

“Lord, Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner”: Aquinas on Grace, Impetration, and Justification

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Abstract

This article explores St. Thomas Aquinas’s doctrine of grace for the way in which it heals and moves the sinner towards justification. It expositively Thomas’s use of the language of “impetration” to express a causal yet non-meritorious role for human action, and it applies this conception to the free will’s movement in justification. It argues that Thomas understands the prayer of a sinner to illumine the way in which God’s infallible and predestinating will unfolds through human actors without destroying their contingent nature. To that end, it first expositively critical points in Thomas’s doctrine of grace, including the notions of habitual grace and auxilium, intact and fallen human nature, and operative and cooperative grace. It then introduces the language of impetration for the way in which it elucidates a valuable role for human action in justification. It concludes that impetration illustrates the on-going perfection of nature in such a way that God’s grace draws human beings into the causal sequence of divine providence. The sinner’s impetration captures the indispensable movement of the free will while recognizing that, in its appeal to divine mercy, it has already been graced by God and cannot earn the gift of justification.

Keywords

Aquinas, grace, justification, prayer, impetration, predestination, nature and grace, theological anthropology

Saint Thomas’s understanding of the Christian life is one which is suffused with and sustained by God’s grace. Human beings are called into a relationship with God which progresses toward eternal, unmediated union. Along the way, *in via*, human beings move as wayfarers through significant stages of a journey that include advancing from a state of sin into a state of grace and progressive divinization as adopted sons and daughters of the Father. God’s grace, flowing especially from the effects of Christ’s Incarnation and communicated

by the Holy Spirit, makes forward progress on the journey possible. It heals and justifies the recipient; it elevates and makes human merit possible; and it capacitates and moves human beings as authentic agents in a dynamic and saving movement to God. Thomas's doctrine of grace rests on the fundamental commitment that *gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*, literally, "grace does not remove nature but perfects it."¹ It completes what God begins in the creation of human nature – itself a gratuitous and intentional act – so that there is fundamental continuity between God's action in creation and salvation. God's grace thus perfects human beings as rational creatures in whom knowing and willing are necessarily part and parcel of any graced act.

The present study probes an inherent tension in Thomas's theology of grace. Thomas affirms justification as an operative effect of grace where God alone receives credit as the agent of the action. He also affirms that God's grace justifies sinners according to their nature so that they act as rational and free persons in their conversion. At issue is how human beings can be said to participate freely in their justification without meriting its outcome – something which Thomas expressly rejects at multiple points in the corpus of his mature works.² This study explores Thomas's use of the language of "impetration" to express a causal yet non-meritorious role for human action, and it applies this conception to the free will's movement in justification. It argues that Thomas understands the prayer of a sinner to illumine the way in which God's infallible and predestinating will unfolds through human actors without destroying their contingent nature. To that end, it first exposit critical points in Thomas's doctrine of grace, including three vital distinctions; it then explores the language of impetration for the way in which it elucidates a valuable role for human action in justification; and it concludes that impetration illustrates the on-going perfection of nature in such a way that God's grace draws human beings into the causal sequence of divine providence. The sinner's impetration captures the indispensable movement of the free will while recognizing that, in its appeal to divine mercy, it has already been graced by God and therefore cannot properly earn the gift of justification.

I. Thomas's Doctrine of Grace

Thomas culminates the *prima-secundae* of the *Summa theologiae* with the treatise on grace (qq. 109–114). His mature theology of

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ST) I:1, 1 ad. 2. Translations of the *Summa theologiae* are mine and are taken from *Summa theologiae*, 5 vols. (Ottawa: impensis Studii generalis OP, 1941-1945).

² See, for example, ST I-II:109, 6 and 114, 5.

sanctifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) leverages a series of distinctions to illumine the arc of the human journey to union with God.³ First, in the initial articles of *prima-secundae* 109, Thomas distinguishes sanctifying grace according to its habitual and helping effects. Specifically, habitual grace (*gratiae habitualis donum*) pertains to the human form, and it heals and elevates that form, capacitating its habits or virtues as steady dispositions to action. For example, God may infuse the habitual gift of faith into a recipient so that she has the steady disposition toward belief. Divine auxilium, sometimes referred to as helping grace, connotes God's application of motion to the human form which moves or reduces persons into action so that the wayfarer participates in the progress of her journey.⁴ For example, a wayfarer may have the form of belief in potency through a habitual gift, but she remains a potential believer until she is moved by something into actual belief – perhaps experienced as inspiration, a call, or the action of a friend.⁵ Using the habitual and auxilium distinction, Thomas speaks to grace's diverse effects not only as formal causes of the wayfarer's progress but also efficient and on-going causes. This latter insight adds a significant feature

