

Thomas Aquinas on the Sacrifice of Christ and the Eucharist: A Defence

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Abstract

In this paper I will discuss one of the soteriological models Thomas Aquinas outlines in his *Summa Theologiae*, namely ‘sacrifice’. This is only one of several, but not mutually exclusive, ways in which Thomas interprets our salvation in Christ. I will briefly list the other models before focussing in more depth on sacrifice by considering some objections against it. I will continue by outlining Thomas’s theology of sacrifice in its own right and explain its connections with the Eucharist. By way of conclusion I will return to the modern criticism raised.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, sacrifice, Eucharist, Church, soteriology

INTRODUCTION

In *Summa Theologiae* III,¹ q. 48 Thomas lists four ways in which Christ effects our salvation, namely merit, making satisfaction, sacrifice, and redemption. It is only at the very end of the *quaestio*, in a reply to the final objection of a.6, that he clarifies their organic unity and connections. I quote in full:

Christ’s Passion, according as it is compared with his Godhead, operates in an efficient manner: but insofar as it is compared with the will of Christ’s soul it acts in a *meritorious* manner; considered as being within Christ’s very flesh, it acts by way of *satisfaction*, inasmuch as we are

¹ I will not be able to consider all aspects of this soteriological model. One aspect I will not discuss is the connections between Christ’s sacrifice and those performed under the Old Law. Here the reader can still benefit from Matthew Levering’s fine study, *Christ’s Fulfilment of Law and Torah: Salvation according to Thomas Aquinas* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

liberated by it from the debt of punishment; while inasmuch as we are freed from the servitude of guilt, it acts by way of *redemption*; but in so far as we are reconciled with God it acts by way of *sacrifice* (...).²

I will return later to the way that Christ's passion is the primary cause of our salvation, both in its own right and through the sacramental economy. Of the soteriological models Thomas lists, the *satisfaction* model has received most attention of late, if only because some scholars associate it with incipiently Calvinist, penal notions of salvation.³ Although I cannot refute this reading within the constraints of this article, I would like to signal that I consider a penal interpretation of the model of satisfaction less than convincing. Satisfaction should be understood in light of a theology of penance, not punishment.⁴ This applies as much to St Anselm's account (*aut poena aut satisfactio*)⁵ as Thomas's own. It is no coincidence that *satisfactio* constitutes one of the three key elements of the sacrament of penance, the other two being contrition and confession.⁶ When we are genuinely sorrowful for the sins we have committed we will want to express that sorrow, thereby restoring the relationship with the offended party. In other words, salvation through making satisfaction means that through the penitential acts of Christ (the sinless representative of humanity), the relationship between humanity and God is restored – not because God is in need of salvation or reconciliation, but because we are.

In his mature works Thomas interprets *merit* (a theme he would have encountered in Peter Lombard's *Sentences*) through the concepts of charity and justice. This explains why in the passage I quoted he mentions the role of the will, for the will is the locus of merit and

² ST III, q. 48, a. 6 ad 3. All translations are taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* tr. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Maryland, Christian Classics, 1947).

³ See for instance: Brandon Peterson, 'Paving the Way? Penalty and Atonement in Thomas Aquinas's Soteriology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15 [2013]: 265–83 and Douglas Farrow, *Theological Negotiations. Proposals in Soteriology and Anthropology* Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), p. 105–107. I have refuted this reading in a number of contributions, such as 'Bearing the Marks of Christ's Passion: Aquinas's Soteriology' in Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (eds.), *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 277–302 and more recently in 'St Thomas Aquinas on salvation, making satisfaction, and restoration of friendship with God' in *The Thomist* 83 (2019): 521–545. For a classic study on satisfaction, see Romanus Cessario, *The Godly Image: Christ, and Salvation in Catholic Thought from Anselm to Aquinas* (Petersham, Mass.: St Bede's Publications, 1990).

⁴ As Jaroslav Pelikan pointed out many years ago in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, vol. III: The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), p. 143–45. For a brief overview of Anselm's soteriology, see Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Introduction to Medieval Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 94–98.

⁵ This also applies to Thomas Aquinas, despite his use of the phrase *poena satisfactoria*. See footnote 3 for literature.

⁶ ST III, q. 90, a. 2.

charity. Christ's saving activity is meritorious (worthy of reward) because he freely chooses to restore the broken relationship between God and humanity through his passion, which manifests his perfect charity. As is well-known, Thomas understands charity in terms of friendship. When we offend or alienate a friend, rules of (vindictive) justice that would be invoked normally (i.e., against those with whom we are not on friendly terms), are not considered appropriate. In his mature works, then, Thomas considers the saving work of Christ (and our participation in his addressing our sinful alienation from God through the sacraments made available to us through him) in light of charity. While I will not be able to discuss the way charity transforms notions of justice within the constraints of this paper,⁷ I will return to the topic of charity when discussing the Church as the Body of Christ.

Redemption, a fourth model, refers to remission of guilt. Guilt, for Thomas, should be understood in an intrinsic manner: redemption from guilt does not denote an extraneous divine amnesty in which God no longer holds our misdeeds against us, sinful though we remain (Luther's *simul justus et peccator*) but it refers, rather, to an inner transformation of the sinner: forgiveness of sin means the abolishment or erasure (*remissio*: 'sending away') of sin within us.

Much more can be said about these models but within the constraints of this essay the ensuing discussion will be limited to Thomas's discussion of the notion of *sacrifice*. Before I outline this in its own right, I will mention some reservations modern scholars have raised against the sacrificial model.

