St Thomas Aquinas on Salvation, Making Satisfaction, and the Restoration of Friendship

Introduction: ‘Paving the way for a penal notion of salvation’?

St Augustine’s Book X of The City of God ‘the visible sacrifice is the sacrament, i.e., the sacred sign, of the invisible sacrifice’ (sacrificium ergo visibile invisibilis sacrificii sacramentum id est sacrum signum est)\(^1\)

Gerald O’Collins: Aquinas’s soteriology contributed to the development of ‘a monstrous version of redemption: Christ as the penal substitute propitiating the divine anger.’

Brendan Peterson: ‘By including punishment within satisfaction, Thomas recognizes punishment on both sides of the dichotomy established by Anselm, and in so doing can be fairly said to open the door to a vision in which no dichotomy is recognized at all, in which the only option is punishment, the execution of which suffices for atonement.’\(^2\)

Asle Eikrem, ‘I tend to agree with Branden Peterson who, against the interpretation provided by Rik Van Nieuwenhove, argues that Aquinas attached penal images to his notion of satisfaction. Together with Abelard, he thus paved the way for the later reformers’ understanding of the sacrifice of Christ in terms of penal satisfaction.’

1. Language of placating God

Language of ‘appeasement’ refers to a change in us and not in God. See ST I, q. 9, a. 1 ad 3: 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.’

2. ST III, q. 48, a. 2: making satisfaction and poena satisfactoria

ST III, q. 48, a. 2: ‘He properly makes satisfaction for an offense who offers something which the offended one loves equally, or even more than he detested the offense. But by suffering out of love and obedience, Christ gave more to God than was required to compensate for the offense of the whole human race. First of all, because of the exceeding charity from which he suffered; second, on account of the dignity of his life which he laid down in atonement (pro satisfactione), for it was the life of one who was God and man; third on account of the extent of the Passion, and the greatness of the grief endured, as stated above.’

How do we translate poena satisfactoria?

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\(^1\) For instance in ST III, q. 22, a. 2; III, q. 48, a. 3, obj. 2; III, q. 60, a. 1 and earlier in II-II, q. 81, a. 7, ad 2.

IV Sent. d. 15, q. 2, a. 1 qc. 2, ad 3. ‘Poena is called an evil inasmuch as it takes away some good because this is how evil injures a nature. (…) There is a different character of poena in almsgiving, which takes away riches, and in fasting, which takes away tasty things, and in prayer, which brings down a proud spirit’s height by humility. And because of this there are different parts of satisfaction.’ It seems clear that poena simply refers to something that goes against our will (‘pain’, ‘deprivation’, ‘affliction’), as Aquinas explicitly states in what follows, with a revealing reference to Anselm: poena enim voluntati contrariatur, ut Anselmus dicit).

- Qualifying the penal elements in the tradition

Three kinds of poenae (ST I-II, q. 87, a. 7-8): (a) Punishment for sin simpliciter whereby each person is punished for his or her sin. (b) Medicinal poena, whereby we suffer the loss of a (bodily) good for the sake of spiritual health. Medicinal poenae are not penal properly speaking (non proprie habent rationem poena). (c) Thirdly, there is poena satisfactoria whereby we willingly espouse deprivation or do penance on behalf of ourselves or others with whom we are united in charity: ‘Now when poena is satisfactory, it loses somewhat of the nature of poena (punishment) (de ratione poenae): for the nature of punishment is to be against the will (Est enim de ratione poenae quod sit contra voluntatem); and although poena satisfactoria, absolutely speaking, is against the will, nevertheless in this particular case and for this particular purpose, it is voluntary. Consequently, it is voluntary simply, but involuntary in a certain respect.’

- Christ’s will and poena

Aquinas makes a distinction between voluntas ut ratio and voluntas ut natura (III Sent, d. 17, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 1, co.) The former always conforms perfectly to the divine will. The latter, which includes our lower sensuality, did not always conform to the divine will (or Christ’s rational will as human): Christ’s ‘natural’ will was repulsed by the prospect of suffering. This state of opposition between Christ’s sensual nature and his reason (contrarietas sensualitatis ad rationem) did not result in a vehement shunning of one power from the other (non violentia refusio in Christo de potentia in potentiam). The Father gave to the man Christ the will and the charity by which he wanted to suffer (Christo homini voluntatem dando, et caritatem, ex qua pati voluit) – thereby pre-empting any hint of ‘cruelty’

3 ST I-II, q. 87, a. 6.
on the part of God. Aquinas reiterates that Christ wanted to suffer out of supreme charity (ex maxima caritate pati voluit).

