, and charity, sets Thomas up to discuss the theological virtues in the 6th Article of Question 85. Here Thomas considers whether penance might be the first of the virtues. He answers, first of all, that all the virtues are connected, so none comes before the others chronologically speaking, although they may be exhibited in a chronological order in regard to their acts. Properly speaking, faith, hope, and love occur at the

same time as penance. The movement of the will towards God is an act of faith quickened by charity whereas the movement of the will towards sin is an act of penance, but these are simultaneous. Yet Thomas says that the act of the virtue of faith can be said to precede the act of the virtue of penance in that the first is directed toward God while the second is directed against sin because of the love of God. In other words, the act of faith is the reason for the act of penance. The theological virtues hence precede the virtue of penance in the order of nature. On the other hand, Thomas notes that in some sense penance is the first of the other virtues in regard to the justification of the ungodly. Although here the virtue of penance is naturally preceded by the theological virtues, the act of the virtue of penance is first in securing the person's justification.

By introducing the topic of penance as motivated by fear, Thomas has illustrated the distinctly Christian elements of the virtue of penance. In particular, the theological virtues have an important role to play in considering penance as a virtue. First, Thomas's discussion of fear demonstrates how the virtue of penance is shaped by the theological virtues. Faith leads to a servile fear, where the sinner wants to amend for sins out of a fear of punishment, hope leads to the sinner trying to amend for sin, and ultimately love leads to the person's dislike of sin for its own sake. Secondly, Thomas emphasizes that faith, hope, and charity maintain a sort of primacy over the virtue of penance in that their proper object is God, whereas penance, a virtue of the species of justice, has the amendment of sins as its proper object.

God as Origin and End: Penance and the Circle of Grace

All of the above sections, especially the last discussed, point toward the current section regarding the role of grace. Penance is both a cause and an effect of grace. How is this possible? The context of Thomas's discussion on penance as both a cause and an effect of grace appears in Question 89, "Of the Recovery of Virtue by Means of Penance," which presents in its 1st Article the question of whether the virtues are restored through penance. As an objection, Thomas notes that penance is itself a virtue and not the cause of all virtues, especially since some virtues (like faith, hope, and charity) precede penance in the order of nature. According to this objection, it would be odd to think that penance could restore virtues. Ultimately, however, Thomas answers that the remission of sins occurs through the infusion of grace, and hence grace is infused into the person through the sacrament of penance. All the gratuitous virtues flow from grace, and therefore all the virtues are restored through penance.

In replying to the objection mentioned above, Thomas explains that penance restores the virtue in the same way that it causes grace. In other words, it is specifically penance the sacrament that restores virtue, not penance the virtue that restores virtue. As a sacrament, penance is a cause of grace, for, as a virtue, it is more of an effect of grace.³¹ “And therefore, it is not necessary that penance, inasmuch as it is a virtue, is the cause of all other virtues, but that the habit of penance, together with all the other habits of virtue, is caused through the sacrament.”³²

This raises a truly interesting question. It would be too simple to say that only penance the sacrament is a cause of grace, whereas only penance the virtue is an effect of grace. But yet, as noted earlier, penance the sacrament *presupposes* penance the virtue, which motivates the acts performed during the reception of the sacrament. And yet penance the sacrament is a cause of grace, whereas penance the virtue is “more of” an effect of grace. In regard to grace, Thomas clearly wants to emphasize the sacrament as a particular site of grace. His earlier discussion of penance the virtue, however, seems to indicate that there is grace as the virtue of penance is infused. So which comes first, the sacrament or the virtue of penance? On the one hand, it seems to be the virtue of penance, which allows the sinner to perform the acts of penance which constitute the sacrament. On the other hand, it seems to be the sacrament of penance, which causes grace and restores the virtues.

This question may ultimately be misleading. It seems that Thomas’s point here is more that grace is intimately involved in penance, as sacrament or as virtue. The emphasis on grace, moreover, points us to God. Penance the virtue is received as a gift of God. Penance the sacrament is also received as a gift of God. While both sacrament and virtue make sense in the context of human acts, as discussed above, ultimately both have their origin in God. Furthermore, both aim at an end in God. Penance the virtue motivates the acts that constitute the sacrament of penance, and this sacrament seeks relative justice, restoring the relationship with God that has been hindered by the person’s sins.

³¹ The Christian Classics edition translates the “nam” as “because.” However, the Latin sentence does not seem to imply causality in this way. This translation also omits the “magis,” which I have reinserted in my translation above. Est autem causa gratiae in quantum est sacramentum, nam in quantum est virtus, est magis gratiae effectus. Et ideo non oportet quod poenitentia, secundum quod est virtus, sit causa omnium aliarum virtutum, sed quod habitus poenitentiae simul cum habitibus aliarum virtutum per sacramentum causetur. Latin text accessed at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth4084.html> on 25 November 2007.

³² III 89, Reply Obj. 1.

Implications for Moral Theology

The exposition and discussion above have implications for the sometimes ungrounded field of Catholic moral theology, particularly in its consideration of virtue ethics. As noted in the introduction of this paper, Thomas's conception of penance as both virtue and sacrament represents a promising way to reestablish a connection between the virtues and the sacraments, as well as to emphasize God as origin and end. Inasmuch as Thomas does not distinguish between penance as a sacrament and penance as a virtue, we recognize a unity. Inasmuch as Thomas does distinguish between them, our attention is drawn to the role of grace, the cyclical nature of sacrament and virtue, the importance of reception of the sacraments for strengthening virtues, and ultimately God as the origin and the end of acts of the will. This is further confirmed in Thomas's placement of penance the virtue within a discussion on the sacraments. In what follows I will attend to the elements of the exposition above and consider the implications of this twofold contribution.