First, there are those who argue that language of sacrifice and making satisfaction has become simply *unintelligible*. As Mark Heim puts it in a pointed manner: 'It is no more natural for people in our society to regard Christ as a sin offering who removes our guilt than for them to consider sacrificing an oxen on an altar in the neighbourhood playground to keep their children safe'.⁸ Talk of sacrifice conjures up visions of cultic ceremonies that strike most of us as primitive and unpalpable. In this context it is worth recalling the analysis by René Girard of the scapegoat mechanism.⁹ Girard argues that the sacrifice of the scapegoat restores social cohesion to a society torn asunder by competing claims and desires of its members, but it can only do so if the innocence of the scapegoat remains veiled. One of the advantages of Girard's theory of the scapegoat mechanism is that it enables us to

⁷ For a first exploration as to how charity transforms the demands of justice in Thomas's mature writings, see 'St Thomas Aquinas on salvation, making satisfaction, and restoration of friendship with God'.

⁸ Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice. A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Eerdmans, 2006), p. 23.

⁹ Aside from Mark Heim's work, see also James Alison's classic book, *Living in the End Times. The Last Things Re-Imagined* (London: SPCK, 1997).

understand that our Western unease and incomprehension toward cultic sacrifices is the very result of the influence of the Christian gospels which, in exposing the anthropological and sociological mechanism of the sacrifice of an innocent scapegoat, inaugurated its demise. Increasingly throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Book of Job) and even more explicitly in the gospel accounts, the sacrificial mechanism is unmasked, opening up the possibility of founding society upon a non-sacrificial principle, in solidarity with victims. Hence, in the words of Mark Heim who has appropriated Girard's ideas in his own work on soteriology, Christ's passion is the sacrifice to end sacrifice: 'God enters into the position of the victim of sacrificial atonement (a position already defined by human practice) and occupies it so as to be able to act from that place to reverse sacrifice and redeem us from it'.¹⁰

This analysis has the advantage that it can point to a decisive difference the Biblical tradition, and Christianity in particular, has made to the world: it has abolished cultic sacrifices and has encouraged us to look at the world through the eyes of the victims. There are, however, some major problems. First, it is hard to dispel the impression that an element of reductionism is operative in this analysis, namely the reduction of religious categories to anthropological ones.¹¹ Sacrifice is interpreted primarily as a practice that restores or maintains social cohesion. In the Biblical tradition, however, sacrifice concerns first and foremost the relationship between the people and God.¹²

It is no coincidence that Heim rehabilitates the ransom model of soteriology, in which the powers of evil 'overstretch' their reach in crucifying Christ. Reference to Satan is the most effective way in which theologians can explain 'the fact that Jesus's death is not the work of God but the product of an evil process, even as God turns it against itself to a saving purpose. "Ransom" is expressive of just this idea'.¹³ This undoubtedly fascinating and creative interpretation of the theory of the devil's rights remains vulnerable to the critique that St Anselm raised against it: it bestows a prerogative on the powers of evil (the devil's rights) that they cannot possibly have; and more importantly, it fails

¹⁰ Heim, p. 143.

¹¹ In fairness, Heim is aware of this concern, and mentions it (briefly) on p. 197, arguing that it required 'an act of transcendent power and wisdom' to disclose the injustice and violence of the sacramental mechanism. It can therefore not 'be reduced to some sociological or anthropological insights, clothed in symbolic, religious terms'. Even if we were to grant that the theory analyses an event that is acknowledged to be genuinely divine or transcendent in origin, this does not fully address the charge that the theory and the categories it employs may still be reductionist.

¹² It is not without significance that the Old Testament notion of sacrifice cannot be limited to offerings to extinguish sin. There are, for instance, also offerings as thanksgiving to God. They (also) have the relationship between God and his people as their central focus, rather than between the members of the community.

¹³ Heim, p. 161.

to do justice to the fact, already alluded to, that the Biblical tradition sees reconciliation as something that concerns the relationship between God and humans, and not merely between humans themselves (or between the devil and humans). Thomas teaches that our friendship with God (i.e., charity¹⁴), restored through the passion of Christ, has implications for the way we relate to other people, including our enemies; but he would resist the notion that the passion of Christ effects *nothing else* but our relations with other people. It remains unclear how in the proposal of Girard/Heim God can be said to forgive sins, that is, if that notion is to mean more than becoming victim-oriented and abandoning the ways of violence, important as these undoubtedly are.¹⁵

Secondly, aside from the lack of intelligibility, opponents of the sacrificial model also raise serious *ethical* concerns. In giving central place to, or even celebrating, the suffering and death of Christ, are we not glorifying innocent suffering, thereby perhaps encouraging victims of aggression to acquiesce in their own suffering? Mark Heim voices this concern (rather more bluntly this time) by quoting the work of Rita Nakashima Brock: 'A theology that has the heavenly Father punish his innocent Son to redeem the world looks uncomfortably to some like a charter for child abuse, with an innocent son sent to bear the wrath of a "heavenly father" to make things right for the entire extended family'.¹⁶ Aside from the fact that the alleged connection between the sacrifice of (the adult) Jesus of Nazareth and child abuse is not immediately obvious, the association of sacrifice with divine 'punishment' to appease his 'wrath' should be questioned. Still, the concern remains that notions of sacrifice may give rise to 'a mentality of sacrifice, not self-responsible saving actions', as Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel puts it.¹⁷ Especially feminist authors have pursued this line of critique. They argue that sacrifice as self-gift is simply the counter-image of a typically masculine notion of sinfulness in terms of self-assertion and pride. A theology of (self-)sacrifice fails to consider what Kierkegaard called 'the feminine variety of sinfulness' in his profound book *The Sickness unto Death*.¹⁸

¹⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 23, a. 1.

¹⁵ Heim, p. 244: 'The life that corresponds to the cross is a way of life without victimisation'. Also, on p. 304: 'The act of Jesus' "sacrifice" is meant to overturn the mechanism of victimage'. It is both revealing and ironic that Heim reproaches Anselm's theory for its (alleged) 'near-exclusive emphasis on the relations of humans with God' at the expense of our sin against other humans'. (p. 316). In adopting Girard's theory Heim's own analysis appears to be guilty of the opposite charge, i.e., it fails to show how the life and death of Christ affect and effect the relations of humans with God.