3. Merit, charity and justice

In III Sent. d. 18, q. 1, a. 2: Utrum Christus potuerit mereri? Aquinas argues that merit falls broadly under the category of justice. In general terms we merit when we act or do something in such a way that something is due to us. It is, however, only when an action is performed out of charity (actio ex caritate facta) that it is proportionate to receiving the reward of eternal life. When discussing the relation between the action and the reward Aquinas emphasises the central role charity occupies in establishing an equivalence between action and reward: ‘There must be an equivalence between the action and the reward. I do not mean an equivalence according to equality of quantity, which pertains to commutative justice, such as in buying and selling, but according to an equality of proportion, as demanded in distributive justice, according to which God bestows his eternal rewards. Now, the action proportionate to eternal life is an action performed with charity (Actio autem proportionata ad vitam aeternam est actio ex caritate facta). Thus one can merit ex condigno those things that pertain to eternal life. Works done, however, without charity fall short of this proportion.’

Why is charity essential in merit so much so that we cannot merit properly without charity or friendship for God? The answer is that charity transforms the nature and dynamic of the manner in which we restore the broken relationship with God. In IV Sent. d. 15, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 4, we read: ‘Now, since in everything that is freely given the primary reason of giving is love, it is impossible that someone should cause such a debt to himself if he lacks friendship. And therefore since all goods, both temporal and eternal, are given to us by divine generosity, no one can acquire the debt of receiving any of them, except through charity for God. And this is why works done without charity are not meritoriously condignly.’

Even though Aquinas uses language of condign merit there is no strict equivalence; but amongst friends this is not required. Especially amongst

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4 III Sent. d. 20, q. 1, a. 5, qc. 1 co. He writes (ibid., ad 1): ‘God has not delivered Christ to death as if he coerced him to die but by giving him a good will by which he freely wanted to die; and therefore it does not follow that there is any cruelty in God’.
5 III Sent. d. 20, q. 1, a. 3 ad 1.
6 III Sent. d. 18, q. 1. a. 2.
7 See III Sent. d. 18, q. 1, a. 2 co.
8 In relation to satisfaction Aquinas writes in IV Sent d. 15, q. 1, a. 5, qc 2: ‘It should be said that for satisfaction a man must be reconciled to his neighbour, just as to God. Now reconciliation is nothing other than the repairing of friendship. But while the cause of friendship’s dissolution remains, friendship cannot be repaired; which cause indeed was the inequality caused by an unjust taking or keeping. And so the person who does not restore
friend who are not entirely on an equal footing there is therefore an element of acceptatio by the higher one: ‘equality in making satisfaction to God is not according to equivalence, but rather according to his acceptance’.  

When discussing satisfaction as part of the sacrament of penance in *ST* III, q. 90. a. 2, he writes: ‘Now it has been said above (*ST* III, q. 85, a.3 ad 3) that an offense is atoned otherwise in penance than in vindictive justice. Because, in vindictive justice the atonement is made according to the judge's decision, and not according to the discretion of the offender or of the person offended; whereas, in penance, the offense is atoned according to the will of the sinner, and the judgment of God against Whom the sin was committed, because in the latter case we seek not only the restoration of the equality of justice, as in vindictive justice, but also and still more the reconciliation of friendship (*sed magis reconciliatio amicitiae*), which is accomplished by the offender making atonement according to the will of the person offended.’

In *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3 ad 2 Aquinas discusses an objection that states that God’s mercy appears to clash with his justice: ‘God cannot remit what appertains to his justice’. Aquinas replies: ‘God acts mercifully, not indeed by going against his justice, but by doing something more than justice; thus a man who pays another two hundred denarii, though owing him only one hundred, does nothing against justice, but acts liberally or mercifully. The case is the same with one who pardons an offence committed against him, for in remitting it he may be said to bestow a gift. (…) Hence it is clear that mercy does not destroy justice, but in a sense is the fullness thereof.’

*ST* I, q. 21, a. 4: ‘the work of divine justice always presupposes the work of mercy; and is founded thereupon.’

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9 IV Sent. d. 15, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 2: ‘Aequalitas autem in satisfactione ad Deum non est secundum aequivalentiam, sed magis secundum acceptationem ipsius’. Also: IV Sent. d. 15, q. 1, a. 2: ‘among those honours that are for parents or gods, even according to the Philosopher [*Nic. Ethics*, IX, ch. 14, 1164b15], it is impossible to render the equivalent according to quantity; but it is enough that a man render what he can: for friendship does not require an equivalent except according as it is possible. And this is also a certain kind of equal, namely, according to proportionality: for just as what is due to God is related to himself, so is whatever this man can render related to him. And this is how the form of justice is preserved in some way, and it is the same on the part of satisfaction’.

10 *ST* III, q. 85, a. 3 ad 1