

Heather M. Erb

Great Books Academy
USA

DIVINE POWER AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IN AQUINAS

Portrayals of the spiritual life often suffer from the effects of the rift between ascetic and moral theology, on the one hand, and mystical theology, on the other. Within and at the margins of belief, the pendulum swings between sentimental devotionism, ecumenical experientialism, and diluted psychological versions of “soul-care,” ignoring the metaphysical principles which explain the nature of spiritual progress. Neither the problem nor its’ solution are new. Writing in the Dominican review, *La Vie Spirituelle* in 1921, Pope Benedict XV lamented that,

In our day, many neglect the supernatural life, and cultivate in its place a vague and inconsistent sentimentalism . . . The attention of souls must be drawn to the conditions required for the progress of the grace of the virtues and Gifts of the Holy Ghost, of which the full development is found in the Mystical Life.

Today, the spiritual dimensions of the notion of divine power are often discarded in pastoral theology and are avoided in all but charismatic circles, which distort power for experientialist ends. In contrast to modern kenotic (or divine “self-emptying”) soteriology, a proper account of divine power is needed to ground ideas such as the progress of charity, the progressive influence of the Gifts of the Spirit on the virtues, the soul’s conformity to its cause in holiness, the nature of the

mystical body of Christ, and the paradoxical path to glory through weakness chosen by Christ.

How St. Thomas develops the relation between divine power and the spiritual life is the topic of this paper, which contains three sections. First, the kenotic theory of divine action proposed by John Polkinghorne will be noted and compared with Aquinas's view of divine goodness and power. I argue that Polkinghorne's view of divine love results in a misconstrual and rejection of divine power, and that this problem is avoided by the metaphysics of divine goodness found in Aquinas. Second, I argue that the themes of divine agency, charity, and creaturely dependence highlight points about divine power that enervate Aquinas' spiritual doctrine, and provide key entry points to it by way of a Platonic emphasis on transcendence. Third, I explore the relation of divine power to the topics of the spiritual counsels, and the Pauline doctrines of the Church as the body of Christ, and of power through weakness. In these themes, Aquinas uses Aristotelian maxims and motifs of unity and growth in his theory of spiritual progress.

Kenotic Divine Action vs. Causality of Divine Goodness in Aquinas

Kenotic theology stands between classical and process theology. Like classical theologies, it accepts the distinction between primary and instrumental levels of causality, but like process thought, it sees a rupture between divine omnipotence and divine love. Kenotic theology begins with St. Paul's famous hymn to Christ in *Philippians*, which speaks of Christ's self-emptying into servant-hood and the Passion:

He was in the form of God; yet he laid no claim to equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself, and was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross! Therefore God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names. (*Phil.* 2.6–9)

The divine kenosis envisioned by Polkinghorne and others such as the Christian/Buddhist hybrid Masao Abe, interprets Christ's self-emptying according to the Arian error, whereby the Son "becomes" the Logos by submitting in humility to the conditions of the Father's will, in becoming flesh. This divine kenosis is proposed as an alternative to the classical image of divine power as transcendent and self-sufficient, seen as inadequate to solve two problems.

First, there is the problem of divine love. Reminiscent of Whitehead's process God, "a fellow-sufferer who understands," kenotic theology is said to balance the immanence of divine love and divine power. Polkinghorne states that,

Love without power would correspond to a God who is compassionate but impotent spectator of the history of the world. Power without love would correspond to a God who was the Cosmic Tyrant, holding the whole of history in an unrelenting grasp.¹

Classical theology's picture of God, he maintains,

is a scheme articulated by Aquinas . . . [and] its picture of the divine nature . . . is remote and insulated from creation . . . [and] puts into question the fundamental Christian conviction that "God is love" (*1 John* 4.8).²

Second, there is the perceived problem of the relation of science and theology, and of a mysterious "causal joint" between primary and secondary causality. Kenotic theology is said to accommodate an evolutionary cosmos which undergoes "continuous creation,"³ achieving this through a univocal view of causality which denies the "two languages" of primary and secondary causality. The vertical primary causality operating in metaphysics which attributes the hidden power of

¹ John Polkinghorne, "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. J. Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 91.

² *Ibid.*, 92.