¹⁶ Heim, p. 25-26, with a reference to Rita Nakashima Brock, 'And a Little Child Will Lead Us: Christology and Child Abuse', in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, edited by Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (NY: Pilgrim, 1989), p. 42-61.

¹⁷ Quoted by Asle Eikrem, *God as Sacrificial Love. A Systematic Exploration of a Controversial Notion* (London, NY: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 54.

¹⁸ In an article published in 1960, entitled 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View', *Journal of Religion* 40/2, p. 100-12, Valerie Saiving has given an eloquent account of this

Scholars wonder whether the sacrificial model has the resources to address this kind of sinfulness and whether it may perhaps even be in danger of reinforcing it.

Thirdly, there are *theological* concerns. First, the notion that Christ died on our behalf ('for the forgiveness of sins') seems to rest on the assumption that guilt is somehow transferrable. In reality, guilt is always personal. Hence, a key assumption of the soteriology of Thomas (and Augustine before him) seems rather problematic. Moreover, one has to question critically the notion of God that classic models of sacrifice and satisfaction appear to adopt. Is there a vindictive, blood-thirsty God for whom meeting the demands of justice override mercy lurking behind models of sacrifice and making satisfaction? E. Schillebeeckx seemed to suggest so, writing: 'Many existing theories of our redemption through Jesus Christ deprive Jesus, his message and career of their subversive power, and even worse, sacralise violence to be a reality within God. God is said to call for a bloody sacrifice which stills or calms his sense of justice'.¹⁹

In what follows I hope to show that these criticisms, albeit important, do not strike at the heart of Thomas's understanding of sacrifice. On the contrary, Thomas's account may prove to be immune to some of the weaknesses modern accounts are vulnerable to. In expounding Thomas's theology of sacrifice I will also make reference to Augustine's rich analysis, to which it is deeply indebted.

THOMAS AND AUGUSTINE ON SACRIFICE

In the *Summa Theologiae* Thomas first treats of the topic of 'sacrifice' in its own right in *ST* II-II, q. 85, consisting of four articles. Before this he had given the topic scant attention.²⁰ In marked contrast to earlier works [*III Sent.* d. 18 (merit), d.19 (liberation, redemption, reconciliation) and d. 20, q. 1, a. 1–4 (restoration through satisfaction); and *ScG* III, 54–55 (satisfaction)], sacrifice acquires a dominant place only in his mature discussion of Christ's saving work (in *ST* III, q. 48, especially a. 3) in which the important discussion on salvation from Book X of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* [*The City of God*] figures largely.

kind of womanist sinfulness, such as: 'triviality, distractability, and diffusiveness; lack of an organising centre or focus; dependence on others for one's self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossip sociability, and mistrust of reason – in short, underdevelopment or negation of self'. (p. 109) I am indebted to Asle Eikrem, p. 208 for this quotation.

¹⁹ E. Schillebeeckx, *The Church: The Human Story of God* (London: SCM, 1990), p. 120.

²⁰ In his systematic works it is mentioned in passing in *III Sent.* d. 9, q. 1, a. 1, qc. 2 ad 1 and in *ScG* III, 119 [10], in each instance as part of the broader discussion of the cult of *latria*.

Augustine had argued that Christ's saving work should be understood in a sacramental sense (broadly conceived) – a theme that Thomas was to develop also in his *Compendium of Theology* I, 227–228, where he describes Christ's death as 'a sacrament of salvation'. More specifically, Augustine had stated that 'the visible sacrifice is the sacrament, the sacred sign, of the invisible sacrifice' (*sacrificium ergo visibile invisibilis sacrificii sacramentum id est sacrum signum est*).²¹ This key phrase must have struck a chord with Thomas. It does not occur in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, presumably because he had not yet come across it. But once he had, rather late in his career, it appears in *Summa Theologiae* in many different places, as we will see.

Quoting Ps 16:2 and Ps 51:18 Augustine had made the point that God does not need nor take pleasure in our sacrifices: God will not delight in holocausts as such. Rather, the sacrifice offered to God is a broken spirit; God will not despise 'a heart that is broken and humbled'. 'What God required', so Augustine writes, 'was that which these offerings signified'. Ultimately, what God desires is our gift of self, of body and soul, through myriad actions that unite us to God in holy fellowship, 'every act, that is, which is directed to that final Good which makes possible our true felicity'.²² For Augustine such an offering is not an individualist action. On the contrary, it presupposes the self-gift of Christ on the Cross, which constitutes the Church which is called to participate in Christ's sacrifice.²³ I will return later to this communal aspect.

The strong emphasis upon the symbolic nature of sacrifice does not imply that visible sacrifices are redundant. On the contrary, the very fact that visible sacrifices are symbols of invisible offerings implies that the latter need a corporeal expression.²⁴ Augustine concludes by arguing that Christ as the true mediator, both divine and human, is both the priest who makes the offering, and the oblation itself. He then makes the explicit link with the sacrifice of the Mass: 'Thus he is both the priest, himself making the offering, and the oblation. This is the reality, and he intended the daily sacrifice of the Church to be the sacramental symbol of this; for the Church, being the body of which he is the head, learns to offer itself through him. This is the true sacrifice'.²⁵ Augustine, therefore, emphasises that there is an intimate link between Christ's sacrifice and the sacrifice of the Church through the Eucharist.