³ The foundational studies of grace with important implications for understanding human agency, particularly in justification, include Henri Bouillard's *Conversion et grace chez S. Thomas d'Aquin. Etude historique* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), Bernard J. F. Lonergan's *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. J. Patout Burns (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), and Joseph P. Wawrykow's *God's Grace and Human Action: 'Merit' in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). See also Wawrykow's introduction to Aquinas's mature teaching on grace in "Grace," in Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph P. Wawrykow, eds., *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 192-221 and my "Aquinas and the Grace of Auxilium," *Modern Theology* 32 (2016), pp. 187-210.

⁴ In *ST* I-II:110.2 c Thomas codifies the working distinction between habitual grace and auxilium that he establishes in the early articles of 109; he writes: "Now it was said above that a person is aided by God's gratuitous will in two ways. In the first way [a person is helped] inasmuch as the soul is moved by God to know or will or act. And in this way the gratuitous effect in the person is not a quality but a certain movement of the soul, for 'motion is the act of the mover in the moved (*moventis in moto est motus*),' as is said in *Physics III*. In another way, a person is helped by God's gratuitous will inasmuch as a habitual grace is infused into the soul by God." Wawrykow notes that, while Thomas sometimes elides the term *auxilium* with habitual grace, he consistently reserves a narrow sense of the term which means nothing other than God's application of persons to their acts, and in the case of acts which make one pleasing to God, one may speak of auxilium as a sanctifying grace. Wawrykow writes: "For *auxilium* in this [narrow] sense, see such texts as I-II 109, 1c, where he calls it *divinum auxilium*, I-II 109, 2c (*divinum auxilium*), I-II 109, 3c (*auxilium Dei moventis, auxilium Dei*), I-II 109, 4c (*auxilium Dei moventis*), I-II 109, 5 ad 3 (*auxilium gratiae*), and 109, 6c (*auxilium gratuitum Dei interius animam moventis*)" (*God's Grace*, p. 171, note 52).

⁵ Thomas likens a person lacking divine auxilium to a soldier who is capable of seeking victory but remains motionless without the command of the leader of the army (*ST* I-II:109,6 c).

to Thomas's mature thought by appreciating the category of divine motion as one which brings God, and, so, grace more immediately into the economy of human salvation.

Second, Thomas further distinguishes between intact and fallen nature.⁶ While human beings always stand in need of habitual grace and auxilium in order to reach the supernatural end of eternal life with God, sin and its consequences complexify the ways in which grace is needed. Prior to the fall, with their intellects, wills, and sensual appetites properly ordered to God, human beings possessed the ability to know and love God as well as a wide range of other acts proportionate and connatural to their nature.⁷ Intact nature nevertheless requires surpassing gifts of faith and love, for example, to know God as triune, to love one's enemies, or to merit the supernatural end of eternal life, which lies beyond the powers of human nature itself. Thomas classes the habitual differences, for example, as ones between infused and acquired virtues. Fallen nature stands in significantly more need of grace.⁸ Sin not only incurs punishment according to justice; it also corrupts the natural good of human nature and its ordered status so that the wayfarer cannot do all of the good all of the time that would be required for progress.⁹ Thomas writes: "And thus in the state of intact nature a person needs a gratuitous strength superadded to natural strength for one reason, namely, to do and wish the supernatural good. But in the state of corrupt nature [a person needs a gratuitous strength] for two reasons, namely, to be healed and moreover to do works of supernatural virtue, which are meritorious. Beyond this, in both states a person needs divine auxilium in order that she is moved to act well."¹⁰ Thomas thus distinguishes habitual grace as healing (*sanans*) and elevating (*elevans*), and in order to do those goods which deserve reward, originally fallen human beings

⁶ Thomas writes: "I answer that the nature of a person may be considered in two ways, in one way, in its integrity just as it was in the first parent before sin, and in another way, as it is as it is corrupted in us after the sin of our first parent" (109, 2 c).