³ See quote in Craig A. Boyd, Aaron D. Cobb, "The Causality Distinction, Kenosis, and a Middle Way: Aquinas and Polkinghorne on Divine Action," *Theology and Science* 7 (2009): 394.

creation and conservation to God is seen to compete with the horizontal secondary causality of physical objects, observable by science.⁴ The dual scheme is revised to preserve two non-negotiables. First, God's immanent activity and the Creator's kenotic love, which "includes allowing divine special providence to act as a cause among causes."⁵ He introduces the idea of *creatio continua*, or an immanent God affected by and added to by the fruitful becoming or play of creatures in a four-fold kenosis of divine omnipotence, eternity, omniscience, and causal status.⁶ Second, kenosis is said to absolve God of the concurrent causality of evil by deferring responsibility to man's freedom for moral evil, and to the accidents of evolution for natural evils.

There are contradictions and misinterpretations of classical theology here. First, kenotic theology rests on a misconception of the habit or mode of possession of divinity by Christ. Christ is found in human form, says Aquinas, in that he "put on humanity as a habit."⁷ This is not the sort of habit by which both the subject and habit are changed, as in taking in food; rather, it resembles wearing a cloak, whereby the possessor (his divinity) remains changed. Aquinas says:

by this likeness the human nature in Christ is called a habit or "something had;" because it comes to the divine person without changing it, but the [human] nature itself was changed for the better, because it was filled with grace and truth.⁸

For Aquinas, Christ's self-emptying *is* His assuming a human nature, not a departure from the divinity of the Logos. Christ's abandonment in the Passion, for Aquinas, refers to the fact that God abandoned

⁴ I use the terms "vertical" and "horizontal" causality. Cf. Polkinghorne, "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action," 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶ The fourfold kenosis is detailed in Boyd, Cobb, "The Causality Distinction, Kenosis, and a Middle Way," 396ff. See Polkinghorne, "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action," 94ff.

⁷ *In 2 Phil.* 1.2 #61.

⁸ *Ibid.*

him “inasmuch as he . . . withdrew His protection, but maintained the union.”⁹

Second, in failing to give a proper account of divine agency, kenotic theology cannot explain the power of the glorified humanity of Christ, which acts as an instrumental cause in concert with His divinity, Passion and death, to effect our salvation. Polkinghorne secures God’s ‘passivity’ and ‘immanence’ at the expense of His divine power. The divine self-limitation, that is the Incarnation and Passion, is not pure passivity but a veiled benevolent omnipotence, in that God chooses not to overwhelm temporal creatures with His abundance, and instead to enter time and its conditions.

At root, kenotic theology (whether that of Polkinghorne or Masao Abe’s Buddhist-Christian hybrid variety) exchanges a classical view of divine power for a process view of divine goodness that misses the interdependence of final and efficient causes, and the Aristotelian and Dionysian aspects of divine goodness combined by Aquinas. In the Platonic tradition, Dionysius defines goodness in terms of generosity, while Aristotle defined it as the term of desire. Aquinas harmonized the efficient and final cause through deepening the Aristotelian notion of act so as to ground all actuality in the primary perfection of being.¹⁰ God’s creative causality combines love, the diffusive character of goodness for His own end, and power, the plenary actuality of being.¹¹

⁹ *ST IIIa* 50.2 ad 1. God exposed him to his persecutors. On the unprotected nature of Christ’s modern followers who participate in his Passion, see Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, trans. Joseph Theman and Herbert Burke (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1956). There, he argues that the rapid de-Christianization of the West will accelerate the new paganism, and “the world to come will be filled with animosity and danger” (128), removing love from the “face of the public world,” but the true faithful will remain God-centered, “even though placeless and unprotected” (132). On the “abandonment” of Christ, see “Appendix 1,” in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 54 (3a 46–52), Latin text and English translation by Blackfriars, ed. Richard T. A. Murphy (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1965), 181–188.

¹⁰ See Fran O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 87.

¹¹ *ST I* 9.1. Cf. O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 87.