²¹ *De Civ. Dei* X, 5. For a translation (which I have used), see Henry Bettenson, *St Augustine, Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

²² *De Civ. Dei*, X, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*: 'the whole redeemed community, that is to say, the congregation and fellowship of the saints, is offered to God as a universal sacrifice, through the great Priest who offered himself in his suffering for us – so that we might be the body of so great a head – under the form of a servant' (cf. Phil. 2:7).

²⁴ *De Civ.* X, 19.

²⁵ *De Civ.* X, 20.

It is instructive to examine in which contexts Thomas explicitly quotes Augustine's key phrase. It occurs first in his discussion of the nature of religion and its exterior acts in *ST II-II*, q. 81. Article 7 of question 81 asks whether we need to honour God through external, bodily acts. Thomas argues, of course, that we should. He reminds us, as Augustine had done, that we honour and revere God not for his sake, but for our own, as in doing so our mind is subjected to God. Given his positive understanding of the created, sensible world, Thomas is not tempted by a purely 'spiritual', non-material brand of religion. An objection had argued that we should not offer God things corporeal, which are meant for the relief of human needs, for it is not becoming but even irreverent, to offer such things to God. In his reply, Thomas, quoting Ps. 49:13, agrees that God does not need the external things offered to him, but he accepts them as manifestations or signs of internal and spiritual works, and he goes on to cite the Augustinian key phrase.²⁶ Question 85, then, examines in greater detail one of these external acts of religion, namely sacrifice. The four articles that constitute this question are again heavily indebted to St Augustine's treatment of sacrifice in *De Civ. Dei* Bk X, which is quoted or referred to throughout.²⁷ The key article is the second one which reduplicates Augustine's discussion from *De Civ. Dei*, Bk X:

a sacrifice is offered in order that something may be represented. Now the sacrifice that is offered outwardly represents the inward spiritual sacrifice, whereby the soul offers itself to God according to Ps 50:19, *A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit*, since, as stated above (q. 81, a. 7; q. 84, a. 2), the outward acts of religion are directed to the inward acts.

Closely following Augustine, Thomas explains that we can offer a three-fold good: the soul itself can be an offering to God by inward devotion, and prayer; our bodies can constitute a medium of sacrifice (abstinence, martyrdom), and, finally, our external goods (money) can be offered to God directly, or indirectly (when we share with our neighbour).²⁸ Thus, for Thomas, as for Augustine, this threefold gift constitutes the true sacrifice. In Thomas's discussion in q. 85 there is one final element worthy of note. He explains that the word 'sacrifice' (*sacrificium*) denotes the act whereby we render something sacred (*sacrum facit*), such as animals being slain and burnt, or bread broken, eaten and blessed. While making satisfaction is about being liberated from the debt of punishment for sin, sacrifice has a more positive thrust. Thomas's mature account of salvation is not merely about counteract-

²⁶ See also *ST II-II*, q. 85, a. 1, where he argues that because we derive our knowledge from perceiving things from the senses it is appropriate that we use sensible signs to express our reverence to God.

²⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 85, a. 1, obj. 3; a. 2; a. 2 ad 2; a. 3, obj. 1 and ad 1.

²⁸ *ST II-II*, q. 85, a. 3 ad 2.

ing the fateful consequences of the Fall but it has a more explicitly positive dimension, namely our sanctification and even deification.

ST III, q. 22, a. 2 is another passage that is indebted to Augustine's discussion of sacrifice. It deals with the theme of Christ as both priest and victim. Thomas quotes the key phrase from Augustine a third time in *ST III*, q. 48, a. 3, obj. 2, to which I will return shortly. Finally, we encounter it in the *Sed contra* of *ST III*, q. 60, a. 1, which is, significantly, the first article that explores the nature of a sacrament ('Whether a sacrament is a kind of sign?').

This brief survey of the passages where Thomas explicitly quotes Augustine's key phrase reveals that he, like Augustine before him, employed it to draw together different theological areas, such as soteriology, sacramentology, and ecclesiology. The explicit connection between sacrifice and sacrament, the richly symbolic understanding of sacrifice, and the mere fact that the notion of sacrifice is more Biblical than the Anselmian one of making satisfaction, would have exerted a strong appeal to Thomas.

Let us wrap up this section by considering how Thomas describes the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross in the main text from *ST III*, q. 48, a. 3. The question is entitled whether Christ's passion was effective as a sacrifice. Three objections are raised: first, it is argued that the sacrifices of the Old Law did not involve any offerings of human flesh. Assuming that the reality (Christ's sacrifice) should correspond to the figure (the sacrifices of the Old Law that prefigured it), the objection argues that Christ's passion cannot be called a sacrifice. In the second objection Thomas quotes our key phrase from Augustine (in which sacrifice and sacred sign or sacrament are closely linked). Invoking this connection, the objection then makes the point that Christ's passion is not a sign but it is itself signified by other things; therefore it does not seem appropriate to call it a sacrifice. Thirdly, as the word 'sacrifice' indicates, to offer a sacrifice is to do a sacred thing – but the men who killed Christ did nothing sacred, but perpetrated a horrendous crime: hence, Christ's passion was a wicked deed (*maleficium*) rather than a sacrifice (*sacrificium*).²⁹

The main response commences as follows:

Sacrifice, properly speaking, designates what is offered to God in token of the special honour due to him, in order to please him (*ad eum placandum*). Hence it is that Augustine says (*De Civ. Dei X*, 6): 'A true sacrifice is every good work done in order that we may cling to God in holy fellowship, yet referred to that consummation of happiness wherein we can be truly blessed'. But, as is added in the same place, 'Christ offered himself up for us in the passion', and this voluntary enduring of the passion was most acceptable to God, as coming from the greatest of

²⁹ *ST III*, q. 48, a. 3 obj. 1-3.

charity (*ex charitate maxima proveniens*). Therefore, it is manifest that Christ's passion was a true sacrifice.³⁰