⁷ Thomas writes: "But in the state of natural integrity, as it pertains to the sufficiency of operative power, a person is able to wish and to do the good proportionate to [human] nature through his natural capacities such as the good of acquired virtue . . ." (*ST I-II:109, 2 c*).

⁸ Thomas writes: But in the state of corrupt nature a person also fails in that which he is able to do according to his nature" (*ST I-II:109, 2 c*).

⁹ In *ST I-II.85*, on the effects of sin, Thomas argues that sin "wounds" human nature by disordering the natural order of intellect, will, and lower appetites; in the corpus of article three he writes: "Now there are four powers of the soul that can be the subject of virtue, as said above, namely, reason, in which there is prudence, the will, in which there is justice, the irascible, in which there is fortitude, and the concupiscible, in which there is temperance." Question 109 carries a sense of this disorder over even to the justified wayfarer whose irascible will remains partially unconformed to the movement of the intellect and will.

¹⁰ *ST I-II:109, 2 c*.

require both effects. Thomas's stress on the need for healing habitual grace as well as *auxilium* is indispensable for any role that human beings might play in their justification.

Thomas employs a third and consequential distinction between grace as operative and cooperative, and he applies these categories to habitual grace and *auxilium* alike.¹¹ In those graces where God is the sole actor and the recipient is simply disposed or moved by the grace, the effect is described as operative. God alone receives credit for the term of the action because God is the sole agent; the human recipient might describe such an outcome as a gift – something wholly undeserved. In those graces where God initiates the movement or infuses the gift in such a way that the recipient freely moves or responds to the grace, the effect is described as cooperative. In such instances, both God and the human person receive credit for the effect because both were agents in bringing about its term; the human actor might describe such an outcome as, in part, a reward for her cooperation.¹² Those *habitual* graces which God simply gives to human beings – particularly those which heal a sinner's damaged nature – are reckoned as operative because they inform one's "being." Those habitual graces which pertain to the recipient's "operation" are reckoned as cooperative habitual graces inasmuch as they reach their term through the recipient's free actions.¹³ Those *auxilia* which move the recipient prior to the will's deliberation and choice are considered operative because God's motion alone actualizes them, while those *auxilia* which move the free will to assent and move with the grace qualify as cooperative *auxilia*.

With these three working distinctions in hand, Thomas is able to distinguish between a variety of human actions, and this is particularly consequential for understanding divine and human action on the journey. For example, when speaking of operative *auxilium*, Thomas cites the specific example of a sinner's conversion; he writes: "But there is a double act in us. First [there is] an interior [act] of the will. And in regard to that act, the will is a thing moved, and God is the

¹¹ Thomas writes: "Therefore in those effects in which our mind is moved and does not move, but in which God alone is moving, the operation is attributed to God, and accordingly this is called 'operating grace.' But in those effects in which our mind both moves and is moved, the operation is not attributed alone to God but also to the soul, and accordingly this is called 'cooperating grace'" (*ST I-II.111. 2 c*). Lonergan observes that Thomas notably redefines earlier scholastic uses of this distinction which had become nearly synonymous with the categories of *prevenient* and *subsequent* grace; see Lonergan, pp. 35-36.

¹² For a full treatment of the way in which Thomas relates cooperative grace to divine rewards, see "Aquinas and the Grace of *Auxilium*," pp. 196-200.

¹³ Thomas explains: "And thus habitual grace, inasmuch as it heals and justifies the soul, or makes it pleasing to God, is called operating grace; but inasmuch as it is the principle of meritorious works, which spring from the free will, it is called cooperating grace" (*ST I-II:111, 2 c*).

mover; and especially (*praesertim*) when the will begins to will good which before had willed evil.”¹⁴ The example is instructive for the conversation at hand because it addresses the moment of justification, indicating that the will’s turn to God is an effect of God’s operative auxilium. His use of the term *praesertim* is telling inasmuch as it identifies conversion from a state of sin into a state of grace as the paradigmatic instance of operative auxilium.¹⁵ Thomas wishes to underscore the necessity of operative grace for justification, grace by which the recipient is a thing moved.