We can argue further, that the kenotic God is not lovable since only pure actuality is worthy of perfect desire—the merely potential can't be the term of desire or be perfective of another. And, making causality univocal and a matter of degree defers the problem of the “two languages” of physics and metaphysics and unmasks an anthropomorphic inspiration. Detached from the finality of divine goodness, power becomes an arbitrary efficiency set against divine wisdom, and then magnified to the degree of a “distant” God. The classical concept of divine love, namely, the imparting of all perfections to things (*CG I* 29.270) is lost in favor of a common form by which God is likened *to us*. But for Aquinas, creatures are likened *to God* as to the first and universal principle of all being and this occurs in an analogous way (*ST I* 4.3). The caused is similar to the cause, not vice-versa—since similarity denotes the image's dependence on the exemplar.¹²

One reason the kenotic notion of divine power suppresses finality is its collapsing of metaphysical into moral goodness, symptomatic of the rejection of a distinct line of metaphysical causes. Instead of linking power, as Aquinas does, to perfection and actuality, it is hitched to the presumed moral goodness of a compassionate, suffering God. But God is not morally good for Aquinas in the sense that Swinburne and others have thought, by being decent and virtuous through fulfilling obligations to creatures. He contains creaturely perfections super-eminently, and as perfectly actual, is His *own* end.¹³ He is good as the source of all being in a secondary way, and can be said to be just or truthful analogously, in relation to His wisdom.

Unlike Polkinghorne, who makes the moral goodness of God prior to His metaphysical goodness, Aquinas sees divine goodness as the perfection of being, and creation a gratuitous act of love ordered towards divine goodness itself. In effect, kenotic theology invents a

¹² *De Ver.* 4.4 ad 2; *CG I* 29; *De Pot.* 7.7; *ST I* 4.3 ad 4.

¹³ *ST I* 6–7. Brian Davies (*The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1992], 84) makes this clear.

passive God because it neglects the power of the final cause. In the order of being, finality is last, but in the order of causes, it is first in power. For Aquinas divine goodness and power are interdependent, in that God's metaphysical goodness acts as a final cause to which creation, conservation, and creatures' acts, are directed. But this is not so if God is morally accountable to creatures, or is a mere cause among causes.

The entire train of causality flows from the final cause, which sets the form in motion to reach its end through efficient causality.¹⁴ The final cause is also intentionality at work—an ordering power bent on bringing forms to their fullness and perfection. We can't recognize divine power without reference to the end of divine goodness: "Good things pour forth their being in the same way as ends are said to move one."¹⁵ Love, the appetite towards the end, is *also* the diffusion of God's goodness, a sharing of His active and penetrating power. So, the conflict of divine power and love found in kenotic theology destroys the relation of power and love by missing the interdependence of final and efficient causality in divine goodness.

Divine Agency, Charity and Dependence

Virtus is linked to perfection and act, for Aquinas—a thing is perfect when it attains its proper power and fullness of existence.¹⁶ Divine agency, charity and creaturely dependence all point to a Platonic notion of divine transcendence at work in his spirituality. Among Aristotle's divisions of natural priority,

some things are called prior and posterior . . . in respect of nature and substance, i.e., those which can be without other things,

¹⁴ In the order of *being*, the form grounds the efficient cause's action, which acts towards an end, its perfection or goodness. But from the viewpoint of *causality*, the order is reversed. See *ST I 5.4*.

¹⁵ *ST I 5.4 ad 1*.

¹⁶ Cf. O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 163.

while others cannot be without them—a distinction which Plato used.¹⁷

The Platonic separability criterion is invoked here, to establish the primacy of the transcendent and actual. The capacity of something to exist independently is its actuality, and so primary substance is substituted for Plato's universals.

Aquinas's transcendent actuality grounds various divine attributes, as a source of intensive and extensive causal power. Although power is not listed as one of God's attributes in the *Prima Pars*, God's goodness is described as a source of power creating and coordinating all desired perfections (6.2). The objections to divine infinity treat the notion in terms of causal or productive power, as does Aquinas in his description of God as the infinite source of being (7.1). Finally, God's omnipresence is described as the motion of an agent upon its patient, through a non-mediated exercise of its power (8.1), giving things their being, power, and operation (8.1). The "essence, presence, power" formula refers to divine power as creating, knowing, and influencing or directing things towards their ends (8.3). In treating divine active power in the context of the refusal of grace or denial of creaturely dependence, we see the metaphysics of priority undergirding Aquinas' spirituality.

First, there is the issue of divine agency. Since God has no passive potency, His will rests in His own goodness and is not drawn by desire to extrinsic ends.¹⁸ Even though His will is open to opposites in that He does not will things necessarily, this is not by passivity or defect, but is on the side of the object willed. Like an artisan using a diversity of instruments equally suited to his craft, God's openness to create or not, and to create any number and type of beings, points to His causal eminence.¹⁹ The fullness of His power extends to anything not

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V.11 (1019a1–5).