This text calls for some comments. First, language of 'pleasing or placating God' should not be misunderstood in terms of changing a wrathful God to a God who is at peace with us. Thomas explains elsewhere that talk of 'appeasement' and 'anger' is metaphorical and refers to our way of relating to God who remains unchangeable and steadfast in his love for us. When the Bible attributes anger to God this occurs 'on account of a similitude of effect'.³¹ Anger is a passion for Thomas, and this can only be metaphorically attributed to God,³² and not properly.³³ In several places he explains that language in the Bible that suggests change in God should be interpreted as saying something about our world and how it is effected by God, rather than about God himself. In *ST I*, q. 9, a. 1 ad 3, for instance, Thomas responds to the objection that the Bible appears in places to attribute change and movement to God, such as in James 4:8 ('Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you'). Thomas answers that these things are said in Scripture of God metaphorically, and he offers a simile: as the rays of the sun are said to enter a house, or to go out, 'so God is said to approach us, or to recede from us, when we receive the influx of his goodness, or decline from him'. Hence, talk of God being appeased refers to our (renewed) relationship with him, not to a change in God.

Secondly, as is clear from the quotation from St Augustine, Thomas characterises 'sacrifice' as a way of entering into holy fellowship with God. In a beautiful text from *Ad Romanos* 12:1 ('I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercy of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God') Thomas spells out in greater detail how we ourselves can become a sacrifice, emulating the sacrifice of Christ. First having quoted again our key phrase from Augustine's *De Civ. Dei*, Bk X, he proceeds by outlining how our external goods, body, and soul should become an offering to God.³⁴ The sacrifice of external goods includes almsgiving and offerings to God; we

³⁰ *ST III*, q. 48, a.3.

³¹ *ST I*, q. 3, a. 2 ad 2: 'Anger and the like are attributed to God on account of similitude of effect. Thus, because to punish is properly the act of an angry man, God's punishment is metaphorically spoken of as his anger'.

³² *ST I*, q. 21, a. 1, ad 1. See F.J.A. De Grijns, 'Ira as a divine metaphor' in Henk Schoot (ed.), *Tibi Soli Peccavi. Thomas Aquinas on Guilt and Forgiveness* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996), p. 19-46.

³³ *ST I*, q. 19, a. 11: 'anger is never attributed to God properly (*nunquam proprie*), since in its primary meaning it includes passion'. Nor is punishment a sign that there is anger in God, as Thomas explicitly states in *ST I*, q. 19, a. 11 ad 2: 'punishment (*punitio*) is not a sign that there is anger in God; but it is called anger in him, from the fact that it is an expression of anger in ourselves'.

³⁴ *Ad Romanos* 12:1, no. 958-959 and *ST II-II*, q. 85, a. 3 ad 2.

offer our body through fasts and abstinence, acts of divine worship and good deeds, and by exposing it to suffering and death for God's sake. Finally, and most importantly, we offer our soul to God through inward devotion, prayer, and contrition, quoting Ps. 51:17 ('a sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite spirit').³⁵ In short, our entire life can become a sacrifice or offering to God, and a participation in the sacrifice of Christ.

Thirdly, in the text quoted Thomas singles out the importance of charity or love (*ex charitate maxima proveniens*). It is charity or love for God that constitutes the 'invisible sacrifice' of which Christ's sufferings are the external manifestations, or the visible sacrifice. Hence, in reply to the second objection, Thomas does not reject the Augustinian key principle it quoted, but he agrees that other sacrifices (those performed under the Old Law) prefigured Christ's sacrifice, which is itself 'a sign of some reality we ought to observe'. He then quotes 1 Peter 4:1 to illustrate that the reality we ought to observe is sanctification.³⁶

In response to the first objection, Thomas makes a number of points. First, he simply observes that under the Old Law animal flesh was being offered, which prefigures the flesh of Christ. The prefiguration does not have to anticipate perfectly the reality, which exceeds the sacrifices of the Old Testament. Another reason he gives for the appropriateness of the offering of Christ's flesh as sacrifice is the continuity it establishes between Christ's self-gift on the cross and in the sacrifice of Mass. (I will come back to the connection between sacrifice and Eucharist in the next section).

The concerns that modern scholars, including Schillebeeckx (quoted in section 1), have raised concerning the unpalatable nature of a theology of sacrifice finds a voice in the third objection: Christ's death is a crime and should not be considered a saving sacrifice. Here Thomas tersely replies that Christ's execution was, indeed, a gravely sinful act on the part of his executioners, but Christ freely chose, out of charity, to undergo the suffering inflicted upon him. This response can only be fully appreciated against Thomas's theology of providence, in which divine causality and creaturely action are not in competition with one another: God's providence can attain its (good) ends through contingent (and at times sinful) creaturely (incl. human) acts. Thomas can, therefore, say that Christ's death was both a horrendously sinful act and yet had saving power and was part of divine providence. The one does not exclude the other.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ 1 Peter 4:1: 'Christ therefore having suffered in the flesh, be you also armed with the same thought, for he that has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sins, that now he may live the rest of his time in the flesh not after the desires of men but according to the will of God'.

THOMAS ON THE EUCHARIST AS SACRIFICE

As suggested earlier, Thomas's treatise on the Eucharist also draws heavily on Augustine: according to both theologians, the Eucharist is a sacrifice that re-enacts the sacrifice of Christ's passion; it occurs for our sake, not God's; and it constitutes the Church as Christ's Body, i.e., as members united in faith, hope, and charity. Before I examine these elements in some more detail. I will say a few words about how Thomas characterises sacraments in general and how he sees the role of Christ's passion in their efficacy.