First, as concerns the acts of penance as acts of the will, I noted above that this unites penance as a virtue and as a sacrament. The virtue of penance is the principle for the acts of contrition, confession, and satisfaction, which constitute the sacrament of penance. Hence the virtue ethics of Catholic moral theology today is pointed back in the direction of the sacraments, particularly reconnecting it to its origin in the sacrament of penance. In this sacrament, the role of acts of the will is particularly evident; these acts constitute the matter of the sacrament such that the sacrament is not simply something that is passively received. It is through the sacrament of penance, in connection with the Eucharist and other sacraments, that virtue ethics rightly finds its home.

Moreover, the attention to the particular virtue of penance, located in a discussion on the sacraments, points to all virtues as rooted in the sacramental life with the final end of beatitude in mind. Penance as virtue and sacrament engenders a picture of human life that is virtuous and sacramental, cyclically beginning with God's grace and ending in God. Consideration of penance as a virtue, therefore, might be valuable in guiding a more authentic understanding of the Thomistic virtues. This acknowledgement of ever-present grace also is beneficial to moral theology as it considers the virtues because it ensures a theology of virtues that is not completely dependent on human acts. By emphasizing penance as virtue and sacrament, moral theologians can assure that they will not leave God out of the picture.

This, in fact, is the second contribution, namely, reconnecting virtue ethics to God. Crucial to this is the discussion of penance as motivated by fear of God, which emphasizes the importance of faith, hope, and love, those virtues that have God as their object. Penance is

shaped by the theological virtues, which lead first to servile fear and ultimately to a filial fear, but penance itself has the amendment of sin as its object. This provides a safeguard such that the attention to human acts associated with penance does not obscure the faith, hope, and love that have God as their object, but rather allows for penance shaped by these theological virtues. This insight might prevent moral theology and the sacrament of penance from taking on the juridical courtroom feel that they have been accused of exhibiting in the past. A reclamation of penance must also bring a renewed focus on the theological virtues.

A specific example to consider here would be topics of social justice. Because penance is categorized as a species of justice, it would be valuable for a virtue ethics approach to social justice to be rooted in penance. Thinking of penance as a virtue wherein justice is owed to God, and wherein relative justice is possible provides a valuable way of thinking about justice where God is intrinsically part of the equation. In other words, the acts of the virtue of penance that occur within the sacrament of penance are a part of justice, and the just person is one who does acts of penance to amend for sins against God and others. Whether moral theologians are considering topics such as war, economics, or other issues, they would do well to make penance part of their reflection, and even to place this, along with worship—another species of the virtue of justice—at the heart of their considerations.

Both of these contributions point to one additional contribution, namely, the possibility of reestablishing a strong connection between moral theology and the lives of Christians. A revitalization of the virtue of penance may lead to a revitalization of the sacrament of penance (and vice versa). As was the case in the time of Thomas, virtue is not simply an abstract category, but a way of life for people. The sacrament of penance gives Catholics the opportunity to work at becoming more virtuous while also inviting God's grace to strengthen their virtues.

Conclusion: Unity in Penance as Sacrament *and* Virtue

In the *Christian Classics* edition of Thomas's *Summa*, the Fathers of the English Dominican province who translated the text decided to distinguish between the sacrament of Penance by capitalizing it while not capitalizing the virtue of penance. Unfortunately, beyond Question 84, "Of the Sacrament of Penance" and Question 85 "Of Penance As a Virtue," it is not always so easy to identify where Thomas is speaking of penance as a sacrament and where he is speaking of it as a virtue. Sometimes Thomas will make a distinction, saying penance "as a virtue" or penance "as a sacrament," but at other

times it seems that his descriptions could fit penance as virtue as well as sacrament. There appears to be a natural unity between penance as sacrament and virtue; the two are intimately connected.

On the one hand, penance as a sacrament presupposes the virtue of penance, which makes possible the human acts—contrition, confession, satisfaction—that serve as the matter of the sacrament. The virtue of penance is made possible by God's having turned the sinner's heart toward Himself. The grace of this act involves an infusion of the theological virtues faith, hope, and charity, which Thomas notes precede penance in the order of nature, even as an act of the virtue of penance is simultaneous with an act of charity. On the other hand, penance as a virtue finds its perfection in penance as a sacrament, where the formal element of the priest enables sacramental forgiveness in the absolution. Moreover, the grace of the sacrament strengthens penance as a virtue, as well as all other virtues.

In a sense penance as a virtue and penance as a sacrament are cyclical; the virtue leads to reception of the sacrament which strengthens the virtue further. Penance, moreover, begins and ends with God. It begins with God turning the heart toward God, and it ends in heaven with the beatific vision. Thomas notes that even the saints in heaven possess the virtue of penance, albeit in a different form. Whereas on earth, the virtue of penance inspired acts of contrition, confession, and satisfaction, in heaven the virtue of penance results in a thanksgiving for God's merciful forgiveness that has allowed the sinner to experience the beatific vision and final happiness in sharing in the life of the Triune God.

Moral theology today, especially that which focuses on virtues, can miss out on the larger context necessary for a theological understanding of the virtues as part of a whole, including the final end of beatitude assisted by God's grace in the sacramental life. By featuring the virtue of penance, however, the connection to the sacrament is inevitable, and the final end, as well as God's initial grace, is more evident. Hence penance as a virtue represents one way of grounding moral theology by reconnecting it to the everyday sacramental lives of people while also keeping the final end of happiness in God as the focus of moral theology. A thoughtful consideration of penance as virtue and sacrament on the part of moral theologians would be a wonderful gift to a Church badly in need of recovering access to the formation of its members beyond the opportunity presented by a weekly Eucharistic celebration.

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