¹⁸ *CG I* 16 (there is no passive potency in God); *CG I* 72 (God's will rests in His own goodness, as His own perfection).

¹⁹ *CG I* 82.

incompatible with the notion of being,²⁰ which excludes contradictions, and the direct causing of evil, which is either a lack of being, or the frustration of one *telos* at the expense of another's flourishing.²¹ Here we see the Dionysian themes of causal plenitude and the diffusiveness of goodness.

Divine power is both intensively and extensively infinite. In discussing Christ's role in creation, Aquinas argues against the Platonists for a unified and immediate nature of divine causation of creatures in both their form and matter. Perfections in things stem from a single preeminent first cause, and are not due to three hypostases, to a Manichean anti-material force, or to a host of ideas and angelic intermediaries.²² Because God is naturally prior to creatures, His power is a direct and essential way of conserving things in being, such that without God they would cease to exist.²³

Second, power and divine transcendence are linked in Aquinas' treatment of charity as the most powerful of the virtues. In *De caritate*, charity is the root and director of the virtues because of its power—"the most powerful directs us to the highest good" and charity steers us directly to God and beatitude.²⁴ A thing is perfect, he says, insofar as it attains its proper end, so the perfection of Christian life consists radically (*specialiter*) in charity.²⁵

De caritate chapter three stresses the priority of the final cause, where charity is the form, mother and root of all the virtues by giving them their acts and directing them to its own end, God. Charity succeeds by excluding both what is incompatible with it (mortal sin), and

²⁰ CG I 26.

²¹ CG II 25. On the causation of evil by God, see the excellent discussion by Brian Davies, who draws on Herbert McCabe, in Davies, *The Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 89–97.

²² On these various errors concerning creation and divine causality, see *In 1 Colossians*, 1. 1 #37–40.

²³ ST I 104.1.

²⁴ *De caritate*, 2.

²⁵ ST II–II 184.1.

all which prevents the soul from tending completely (*totaliter dirigatur*) to God.²⁶ By its supernatural power we overcome our natural inclinations, such as the hatred of enemies and the soul's desire to be united to the body (*De car.* 8; 11). The core of the infused virtues, it works in concert with the Gifts to transform us according to degrees of virtual quantity or intensity.²⁷ Finally, as perfected by the Gift of wisdom, it issues into contemplation, whose power overflows into the active life.²⁸

Third, divine power is highlighted in the topic of creaturely dependence. In particular, the sin of Lucifer points to rational souls' dependence on the power of grace for attaining their end. The devil's sin was not a conflict of desires, which Aquinas thinks is impossible given his lack of materiality.²⁹ It was not a failure to acknowledge the source of bliss which is God, due to his elevated mind, by which he knew the desire to gain equality with God is impossible.³⁰ Lucifer could not have erred on this point, for no passions clouded his intellect, and self-preservation precludes being changed into another nature.³¹ Rather, he sinned by aspiring to a likeness to God gained by his own power, "as something to which he had a claim in justice"—to be godlike beyond the limits of his nature and to "have ultimate bliss simply and solely of himself."

Pride then issues into disobedience and envy, as a failure to observe the measure imposed by a higher will, and in detesting the well-being of man and the majesty of God.³² Lucifer's rejection then is of the

²⁶ *ST II-II* 184.2.

²⁷ *ST II-II* 24.4 ad 1. See O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 165. Knowledge varies also in accord with virtual quantity or intensity: *De Ver.* 8.2.

²⁸ *ST II-II* 182.4 ad 2. "Progress from the active to the contemplative life is according to the order of generation; whereas the return from the contemplative life to the active is according to the order of direction, insofar as the active life is directed by the contemplative."

²⁹ *ST I* 63.2.

³⁰ *ST I* 63.3 on the two types of attempts to be "as God"—by equality (which is impossible), or by likeness (which was deemed possible by Lucifer).

³¹ That is, desiring absolute equality with God is tantamount to desiring non-existence.