It is well-known that Thomas understands a sacrament both in terms of a sign (which, in a general sense, is its primary meaning³⁷—see q. 60), and a cause of grace (in q. 62). This close link between signification and causality (more specifically, the causing of grace) is apparent in the preliminary definition he gives of sacraments in the first question on sacraments: 'that which is a sign of a sacred reality inasmuch as it has the property of sanctifying us' (*signum rei sacrae in quantum est sanctificans homines*).³⁸ It allows him to adopt the traditional scholastic formula, namely that sacraments 'effect what they signify'.³⁹

How do sacraments effect our salvation? Thomas considers the sacraments an extension of the Incarnation. If Christ's humanity is the instrument of his divinity, the sacraments are further material instruments of grace.⁴⁰ This is more than a mere analogy, for Christ is the primary cause of our sanctification that occurs through the sacraments. Thus, sacramental causality is of an instrumental kind only: it is primarily Christ's passion itself that sanctifies us. More specifically, it operates from Christ's divinity through his humanity, as the flow of blood and water from the side of the crucified Christ symbolises.⁴¹ Thus, the sanctifying power of the sacraments is always related to the passion of Christ, which is the primary cause of our sanctification. Given this connection with the God-man, the sacraments are on the crossroads

³⁷ This is clear from *ST* III, q. 60, a. 1, ad 1. Here Thomas deals with the objection that a sacrament is not a kind of sign, for it appears to be primarily concerned with causing something, rather than signifying something. In his reply he explains that the causality of a sacrament is formal or final, rather than efficient, and he will continue to argue for an understanding of sacraments as signs that cause our sanctification (e.g., *ST* III, q. 60, a. 6; q. 61, a. 1; q. 62, a. 1). This illustrates how questionable L.M. Chauvet's interpretation of Thomas is in his book *Symbol and Sacrament. Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (USA: Pueblo Books, 1994). For a more in-depth critique, see Liam Walsh, 'Sacraments' in Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (eds.) *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 326-64.

³⁸ *ST* III, q. 60, a. 2.

³⁹ *ST* III, q. 62, a. 1 ad 1.

⁴⁰ *ST* III, q. 64, a. 3.

⁴¹ *ST* III, q. 62, a. 5.

of time, extending to past, present, and future. They commemorate the passion (past), presently manifest grace, and anticipate our future glory made possible by Christ's saving work.⁴²

The Eucharist is, however, distinct from other sacraments insofar as it contains Christ himself in reality.⁴³ The elements of the Eucharist, bread and wine, are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, again illustrating the intimate connection between Christ's passion and the Eucharist:⁴⁴ 'The Eucharist is the perfect sacrament of our Lord's Passion, because it contains Christ himself who endured it'⁴⁵ (*continet in se Christum passum*).⁴⁶ It is, therefore, the summit (*consummatio*) of the spiritual life; all other sacraments are ordered toward it.⁴⁷ It is also an eminently universal sacrament. Whereas other sacraments confer grace and benefits upon those who perform the rites or those who receive them, here the effect is universal (*universalis*), affecting 'not just the priest, but also those for whom he prays, as well as the entire Church, of the living and the dead. The reason for this is that it contains the universal cause of all the sacraments, Christ' (*causa universalis omnium sacramentorum, scilicet Christus*).⁴⁸

The Eucharist is not only 'the sacrament of the passion of Christ' but also 'the sacrament of charity' (*sacramentum caritatis*), bringing us to spiritual perfection because it is intimately united to Christ who suffered for us.⁴⁹ It both symbolises and brings about (*figurativum et effectivum*) charity.⁵⁰ As pointed out earlier, Thomas understands charity in terms of friendship for God, and he does so by drawing on key aspects of Aristotle's notion of friendship. According to Aristotle, friends like to dwell in each other's company. Now, it fits in perfectly with the charity of Christ to take on a real body and dwell with us in a sacramental way, for it is a law of friendship that friends should live together.⁵¹

Charity constitutes the Church as an organic body: 'charity unites not only one person to another with the bond of spiritual love but also the whole Church in unity of spirit'.⁵² Through partaking in the Eucharist, we become incorporated into the Body of Christ and become Christ-like. Thomas quotes with approval the famous passage from *Confessions* VII, 10, in which Augustine heard 'so to speak'

⁴² *ST* III, q. 60, a. 3.

⁴³ *ST* III, q. 73, a. 1 ad 3.

⁴⁴ *ST* III, q. 74, a. 1.

⁴⁵ *ST* III, q. 73, a. 6.

⁴⁶ *On John*, 6: 52, no. 962-963.

⁴⁷ *ST* III, q. 63, a. 6; q. 73, a. 3.

⁴⁸ *On John*, 6:52, no. 964.

⁴⁹ *ST* III, q. 73, a. 6 and q. 75, a. 1.

⁵⁰ *ST* III, q. 78, a. 3 ad 6.

⁵¹ *ST* III, q. 75, a. 1, with a reference to Aristotle's *Nic. Eth.*, IX, 12 (1171b32).

⁵² *ST* II-II, q. 39, a. 1.

(*quasi audivit*, as Thomas qualifies!) Christ addressing him, saying: ‘you will not change me into yourself as would the food of your flesh; but you will be changed into me’. Through participation in the Eucharist we are changed into Christ.⁵³ This should not be understood in individualist terms, as if it concerned only our individual salvation. On the contrary, through the Eucharist, the entire Church is constituted as a living Body, a community animated by charity (and, on earth, faith and hope). Hence, in his *Commentary on Psalms* 21, no 1, and elsewhere, Thomas writes how Christ and the Church form one mystical body. Christ transforms himself (*transformat se*) in the Church and the Church in Christ.⁵⁴ Perhaps his most beautiful account can be found in his *Commentary on John* 6:55. Here Thomas describes how through eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ we share in the Holy Spirit, ‘through whom we are united to Christ by a union of faith and love, and through him we become members of the Church.’⁵⁵ Thus, the Eucharistic food is ‘capable of making us divine and inebriated with divinity’.⁵⁶

The intimate link between the Body of Christ in the Eucharist and the Church as community was also central to the theology of St Augustine, allowing him to say in a highly powerful and suggestive manner: ‘Receive what you are!’⁵⁷ To the best of my knowledge, Thomas did not know this sermon. But for Thomas, too, there is an intimate connection between the Eucharistic Bread or Body of Christ and the Church as the mystical Body of Christ. Through partaking in a worthy manner of the sacrament of the Eucharist an intimate union or even assimilation is established between the faithful and Christ.