II. Grace and Human Freedom in Justification

Thomas uses the *proemium* to question 113 to frame the effects of grace following the operative and cooperative distinction: “The effects of grace ought now to be considered. And first, the justification of the ungodly, which is the effect of operating grace; and second, merit, which is the effect of cooperating grace.”¹⁶ This taxonomy is critical. It establishes firmly that human beings cannot earn or merit justification; in no way may it be understood as a reward. Rather, the movement toward justice relies on an infusion of habitual grace as well as its actualization.¹⁷ Thomas enumerates four notional steps by which the sinner obtains remission of sins; he writes: “I answer that there are four things which need to be counted for the justification of the impious, namely, the infusion of grace, the movement of free will towards God in faith, the movement of the free will towards sin [in detestation], and the remission of sins. The reason for this is because, as said above, justification is a certain movement by which the soul is moved by God from a state of guilt into a state of justice.”¹⁸ The work of operative habitual grace and auxilium facilitates this fourfold movement; the will is *moved* toward God and away from sin, and this movement is informed by the habit of faith which directs the will.¹⁹ Thomas integrates operative auxilium and

¹⁴ *ST* I-II:111, 2 c.

¹⁵ I am indebted to Joseph Wawrykow for this insight; see *God’s Grace*, pp. 175-76.

¹⁶ *ST* I-II:113, *proem*.

¹⁷ Thomas writes: “Yet God’s love, inasmuch [it is] on the part of the divine act, is eternal and immutable, but inasmuch as [it is] the effect which God’s love imprints in us, it is sometimes interrupted insofar as we sometimes fall short of it and again need to be recuperated. But the effect of God’s love in us, which is taken away by sin, is grace, by which a person is made worthy of eternal life, from which mortal sin excludes him. And for that reason the remission of sin cannot be understood except by the infusion of grace” (I-II:113, 2 c).

¹⁸ *ST* I-II:113, 6 c.

¹⁹ Thomas speaks to the sequential movement of operative graces in justification: “The reason for this is because in whatever movement the motion of the mover is naturally

habitual graces to explain the remission of sins and the new *status* in which the justified finds himself – an aptly named “state of grace.”

Important here is Thomas’s description of justification as a comprehensive motion by which the soul is moved by God (*quo anima movetur a Deo*) to the remission of sin. God is the mover and the sinner is a thing moved. Yet, at the heart of the fourfold movement, Thomas stipulates a motion of the free will to God by faith (*motus liberi arbitrii in Deum per fidem*). What can this mean? Can the free will move freely while “being moved and not moving” (*est mota et non movens*)? Thomas answers thus:

Now God moves everything in its own manner . . . Hence God moves [a human person] to justice according to the condition of human nature. But it is proper to [human] nature to have free will. Hence in the one who has the use of free will, the motion to justice by God does not occur without a movement of the free will; but God so infuses the gift of justifying grace that God simultaneously moves the free will to accept the gift of grace, in those who are capable of such movement.²⁰

Thomas’s answer stresses God’s agency and, so, the gratuity of justification against a sense that the free will’s decision arises from itself.²¹ Even as God infuses the habitual gift of justifying grace, God moves the free will to accept the gift. While conceptual room is left to classify that movement as “free” on the part of the human will, the stress falls on God’s primary and seemingly sole agency. The *initium* of the conversion is a result of God’s operative auxilium alone; the *praesertim* of Thomas’s discussion in 111, 2 specifies the moment *cum voluntas incipit bonum velle quae prius malum volebat* as operative. Even if the will can be said to cooperatively participate through the choice of means, such an act depends on movement

first; but the disposition of the matter, of the movement of the moved, is second; the end of the movement in which the motion of the mover terminates is last” (*ST I-II:113, 8 c*). Thomas associates the “movement of the mover” with the operative grace of auxilium – the motion of God which motivates the will of the recipient. The second step has to do with the disposition of the matter. In the process of justification, the disposition of the matter includes the infusion of faith which is perfected in charity. Habitual graces heal and possibly elevate the will which lacked the virtues of faith and charity by which to move itself towards the remission of sin.

²⁰ *ST I-II:113, 3 c*.

²¹ Here Thomas is, in part, mediating against the maxim “*facienti quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam*” – to one who does what is in oneself, God will not deny grace. Twelfth century theologians developed an explanation around this saw that attempted to handle the respective roles of God and human beings in the moment of conversion. Thomas here and elsewhere in the *ST* (especially *ST I-II:112, 3*) forecloses on the possibility that the free will generates, as primary actor, a first movement towards God which God, in turn, supplements with grace. See Wawrykow, *God’s Grace*, pp. 84-85, n. 47-49. See Heiko Oberman’s “*Facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*: Robert Holcot, OP and the beginnings of Luther’s theology,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 54 (1962), pp. 317-42 for a presentation of the *facienti*’s use in late medieval theology.

where the mind is *mota et non movens*.²² From Thomas's perspective, this cannot be otherwise. The gift of faith reveals God as the ultimate end of the journey so that the rational and free will necessarily seeks it through its rational choice.