³² *ST I* 63.2.

condition of the gift—an attempt at reaching his end by independent means in a bid for domination. Angelic sin involves a transgression of grace, not nature:

It belongs to an angel's nature to turn to God in love as to the source of his nature's existence, but to turn to him as the source of a supernatural happiness, this comes of a love received as a grace (*ex amore gratuito*), and such love could be rejected, sinfully.³³

On a natural level, Lucifer loves God more than himself because his nature, like all creatures, is contained within the universal good, and so belongs to God.³⁴ The comparison here is with the natural love of an arrow for its target, or the part for the whole. But his rejection of friendship with God involves his self-rejection as a “caused image” of God³⁵ in an act of preferring his own nature to his origin—possible in the meager mirror-like knowledge of God. This false power as an inability to *receive* does not release the spirit from dependence, however, as we see in Nietzsche's spiritual agony, pushing up from the depths of the will to power. Echoing Lucifer's false autonomy, he laments in his “Night Song:”

This is my loneliness, that I am begirt with light . . . I do not know the happiness of those who receive . . . this is my poverty.³⁶

Here, power is conflict and domination, in that life in its essence is seen as an appetite for assimilation and appropriation. Instead of the appetite of love which adapts the self to the beloved, or the diffusion of goodness from divine abundance, Nietzsche's will-to-power dominates

³³ *STI* 63.1 ad 3.

³⁴ *STI* 60.5.

³⁵ On the angels' knowledge of God's essence, see *STI* 56.3. (cf. *De Ver.* 8.3 ad 8). On Lucifer's sin, see “Appendix 2: Satan,” in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 9 (Ia 50–64), Latin text and English translation by Blackfriars, ed. Kenelm Foster (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1968), 315.

³⁶ Frederich Nietzsche, “Night Song,” in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. M. Cowan (Chicago 1957), 107.

and crushes the foreign and weak in an amoral release of strength.³⁷ For Aquinas, power is the opposite of this perverse desire for domination, in that it lovingly directs secondary causes' participation in divine wisdom, ordering them to perfection.

For Aquinas, dependence does not imply God's tyranny, since divine power does not usurp but rather conditions creatures' freedom—precisely because it is not univocal. God is not a cause among causes, but the power which conditions *all* causality. All creation is essentially ordered to God as to its source and goal, and even though He moves the will to choose x or y, and moves us powerfully and gently to choose good over evil,³⁸ God's power facilitates and does not preclude, freedom.

Two axioms (*ST* I 83.1) underscore this fact. First, *an efficient cause reproduces its like*; and second, *God operates in each thing according to its nature*. So, God produces free beings and things happen in the way God foresees—some freely, others necessarily. His perfect power moves our free will *fortiter et suaviter*—with a power and sweetness of grace. We can refuse the condition of the gift like Lucifer, in a Pelagian-inspired atheism. Or, our inertia results in sliding below a natural state in the refusal of grace.³⁹

³⁷ Frederich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 211: "A living being seeks above all to discharge its strength—life itself is will to power" (#13). Cf. *ibid.*, 393: "[L]ife itself essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation of the least, at its mildest, exploitation" (#259).

³⁸ *ST* I-II 112.3; *CG* III 89. Cf. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*, trans. Sr. M. Timothea Doyle (Herder: London, 1937), 85–86.

³⁹ On this topic, see Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*, 91–94. Aquinas argues that God's power also extends to bringing greater good out of evil, in a manifestation of God's mercy and justice (*ST* I 23.5 ad 3; *In 9 Rom.* 1.4).

Divine Power, the Church, and Spiritual Perfection

Aquinas links divine power and charity closely in his development of the themes of religious life, the union of Christ with His Church, the power through weakness in Christ. He imbues these themes with Aristotelian motifs of hylemorphic unity and growth.

Religious Life

Aquinas defends the counsels as a privileged road to spiritual perfection in his late work *On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life*. The power of divine love transforms some to overcome even the tendencies of nature towards various forms of self-fulfillment. Corresponding to the three counsels are the degrees of detachment from progressively more personal goods—from exterior things (poverty), from persons united to us by a “communion and affinity” (chastity), and from our own will or “self-belonging” (ch. 10). Divine power gives strength for detachment, itself a means to greater union with God. In particular, the vow of obedience is seen as a paradoxical power of freedom over the slavery of one’s own will (chs. 12, 15). Quoting Augustine, he exclaims “happy is the necessity that compels us to better things” (ch. 12; quoting *Epistle* 127). “Nothing is freer to any man than the freedom of his will,” so that he who renounces it makes no greater sacrifice, except of his own life (ch. 10).