In short, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist has important implications, both as sacrament and sacrifice. As a sacrament, its effect is in the recipient in a most intimate manner; but as a sacrifice its effect is both in the one who offers it and in us for whom it is offered. As a sacrament, it was meant for ‘the spiritual nourishment through union with Christ and his members, as food becomes one with the person fed’.⁵⁸ As a sacrament, therefore, its purpose is not primarily the

⁵³ *ST* III, q. 73, a. 3 ad 2.

⁵⁴ See also *Ad Romanos* 12:5: ‘this mystical body has a spiritual unity through which we are united to one another and to God by faith and love: *there is one body and one spirit* (Eph. 4:4). And because the spirit of unity flows into us from Christ – *anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him* – (Rom. 8:9) he adds *in Christ*, who unites us to one another and to God by his Spirit whom he gives us’. (Lect. 2, no. 974).

⁵⁵ *On John*, 6: 55-56, no. 973.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 972.

⁵⁷ This is from Augustine’s *Sermon* 272, preached before newly baptised Christians who were to receive the Eucharistic Bread for the first time: in receiving the Body of Christ they are incorporated into it.

⁵⁸ *ST* III, q. 79, a. 5.

satisfaction of sin but spiritual nourishment. Nonetheless, because the union with Christ and his members constituted by the Eucharist takes effect through charity, ‘from the fervour of which comes forgiveness’ to some degree we obtain remission of sin. As a sacrifice (because it makes present the passion of Christ), it has the power of making satisfaction for those who offer it, and for those for whom it is offered, as long as they are united with Christ through faith and charity.⁵⁹

Thomas reminds us of the rich symbolism that the tradition had bequeathed to him to expound this intimate connection between the sacrifice of the Christ and the Church as constituted by the Eucharist. During his life Christ compared himself to a grain of wheat, as well as to a vine. The two species of wine and bread symbolise the Blood and Body of Christ.⁶⁰ Again, the Church, so Thomas reminds us, is the gathering together of all the different baptised faithful the way bread is made of different grains of wheat and wine from diverse grapes.⁶¹ Similarly, water and wine must be mixed when offering the Eucharist because this best represents Christ’s passion, as water and blood flowed from his side. Moreover, this symbolises our very incorporation into Christ,⁶² the union of the Christian people (symbolised by water) with Christ (wine).⁶³

This brief discussion will have made clear that Thomas establishes a close link between the passion of Christ, the Church as the mystical Body of Christ, and charity. The saving power of the eucharistic Body and Blood of Christ is an extension of the salvific power of the humanity of Christ crucified, which is, itself, an instrument of Christ’s divinity. In this way, all acts of Christ, from his birth, life, death and resurrection, as well as his saving presence in the sacrifice of Mass that commemorates his passion, have a sacramental value into which we are drawn. Through Christ’s death we die to sin, and through his resurrection we live for God.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Let us now return to the criticism levelled earlier. First, there is the issue of *intelligibility*. In my view, we should not be tempted to re-interpret the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary and the way it continues to be re-enacted through the Eucharist in anthropological-cultic terms to make

⁵⁹ *ST III*, q. 79, a. 5 and 7 corp. and ad 2.

⁶⁰ *ST III*, q. 74, a. 1.

⁶¹ *ST III*, q. 74, a. 1.

⁶² *ST III*, q. 74, a. 8, ad 2.

⁶³ *ST III*, q. 74, a. 6.

⁶⁴ *Ad Romanos* 6:11, no. 491.

it more ‘intelligible’ to contemporary audiences. Thomas (and Augustine, whom he follows faithfully on this score) argues that visible sacrifices symbolise and manifest the invisible gift of self. Perhaps we can characterise this as a theological-existentialist interpretation which is, I suspect, more intelligible and relevant for contemporary people than a cultic-anthropological one. This rich theology of the symbolic nature of sacrifice and sacrament, together with the theological acknowledgement of the immutable nature of God, rules out all talk of appeasement of divine anger in the cultic sense. I have dealt earlier with the criticism that a theology of sacrifice implies a problematic portrayal of God (as vindictive, subject to wrath, changeable, and so forth). I argued that Thomas excludes anger from God (and other passions), and constantly affirms his immutability. I also briefly alluded to Thomas’s rich notion of providence, which allows him to characterise Christ’s death a horrendous crime and yet an instrument of salvation – which strikes me as a more nuanced view than that of some modern commentators who want to disparage it as *merely* a horrendous, opaque crime.

The symbolism at the heart of Thomas’s theology of sacrifice implies that the entire existence of the Christian and its manifold acts of self-giving for the sake of God can be interpreted as a participation in the self-giving of Christ. In contrast to contemporary appropriations of Girard’s theory, however, the soteriology of Thomas and Augustine does not involve a reductionism of theological categories (such as sacrifice, forgiveness,...) to merely anthropological or socio-cultic ones. Forgiveness, for instance, denotes the restoration of the relationship between us and God through our transformation in faith, hope and love in response to the saving work of Christ (in his passion and in the sacramental economy) and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. This may – and should – involve the inauguration of a new kind of human community – but it cannot be reduced to it.