The free will's movement in justification dovetails with Thomas's discussion of the certainty of divine predestination in *prima pars*, question 23. Exploring how God's predestining will can be simultaneously infallible and still unfold through contingent secondary agents, Thomas writes: "Yet not all things which are subject to providence are necessary; some things happen from contingency according to the nature of proximate causes, which divine providence has ordained for such effects. . . . So therefore the order of predestination is certain; and nevertheless the free will is not destroyed (*tollit*) by which the effect of predestination has its contingency."²³ Thomas argues that God's will can and often does act providentially through contingent secondary agents, and when God does so, these agents do not lose their contingency. Even with operative auxilium, God causes infallibly through contingent causation, and in this way, grace perfects rather than destroys contingent nature.²⁴ In this sense one may speak

²² The commentary tradition has differed on whether the conversion of a sinner – inclusive of the will's movement toward God as object of love – is operative from its beginning to its term or whether it begins operatively and ends cooperatively. The differences typically center on the meaning of the *duplex actus* of the will in conversion. The discussion is parallel, though not perfectly, to Thomas's earlier discussions of the will's action in I-II:8-17 where he names three dimensions to the will's action: willing the end, the choice of means for attaining the end, and the execution of the end. The three dimensions include an initial, intermediate, and final act of the will with the initial seeming to fit an interior act and the final seeming to fit with an exterior act, though even the status of the final act is disputed by some. In the case of conversion, determining the status of the choice of means is especially significant insofar as it identifies the agent or agents in the act. For a more complete account of this debate, including an argument in favor of the operative character of willing the end and the choice of means, see "Aquinas and the Grace of Auxilium," pp. 197-99. Wawrykow explores the asymmetrical relationship between I-II:8-17 and I-II:111.2, offering a reasonable resolution in *God's Grace*, pp. 174-76. Lonergan takes up the interpretive question in detail in *Grace and Freedom*, pp. 121-38, noting the difference between the *duplex actus* I-II:111.2 and the *triplex actus* of I-II:8-17 (pp. 132-33). For a discussion of the *initium fidei* see Reinhard Hütter's. "St. Thomas on Grace and the Free Will in the *Initium Fidei*: The Surpassing Augustinian Synthesis," *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007), pp. 521-54.

²³ *ST* I:23, 6c.

²⁴ In his *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas* (Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) Wawrykow writes: "God's causing is not at the expense of the genuine causing of human beings; in causing, God brings about the authentic, life-promoting causing of humans. That God is able to do so – that is, that God's causing is not at the expense of genuine human causing – is testimony to the divine transcendence. The successful causes that are contained in the world are often successful at the expense of those through whom they work. God is not to be reduced to such a cause; God, the transcendent cause of being, can cause in such a way that the human also is cause" (p. 66).

of the will freely moving to God in faith as moved by God (*movetur a Deo*). Nevertheless, this notion of the free will causing without receiving credit is difficult to conceptualize. Thomas's discussion of prayer adds insight into the will's non-meritorious causation.

III. Impetration and Human Freedom in Justification

In his discussion of merit Thomas asks whether one may merit the first grace of conversion on behalf of another person. In glossing James 5:17, "the fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful," Thomas introduces the language of impetration. He writes: "The impetration of prayer relies on mercy, but condign merit relies on justice. For that reason a person may impetrate many things from divine mercy in prayer which he nevertheless does not merit according to justice, as in Daniel 9:18: 'for it is not for our justifications that we present our prayers before your (God's) face but for the multitude of your mercies.'²⁵ It would seem that persons can appeal to God's mercy whether or not they are in a state of justice. Thomas uses the language of impetration to describe the effect of such an appeal; to impetrate (*impetrare*) can here be defined as "to obtain" something in a broad sense, but Thomas also uses the word to indicate prayer which appeals to God's mercy.²⁶ Indeed, the appeal of a sinner to God's mercy, under certain conditions, might be said to obtain the effect of justification or the remission of sins. Thomas intentionally distinguishes impetration from merit; the outcome of impetration cannot be understood as reward, but it can be understood to be a gift flowing from God's mercy *as a result of* the sinner's prayer or petition.²⁷

²⁵ *ST* I-II:114, 6 ad. 2.