Here, divine power and love draw believers into paradoxical acts of charitable self-hatred, proportionate, he says (ch. 10), to the degree of divine love existing in a soul—an infused Dionysian *ex-stasis* in which the entire self-possessions, body, and afflicted spirit are made a perfect holocaust in which the entire victim is totally consumed (ch.11). In the Commentary on the *Philippians* “kenosis” text (*In 2 Phil.* 1. 3), he cites obedience as the greatest of the virtues, for it involves giving over one’s soul and will as better than sacrifice.

In obedience, the power of the counsels of poverty and chastity are thus contained and maximized—every virtue is included under obe-

dience, he states elsewhere.⁴⁰ The power of divine obedience also effects our own conformity to Christ, and figures in the self-emptying of Christ of *Philippians 2*—through His obedience, in which He exchanged the natural goods of life and honor for an ignominious death, Christ gives merit to our own sufferings.⁴¹

Church as the Body of Christ

The concept of divine power is also at work in Aquinas's treatments of the Pauline doctrine of the body of Christ—the mystery in which the members subsist and flourish in their union with the head.⁴² Aquinas treats Christ's headship of the body of His Church in various contexts. In his Commentary on *Ephesians*,⁴³ the bridal mystery provides occasion to stress the indissoluble unity of Christ and His Church. In other contexts, the hylemorphic union of body and soul parallels the Holy Spirit, the soul of the Church, working through the headship of Christ animating, uniting, and directing the members of His body, as well as in the relation of natural to supernatural virtue. Just as the moral virtues perfect our appetitive powers under the rule of reason, so the supernatural Gifts move all our powers, and the infused virtues, under the Spirit's motion.⁴⁴ Spiritual progress in the degrees of charity involves our docility, detachment and abandonment to the promptings of divine power.

Aquinas draws on Aristotle's causal axioms to explain both the divine influx of grace and the conformity of the creature to Christ in the spiritual life. For example, Christ's Resurrection is the efficient cause

⁴⁰ *In 2 Philipp.* 1.3 #75.

⁴¹ *In 2 Philipp.* 1. 2 #65–66.

⁴² St. Paul likens the body of Christ (the Head and members) to the subjection of wife to husband, in *Ephesians 5.22–24*. Aquinas says that this is “not for his [Christ's] own utility, but for that of the Church since he is the savior of his body” (*In 5 Eph.* 1.8 #318).

⁴³ *In 5 Eph.* 1.8.

⁴⁴ *ST I–II* 68.4. On the Aristotelian “hylemorphism” theme in the spiritual life, see Denis Fahey, *Mental Prayer according to the Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Dublin: Gill, 1927), 18–23.

of our own resurrection, since “the first in a genus is the cause of all else in the genus”—the *maximum tale* axiom.⁴⁵ The pervasive theme of *conformity to Christ*, the effect of the sacraments, is explained as the assimilation of the effect to its cause—conformity, especially through the sacraments, is incorporation into the mystery of Christ’s life and Passion. Baptism applies the power of the Passion to man; while the Eucharist perfects union with the suffering Christ.⁴⁶

The grace of headship belongs to Christ in virtue of His human nature. In *De Veritate* 19.4, headship is seen as either one of dignity, government, or causality. In all these ways Christ in His human nature is the head of the Church—as possessing grace more abundantly than the members, He possesses dignity; as the ruler to which the actions of the members are directed, He possesses governance, and is a cause as filling and uniting the whole Church with His grace. Inspired by Damascene, Aquinas states that divine power belongs to Christ’s humanity as an instrument that is joined to the principal cause—the language is of influence, of in-pouring, while article 5 (*De Ver.*19.5) uses the *maximum tale* motif to underscore that Christ’s humanity communicates grace just as God is the source of all being. The *Tertia Pars* further develops the relationship between instrumental causality and the mysteries of Christ. Christ’s humanity transmits divine power by virtual contact, or spiritual causality, in which all the actions and sufferings of Christ, even the effects of His death and burial, touch the believer in time, and draw him towards glory according to a plan executed according to divine wisdom.

Divine power transmits grace to believers throughout history. Just as the head in a physical body works not only for itself but for all the members, he says (*De Ver.* 29.7 sc), so Christ’s activities were mer-

⁴⁵ *ST* IIIa 56.1. See Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 2: *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 133.