One of the advantages of a sophisticated theology of sacrifice (such as Thomas’s or Augustine’s) is its potential to provide a practical answer to how Christians should relate to afflictions they cannot remedy, namely, by seeing them as a participation in, and assimilation to, Christ and his suffering.⁶⁵ This does not constitute a legitimisation of suffering as such: the symbolical dimension of sacrifice (i.e., what matters is the invisible rather than the actual visible sacrifice) excludes a glorification of suffering in its own right. It does offer, however, an invitation toward interpreting and relating to our afflictions in the light of the saving work of Christ, rather than to experience it as nothing but a crushing absurdity. It is rather unclear to me how modern theologians who reject

⁶⁵ On this topic, see my short article ‘The Christian Response to Suffering and the Significance of the Model of the Church as Body of Christ’, in *Angelicum* 82 (2005): 595-609.

a theology of sacrifice and satisfaction can offer similar resources of hope and consolation to people faced with apparently endless, desperate suffering. Their theology arguably renders the mystery of suffering and death not just opaque but perhaps even totally meaningless, with rather problematic pastoral consequences.

This has brought us to some of the *ethical* concerns that were raised. Aside from the claim that a theology of sacrifice glorifies suffering (hence legitimising oppression), opponents also argued that sacrifice as self-gift is the sinful feminine counter-image of 'typically' male self-assertion and pride. I can only make some brief comments. First, it should be noted that this characterisation in gender stereotypes is itself perhaps somewhat dubious, even when applied to the medieval era; there is, after all, a rich medieval ideal of (masculine) self-sacrifice in chivalric literature. Secondly, and more fundamentally, there are many instances in which sacrifice is deeply affirmative, heroic, and even life-giving, if not for the person herself, at least for others. Some of our richest and most fulfilling moments in life (and, I suspect, in death) occur when we freely surrender ourselves to a higher ideal or worthy cause. Hence, I would question the basic validity of the objection itself. Sacrifice of self for a worthy cause, such as that of the eight Salvadoran Martyrs resisting exploitation of the poor, is neither degrading nor a legitimisation of oppression – quite the contrary.

Thirdly, in more general terms, I suspect the criticism of unhealthy self-abnegation (and hostility to life) may apply to those theologians who construe love in purely kenotic terms – but that reading is decidedly not Thomas's.⁶⁶ Love as a passion has a metaphysical foundation whereby all things have an appetite toward fulfilment and union with goodness. One of the characteristics of love as passion, namely, ecstasy, refers to a self-transcendence that does not lead to loss of self but fulfilment in that which bestows fulfilment upon us. Charity, as friendship with God, perfects this natural passion. Also, significantly, for Thomas love of others is based on love of self because unity (with oneself) is the principle of union (with others).⁶⁷ Hence, Thomas would have little sympathy for pathological accounts of love in terms of utter self-abnegation. True, Thomas considers a radical gift of self even unto death the greatest sign of love (*signum maximae dilectionis*), in accordance with John 15:13 ('Greater love

⁶⁶ I am thinking of kenotic accounts of love, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar's, who goes as far as giving it a Trinitarian foundation. For a penetrating critique of this approach, see Alyssa Pickstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁶⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 25, a. 4. On this, see Anthony Flood, *The Metaphysical Foundation of Love. Thomas Aquinas on Participation, Unity, and Union* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018).

than this no-one has, that he lay down one's life for his friends'). For Thomas, however, this self-abnegation does *not* constitute love's *essence*. Love is not a self-annihilating force but an ecstatic one, drawing us out of ourselves, enabling us to become other-oriented.⁶⁸ Charity or Christian love perfects this natural love that characterises all things. Thus, while Thomas has a rich and vibrant theology of sacrifice and suffering, he does not consider any of the 'feminine' varieties of sinfulness that Valerie Saiving lists⁶⁹ any less problematic than she does.

In relation to the *theological* criticisms raised there is no need to return to the understanding of God (and his alleged wrath). More interesting is the claim that guilt is always personal and not transferrable. Therefore, Christ's death on our behalf becomes unintelligible, if not futile. In response, I would like to interrogate critically the phrase 'transferral of guilt'. It has a distinct forensic, extraneous ring to it. In the Introduction I mentioned in passing that Thomas's notion of guilt is different from the Lutheran one. For Thomas, guilt is deeply intrinsic – it refers to our inherent state of sinfulness. Thus, I suspect Thomas would agree that 'guilt' is not transferrable. But that does not imply that others – not to mention Christ himself – cannot engage in practices of penance (through prayer, acts of sacrifice,...) on my behalf, for the sake of *my* guilt.

Hence, we find Thomas saying in a number of places that the guilty should in principle be personally punished for their sins. But in relation to penance he denies this personal link.⁷⁰ Indeed, he invariably states that, if two are united in charity, one can make satisfaction for the other. This view may have become alien to us – but if so, this may simply be a reflection of our more individualist age. As explained earlier, according to Thomas, the Church, as the Body of Christ, is a living community, animated by charity, in which the actions of one member – for better or for worse – effect the well-being of the entire Body. As an instance of friendship charity makes us consider the good of our friend(s) as if it were our own. This vision of the Church as the living Body of Christ renders intelligible how the sacrifice of Christ, the head of the Church, can have saving meaning for us, and how we, in Christ, can do penance for other members of Christ, if we are united in charity with them, and they with us. In short, the theology of sacrifice and its corporate vision through participation in the Body of Christ entail a critique of more individualist notions as to how we should relate to

⁶⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 26-28.

⁶⁹ See footnote 16.

⁷⁰ *ScG* III, 158; *ST* I-II, q. 87, a. 7-8. This observation, incidentally, further strengthens the point I made at the beginning of this paper, namely, that penal readings of Thomas's soteriology are problematic.

others and our shared fallenness, thus implicitly challenging the divisions and exclusions caused by ‘virtue-signalling’ in our contemporary public sphere.

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