²⁶ Thomas uses the term *impetrare* or its derivations with regularity in the corpus of his writings. It appears no less than fifty times in the *Summa theologiae* alone, and Thomas also uses it in the *Scriptum*, *Summa contra Gentiles*, and *biblical commentaries*. The term has a general and technical sense. More often, Thomas uses forms of *impetrare* as a synonym for "to obtain," but sometimes he uses *impetrare* more technically to mean a petitionary form of prayer which may obtain God's favor, apart from justice and merit. This narrower meaning may be found throughout the treatise on prayer, *ST* II-II:83 as well as in I-II:114, 6 ad. 2 and ad. 3, 114, 9 ad. 1, II-II:78, 2 ad.2, and III:63, 1 ad.1. Other important examples include the Matthew commentary on the Lord's Prayer, (ch.6, l. 3 and ch. 7, l. 1) as well as his John commentary (ch. 9, l. 3 and ch. 16, l. 6) and the commentary on I Corinthians (ch. 13, l. 2).

²⁷ Thomas reinforces this position in his John Commentary where, in commenting on John 9:31, he writes: "Prayer has two things, namely, it can impetrate and it can merit; but sometimes it impetrates and does not merit, and other times it merits and does not impetrate. And so nothing prohibits the prayer of a sinner from impetrating what he petitions, although it does not merit. God thus hears sinners not through the mode of merit but insofar as they impetrate what they ask from the divine power which they

In his treatise on prayer (II-II:83, 1–17), Thomas significantly focuses the definition and purpose of prayer around the language of petition with impetration representing a particular kind of petition. Prayer is principally, though by no means exclusively, about asking God for something.²⁸ The act of petition constitutes a form of *latritia* because the petitioner acknowledges God as source of all that is good and so subjects himself to God. Thomas writes: “Now a person shows reverence to God through prayer insofar as he subjects himself to God, and by praying, the person professes that he needs God as the author of all goods.”²⁹ Prayer for Thomas approaches or reflects the anthropological ordering which intact human nature possessed, and the worship of God in prayer has the potential to impetrate or obtain the objects of our prayers inasmuch as they conform with God’s will.³⁰ Such petitionary action ties into God’s direction of the cosmos; Thomas writes:

And likewise it is with regard to prayer. For we do not pray so that we may change God’s disposition, but so that we may impetrate that which God has disposed to be fulfilled by our prayers, in other words, “that by asking, we may merit (*mereantur*) to receive that which the omnipotent God from eternity has disposed to give,” as Gregory says in the book of the *Dialogues*.³¹

acknowledge.” (Commentary on John, ch. 9, 1.3, #1348). Translations are mine and taken from Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, *Super Evangelium Iohannis reportatio*. Edited by R. Cai, (Turin: Marietti, 1972).

²⁸ For a comprehensive treatment of the development of Thomas’s understanding of prayer, see Simon Tugwell’s “Prayer, Humpty Dumpty, and Thomas Aquinas,” in Brian Davies, ed., *Language, Meaning and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), pp. 24–50. Tugwell makes the persuasive argument that the *Summa theologiae* focuses the purpose of prayer on petition; he writes: “Thomas’ increasing clarity about prayer precisely as petition and about petition as an act of practical reason, allows him increasingly to deal with some of the problems which tended to befog discussions of prayer” (40). Brian Davies writes: “When it comes to Aquinas’s treatment of prayer, I think that it can be best read as an attempt to demystify it. Many volumes have been devoted to prayer, and many of them seem to suggest that prayer is out of the ordinary, difficult and something with respect to which one needs to develop certain skills or techniques. In 2a2ae, 83, however, Aquinas thinks of ‘prayer’ (*oratio*) in fairly simple terms: *as asking God for something that one wants*” in *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 260.

²⁹ *ST* II-II:83, 3 c. Thomas continues: “It is said that by praying a person hands over his mind to God, since he subjects it to God with reverence and, in a certain way, presents it to God . . .” (ad.3).

³⁰ Thomas identifies three principle effects of petitionary prayer: merit, impetration, and spiritual refreshment of the mind. Merit depends on and arises from proper charity which is possible only in a state of grace; impetration appeals to God’s mercy and God may respond based on the petitioner’s original intent; and finally, spiritual refreshment (*spiritualis refectio mentis*) which flows from fixing one’s mind on God in worship. This third dimension of prayer connects petition to contemplative prayer. See *ST* II-II:83, 13 c.

