



### **Meditation Before Studying Theology**

When pressed by his secretary to explain why, as he lay ill and dying, he had ceased to work on the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas said: "All that I have written seems like straw compared to what has now been revealed to me."

In his vision, he had heard the Lord say, "Thomas, you have written well of me: what shall be your reward?" and his reply was, "No reward but yourself, Lord."

### **Prayer Before Studying Theology:**

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.

Body of Christ, save me.

Blood of Christ, inebriate me.

Water from the side of Christ, wash me.

Passion of Christ, strengthen me.

O good Jesus, hear me.

Hide me within your wounds  
and never allow me to be separated from you.

From the wicked enemy defend me.

In the hour of death call me,  
and bid me come to you,  
so that with your saints I may praise you  
for ever and ever. Amen.

--*Anima Christi* (fourteenth century)

### **Week #14b: Thomas Aquinas on Christ's Atonement**

#### **Christ as Prophet, Priest and King**

- **A Traditional Account of Christ's Threefold Office (*Munus triplex*: Prophet, Priest and King) as the Basis for Discussing the Atonement**

The threefold office as a standard catechetical (teaching) device since at least the time of Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century A.D.

Following Aquinas, this became a common way of explaining Christ's person and work in the Protestant Reformation (see e.g. John Calvin's *Institutes*)

As Word of God, Christ is **Prophet** and *reveals God and the divine command for holiness*

### The Atonement as Connected with Christ's Role as **King**

The kingly office in the OT was intended to

- establish justice and
- preserve the order of justice among the people.

Christ, by the infinite merit of his suffering, is able to *reestablish the order of justice for all who are brought under his lordship by grace.*

### The Atonement as Connected with Christ's Fulfillment of the Law and Self-Offering as **Priest**

(1) In his life and death, Jesus demonstrated complete commitment to the will of God, *fulfilling the requirements of the Law by his obedience.*

(2) Jesus' perfect love (charity) in *offering himself* to save sinners means also that *the precepts of the Law find their consummation (highest fulfillment and completion) in his person*, inaugurating the new law of grace (which involves love toward God and neighbor as a grateful response to that prior love of God which has brought about our salvation).

### **Developing Anselm's Account of the Atonement within an Augustinian Framework**

#### The Atonement as Connected with Christ's **Priestly Mediation**

- When *sin violates the order of justice* and shows contempt for God (breaching the order of love), human beings become alienated from God and subject to divine wrath.
- As such, fallen creatures carry within themselves a *unpaid debt to God* which shows itself in the weak and disordered character of our wills (so that we want and choose things contrary to God's law) so that they lose their noble character and stability of purpose and become liable to death.
- Since our choices and actions continually lead us away from God, *we must look for our redemption to one who does not owe this debt and is not burdened by the liabilities that attach to it.*
  - There is no more fitting way to heal us of our sins than for God to become incarnate, so that as a human representative of all humanity he might offer satisfaction for the human race and, as God incarnate, might restore our fallen nature.
  - By virtue of his birth from a virgin, Jesus remained free from the taint of original sin and, by his perfect obedience, committed no actual sin.
  - Jesus' offering of this spotless life is something that he is not required to do and yet, because it is the life of the Son of God, is of infinite worth to God.
    - Jesus is thus able to pay a penalty for the sins of others to whom they are united in love (i.e. in the will).
    - The divine-human nature in Christ is also relevant in that the human nature participates in the action of the divine nature and the divine nature is able to make use of the action of the human nature, so that each acts in communion with the other. (This apparently

allows Christ's action to be applied to and benefit those who are physically separate from himself.)

Aquinas then introduces the concept of **satisfaction** (=paying of compensation by way of recompense for a past wrong [i.e. debt of honor] that had disturbed the harmonious ordered working of relationships) that Anselm had developed:

- "He properly satisfies for an offense who offers something which the offended one loves equally, or even more than he detested the offense."

The offering of satisfaction by His Son was most acceptable to God as outweighing the former offence and removing from humans the obstacles in them to communion with him, restoring a harmony and will of love between them and God (which wrong action had previously disrupted).

- The means appropriate to achieve such satisfaction (although God could have used another means) is **death**, since humanity suffers under the curse of original sin, whose end is death (a loss of one's own life).
  - In order to restore human souls to justice, a perfectly just individual would have to undergo death as the just penalty for sin, *making it possible for all who were included in this to be restored to the order of justice and (by Christ's charity) to the order of love.*

#### **Beyond a Juridical Account of the Atonement:**

- **Love (Charity), Shown by the Cross and Subsequently Begotten in Us by Grace, as the Basis for Atonement/the Forgiveness of Sins**

(1) Strictly speaking, *God can forgive sins even without satisfaction:*

- "Simply and absolutely speaking, God could have freed us [from the effects of sin] otherwise than by Christ's passion, for nothing is impossible with God" (ST 3a, 46,2).