⁴⁶ *ST* IIIa 73.3 ad 3, quoted in Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 2, 142–143.

itorious for His Church. Christ's Passion is the source of divine power on many levels. In a beautiful text on the reversed condition of mankind through the Passion, Aquinas unfolds the effects of divine power. Through the power of the Passion, the debt of human nature is paid, so we can "fly unrestrained to our heavenly home." Through faith in the power of the Passion, eternal punishment for sin is remitted. And through the "power of the keys," the Passion reduces temporal punishment for sin.⁴⁷

The transmission of divine power from the Father to the Son, in his glorified humanity, to the members through faith and the sacraments, is explained by reference to primary and instrumental causality, in which Christ's humanity transmits grace through being joined to the power of the Word. At *De Veritate* 29.4–5, he argues for the fitness of Christ's humanity as the instrumental cause of grace in the members. The mysteries of Christ's life—His deeds and His sufferings—are salutary in that the Word communicates the effects of grace to rational creatures through Christ's humanity. Our human nature is wounded, and no longer suited to direct, invisible government of the Word (*DV* 29.5). Christ's humanity was thus applied as medicine to the wound, so that man might be recalled to invisible things (*DV* 29.4 ad 3). Conformity occurs through participation in the Passion as well, through penitence, which admits degrees.⁴⁸ The whole power of the sacraments occurs through Christ's humanity, serving as the elevated instrument, by which grace is poured into the members of His body (*DV* 29.4c), which forms a mystical person with its Head.

In his Commentary on *Colossians*, the Aristotelian hylemorphism and growth themes are expanded. The argument for Christ's and the Church's supremacy over pagan syncretism is made through contrasting *soma* and *sarx*—the worldly vanity of the flesh and the spiritual body of Christ. Those puffed up with worldly wisdom, Paul says,

⁴⁷ For these powers of the Passion, see *De Ver.* 29.7 ad 10.

⁴⁸ *In 3 Sent.* 19.1.3 sol. 2 (in Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 2, 143).

lose their hold upon the head: yet it is from the head that the whole body, with all its joints and ligaments, has its needs supplied, and thus knit together grows according to God's design. (*Col.* 2.19)

Christ is the head of the Church for the same reasons that a natural body depends on its head, for its union and growth: "[T]he Church obtains these from Christ, for the entire body depends on him."⁴⁹

The union is one of "joints and ligaments"—the contact of faith and understanding among members ("one Lord, one faith, one baptism" [*Eph.* 4.5]); and the nourishing bonds of charity and the sacraments. Christ's spiritual power is one of growth as well, by which we gain in inner strength through increase in grace, and by which the Church is enlarged.

Divine Power through Weakness

Divine power is also transmitted to the Church through the Passion and Cross of Christ. Aquinas reflects on Paul's "power through weakness" theme especially in his Commentaries on *Corinthians*. As in the Commentary on *Colossians*, the contrast of worldly wisdom and divine folly moves the listener towards a true sense of divine power. In *1 Corinthians* 1.17–25, worldly speech is said to "void" the power of the Cross, leading to erecting idols of power in its stead, whether the Jews' "signs and wonder" or the Greeks' human wisdom.

"Christ crucified," called the "word of the Cross" (*verbum crucis*)—is a stumbling block and folly to those without faith, but is the salutary "power of God" to those with faith. The "word of the Cross," he says, is the power of the Incarnation and Passion to adjust weak human sight to invisible realities, through the healing light of Christ. Divine wisdom embraces the impossible—that the infinite should become man, should die, and suffer at the hands of violent men.⁵⁰ Divine power,

⁴⁹ *In 2 Col.* 1.4 #129.

⁵⁰ *In 1 Cor.* 1.3 #47.

here seen as the redemptive medicine of Christ, is applied with mercy. Knowing that man has vainly wandered off the right path, God acts as a teacher. Recognizing that His meaning was not understood by the words first spoken (natural signs), so gave his own example, His Son, as living proof.⁵¹

God's power is also made perfect in weakness.⁵² This "remarkable expression," says Aquinas, "can be understood materially or by way of occasion." First, human infirmity is the stuff on which patience, humility, and temperance are grafted. Second, it is the occasion by which spiritual growth occurs, through knowledge of our dependence on God.⁵³ Divine power transforms weakness by making it an occasion to glory in our closeness to Christ⁵⁴ whose power dwells within us, and to joy in those very weaknesses—our infirmities, reproaches, lack of necessities, persecutions and anxieties.⁵⁵ Spiritual growth, as he indicates in the Prologue to the Commentary on the *Philippians*, is through the narrow gate of enduring tribulations and referring them to our end, Christ.