³¹ *ST* II-II:83, 2 c; the reference to Gregory is *Dial* 1,8. Thomas adds: “As stated above, our prayer is not ordered for changing God’s disposition, but that, by our petition, we may

Impetrating prayer not only renders worship to God; it also advances divine providence in those things which prayer successfully obtains. This is significant. It means that human beings enter the causal sequence through prayer and become secondary causes of the things which they correctly petition.³²

While it is clear that those in a state of grace may impetrate certain outcomes from God through prayer, the question is more ambiguous for those in a state of sin. The sinner lacks the standing of justice before God, and he suffers from interior corruption which calls into question the intention of any prayer. Thomas reasons that, under certain conditions, even sinners impetrate from God: “On the contrary is that which Augustine says on John: ‘If God were not to hear sinners, the publican would have said in vain: ‘Lord be merciful to me, a sinner.’”³³ There is simply too much scriptural evidence that God invites and responds to the prayers of sinners to ignore its potential efficacy. Thomas’s position on fallen nature is important for the character of a sinner’s prayer; fallen nature is not “shorn of every natural good,” and so it can still “by virtue of its natural endowments, work some particular good, as to build dwellings, plant vineyards, and the like . . .”³⁴ While Thomas is certain that sinners cannot consistently believe in God as highest good or maintain uprightness of will, they can at times perceive God as their end so that they call out to God in prayer. He likens the corruption of nature to being sick: “Just as a sick person can have some movements through himself, nevertheless he cannot move perfectly as a healthy person, unless he is healed

obtain what God has disposed [to give]” (ad.2). Thomas’s position here integrates with his discussion of prayer in the execution of divine predestination: “So, as natural effects are provided by God in such a way that natural causes are directed to bring about those natural effects, without which those effects would not happen; so the salvation of a person is predestined by God in such a way, that whatever helps that person towards salvation falls under the order of predestination; whether it be one’s own prayers or those of another; or other good works, and such like, without which one would not attain to salvation. Whence, the predestined must strive after good works and prayer; because through these means predestination is most certainly fulfilled” (*ST* I:23 8 c).

³² Speaking of prayer’s role as a secondary cause, Tugwell writes: “This means that prayer, precisely as petition, can be seen as playing a fully authentic role in the working out of events in the world; it does make a difference to what happens” (p. 46).

³³ *ST* II-II:83, 16 sc.

³⁴ *ST* I-II:109, 2 c. Thomas includes a similar reference at 109, 5 c. In reference to this passage, Wawrykow writes: “Thomas adds here that the corruption of nature by sin has not been total, and so even in the state of sin a person without grace can do some particular acts by the power of his nature which accord with his natural end, such as “build houses, plant vines, and other things of this sort”; nevertheless, the sinner cannot do ‘totum bonum sibi connaturale, ita quod in nullo deficiat’” (*God’s Grace*, p. 165, n.38). Thomas reinforces this position in I-II.85, on the effects of sin, where he argues that the good of the soul is wounded but not all together lost. Rudi te Velde provides a helpful treatment of the effects of sin on human nature in “Evil, Sin, and Death: Thomas Aquinas on Original Sin,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 143-166, especially pp. 159-63.

by the help of medicine.”³⁵ It is conceptually possible for a sinner to make some of the movements of health – loving God or neighbor for the right reasons some of the time. With that in mind, one may conceive of a sinner crying out to God for mercy, as in the case with the publican in Luke’s Gospel (18:13). Thomas, however, qualifies such prayer: “Yet God hears the prayer of sinners if it proceeds from a good natural desire, not as if from justice, because the sinner does not merit this, but out of pure mercy, provided however that the person observes the four conditions given above, namely, that he asks for himself things necessary for salvation, piously, and perseveringly.”³⁶ Here again, mercy cannot be reckoned a reward, but it is something caused by prayer; the publican’s cry for mercy impetrates or brings about *pura misericordia* as a secondary cause.