Aquinas thus abandons the *necessity* of the atonement:

- "If God had wanted to free people from sin without any satisfaction at all, he would not have been acting against justice."
- The reason: "God has no one above him, for he himself is the supreme and common good of the entire universe. If then he forgives sin, which is a crime in that it is committed against him, he violates no one's rights. People who waive satisfaction and forgive an offence done to themselves act mercifully, not unjustly" (ST 3a, 46,2-3).

(2) God nonetheless chose to make satisfaction and to do so in the particular way because it clearly expressed his righteousness and mercy (ST 3a, 46,1-3).

- Thus preserves *the fittingness* of the atonement, while clearly separating it from *necessity*.
  - "It was more fitting that we should be delivered by Christ's passion than simply by God's good will" (ST 3a, 46,3)

(3) Our humanity is united to God by the *Incarnation*:

- "From the moment of his conception, Christ merited eternal salvation for us" (ST 3a, 48,1)

- The act that reunites fallen humanity to God and makes possible our redemption is thus the Incarnation, not the Cross.
- This work of redemption
  - involves a restoration effected through a *revelation of the love* and virtues [humility, obedience to the divine standard] of the injured party [who initiates the restorative relationship], which
  - *produces in us a responsive faith and love for God by which we desire to be restored to relationship with God and we are so restored and our wills are healed and restored into conformity with the divine will*, so that we will the humility and obedience which is the opposite of pride—*thus going beyond purely retributive/punitive conceptions of atonement by drawing rightly ordered love and will back to the one against whom the offense was made* (restoration as intrinsically important for this reason.)
- It is this supreme charity (the unlimited humbling of himself and ultimate gift of himself extended to save enemies) that Christ demonstrates which unites human beings to himself and atones for the infinitely great offense against the divine majesty and also merits Christ's resurrection, the glorification of his body and the perfecting of his soul, benefits that he merits not only for himself but for all who, from the time of the resurrection onwards, are members of his body and under his headship. (As our heavenly high priest he is therefore able to mediate between ourselves and God, effecting our reconciliation to God, and, as the God-Man, he is able to unite us to God in such a way that we can be indwelt by God.)

Christ's resurrection is effected by his divinity, which is sufficient to raise both body and soul and becomes the model and efficient cause of our own resurrection. It also

- shows forth the beginning of the age of grace (the new possibility of God properly indwelling and glorifying the human person in a way similar to that in which he had indwelt and revealed His glory in the Temple under the Old Covenant) and
- looks forward to the final bestowal of the good things (divine benefits) which God has promised to give us in Christ, so that we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).

Christ's ascension is similarly the cause of our ascension, he being our head and we being united to him as his members, so that our minds are raised up through him to share in the life of the Holy Trinity through faith, hope and love.

- *Again the divine activity in Christ is the form and exemplar of the divine activity within us that saves and sanctifies us, so that what Christ possesses is passed on to his members and affects them.*
  - *In Christ, humanity is loved and accepted by God and God's love for us produces goodness in us*, i.e. the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love. This "gift of grace surpasses every capacity of created nature, since it is nothing other than a certain participation in the divine nature, which surpasses every other nature" [ST Ia2ae, 112,1]).

## Some Questions About This Account

(1) Does this make everything, or at least the possibility of our regeneration, depend upon the fact of the *Incarnation* rather than upon any of the discrete actual details of Jesus' life (or death)?

- Aquinas' Response: "Christ merited eternal salvation for us from the moment of his conception," yet
  - the need to remove obstacles which prevented us from enjoying the results of his previously acquired merits led him to suffer for us so as to make satisfaction.
  - Once satisfaction is made, then it becomes possible for us, united to him, to actually enjoy these benefits he has won for us.

(2) Is the doctrine of *justification by faith* adequate?

- Aquinas' Response:
  - Aquinas considers faith itself as meritorious (a work and a virtue; see P. II.2. qu. 2, art. 9), though men only have a *meritum de congruo* not *ex condigno* (see P. II, q. 114, art. 4)
    - Since, for Aquinas, our assurance that we are saved (unless we are privileged to receive a direct revelation from God concerning this) can only be a conjectural inference (*conjecturaliter per aliqua signa*)—we can never be sure whether we are in a state of grace or not. Indeed, if one examines himself candidly, he will admit that he does not know with certainty and that his asking himself the question clearly shows his own ignorance and doubts concerning the matter. Luther, in his commentary on Gal. 4:6, rejects this as a false and dangerous doctrine.
  - *Justification* is not a change on God's part toward us, but rather *a change on our part when we are touched by God's grace in Christ and turn away from sin and return to God and good works* (so that we may cooperate in securing our justification) the justice of Christ dealing at once with both the debt of past sin and the problem of future sin.
    - This comes out of the medieval concept of penance in which *contrition for past sin must be joined with a desire and striving by means of the will for amendment of life*, so that sin is contrary to one's will and is opposed by the motion of one's will, thus strengthening the will in its resolution to repentance and making it so that one has more than a superficial, short-term remorse.
    - *Does this confuse justification* (as concerned with God's forgiveness of sin) *with sanctification* ("God moving us toward the good"=inner renewal and a fundamental change within one's nature)?