Conclusion

Kenotic theologians such as Polkinghorne sacrifice divine power to divine love in the impression that classical theology alone cannot solve an unavoidable dilemma—God is either determined by human suffering, or is a cosmic tyrant. Their solution was seen to rest on a misconception of the hypostatic union, a univocal interpretation of causality, a suppression of the final cause, and a blurring of moral and metaphysical goodness.

⁵¹ *In 1 Cor.* 1.3 #55.

⁵² Paul is referring to the "thorn in his flesh" which made him realize that God's grace is sufficient (*2 Corinthians* 12.9–10).

⁵³ *In 2 Cor.* 1.3 #479.

⁵⁴ *In 2 Cor.* 1.3 #480.

⁵⁵ *In 2 Cor.* 1.3 #481.

In contrast, we traced Aquinas's robust use of the concept of divine power in several contexts to illumine its pivotal use as a foundation in his spiritual doctrine. The Platonic motif of transcendent causal plenitude is at work in his treatments of divine agency, the role of charity, and Satan's refusal of grace. God's natural priority, understood in terms of the Platonic separability criterion forms the background of these insights. Recognizing the gifted quality of existence is an acclamation of divine power in the spiritual life.

In his teaching on the religious life and in his Pauline commentaries, Platonic detachment is balanced by Aristotelian themes of hylemorphic unity and growth. As in *De caritate*, his treatise on the spiritual life advises detachment from worldly concerns, culminating in the holocaust of self through the counsel of obedience. Aristotle's causal axioms and motif of organic unity cement Aquinas's interpretation of the mystical body of Christ, providing a metaphysical explanation of the transmission of divine power through the vehicles of grace. Finally, St. Paul's doctrine of "power through weakness" provided Aquinas with an occasion to detail spiritual progress through conformity to Christ.

Garrigou-Lagrange once noted that the spirit of prayer is rendered more perfect by the contrast of divine power and human weakness. The infused virtues and Gifts are exercised in the "childhood" of spirituality, where the spirit of adoptive sonship is most apparent. In reviving a Thomistic vision of the spiritual life, the task of illumining an authentic concept of divine power preserves both the vitality and trust that should characterize our upward turn to God, or, as Garrigou might say, unfurls the sails so they spread into the wind.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Garrigou-Lagrange often uses the image of the sails being pushed by the wind (vs. the boat moving by the labor of the rowers) to explain the docility of the human soul to the promptings of the Spirit, through the activity of the Gifts. He also uses the concept of "spiritual childhood" to denote trust in the power of God. See, for example, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace: Commentary on the Summa theological of St. Thomas, Ia IIae, q. 109-114*, trans. the Dominican Nuns (London: Herder, 1952), 499–503.

DIVINE POWER AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IN AQUINAS

SUMMARY

The role of divine power in Aquinas's spiritual doctrine has often been neglected in favor of a focus on the primacy of charity, the controlling virtue of spiritual progress. The tendency among some thinkers (e.g. Polkinghorne) to juxtapose divine love and power stems from the stress on divine immanence at the cost of divine transcendence, and from an evolutionary (vs. classical) view of God with its 'kenotic' theodicy. A study of the ways in which divine power grounds and directs the spiritual life highlights the robust role that metaphysics plays in spiritual ascent for Aquinas, and offers a philosophical entry point to his doctrine. Themes in his doctrine of the spiritual life incorporate Platonic transcendent causal plenitude and Aristotelian causal axioms and motifs of growth and unity. From the side of theology, divine power is analyzed through several lenses, including power through weakness in Christ, the sin of Lucifer against the gift of being in contrast to the counsel of obedience, and the role of Christ's human nature in the Church. Taken together, these themes combine to characterize divine power as redemptive medicine, as opposed to a distant, arbitrary force, and to reveal the ways in which Aquinas applies metaphysical insights to the supernatural order.

KEYWORDS

Thomas Aquinas, John Polkinghorne, divine power, divine goodness, kenosis, process theology, spiritual life, sin of Lucifer, obedience, headship of Christ.

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