Thus it would seem that the act of justification may be anticipated by the sinner’s impetration, and she may be understood to be a cause of her own justification. As if sensing the potential misunderstanding of this position as something that invites a sense of cooperation in justification, Thomas sets down two definitive conditions on the sinner’s impetration. First: “It ought to be said that prayer is not meritorious without sanctifying grace, just as any other virtuous act. And yet even that prayer which impetrates sanctifying grace proceeds from some grace (*aliqua gratia*), as if from a gratuitous gift, because prayer itself is a kind of gift from God, as Augustine states in the book on perseverance (*On the Perseverance of the Saints*, 23).”³⁷ The prayer which impetrates sanctifying grace, even the first grace leading to justification, depends on a prior gift of grace which Thomas glosses as a *gratuito dono*. Any efficacious acts of impetration by the sinner thus fall into a larger causal sequence – beginning with divine predestination – in which impetration is made possible by prior divine

³⁵ *ST* I-II:109, 2 c.

³⁶ *ST* II-II:83, 16 c. Thomas includes this list of four conditions as part of a longer commentary tradition on the conditions for effective impetration; he discusses these conditions explicitly in the *Scriptum* (IV, d. 15, q. 4, a.7, q.3). In the *Summa* he references the list but uses these conditions to describe the proper form of petitionary prayer, specifically, that these conditions reflect a soul that has subjected itself to God in worship. The conditions are therefore less a prerequisite list of things “to do” and more a reflection of the natural disposition for prayer and worship. For a detailed discussion of the conditions for impetration, see Tugwell, pp. 41-43.

³⁷ *ST* II-II:83, 15 ad.1. Thomas’s reference to Augustine’s *On the Gift of Perseverance* is significant. Scholars have argued that Thomas encountered Augustine’s anti-Massilian works sometime in the 1260s prior to his completion of the treatise on grace. See Wawrykow, *God’s Grace*, 269-276, especially notes 16 and 18, his “Perseverance in 13th-Century Theology: the Augustinian Contribution” *Augustinian Studies* 22 (1991): 125-40, and Max Seckler’s *Instinkt und Glaubenswille nach Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: MatthiasGrünewald, 1961) 90–98.

gifts.³⁸ The language of operative *auxilium* seems particularly fitting here inasmuch as it moves the will, “*quae prius malum volebat*,” to begin willing the good.³⁹ The sinner’s cries for mercy are cries moved by God through divine *auxilium*. Second, Thomas clarifies the origin of all impetrating prayer: “It is said that prayer originates principally in faith not for its efficacy in meriting . . . but for its efficacy in impetrating, because a person has knowledge of God’s omnipotence and mercy through faith, from which prayer impetrates what it petitions.”⁴⁰ A sinner cannot obtain divine mercy apart from the gift of faith which disposes her to belief in God’s power and God’s mercy; moreover, the disposition of faith is what makes proper petition possible because, at least in that instance, the sinner has subjected her mind and will to God as highest good. Thomas thus describes the second step in justification, that is, a movement toward God *in faith*. Such a movement is impossible without the habitual gift of faith.

IV. God’s Grace and Human Impetration

Thomas effectively hedges the language of impetration with preventive operative graces. This is especially the case for the sinner who has no just standing before God and cannot cooperate with grace so as to earn justification. He is *movetur a Deo* from injustice to justice. And yet Thomas maintains the language of impetration as meaningful for sinners and their justification. They can “obtain” justification through their prayers. Even as the sinner’s impetration is not cooperative, Thomas affirms it as consequential for at least two important reasons. The first pertains to Thomas’s theological anthropology and

³⁸ Thomas consistently sets salutary human action into a larger sequence of divine causality and ordination so that, while human beings play decisive and consequential roles in their forward progress on the journey, they do so because their actions flow from God’s providence, expressed in predestination and the provision of certain operative grace which capacitate and move the recipient to contingent and free action. See my *The Wayfarer’s End: Divine Rewards in the Theology of Bonaventure and Aquinas*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, forthcoming); see also See Corey Barnes’s “Natural Final Causality and Providence in Aquinas,” *New Blackfriars* 95 (2014), pp. 349-61.

³⁹ In fact, in II-II:83, 2, “Whether it is *Conveniens* to Pray,” Thomas writes: “It is said that it is not necessary to pray to God in order to manifest our needs or desires but so that we ourselves may consider of the necessity of having recourse to *divinum auxilium* in these things” (ad.1). Later Thomas will add that “it is said that the one who prays in spirit and in truth approaches prayer through the movement (*instinctu*) of the Spirit, even if the mind thereafter wanders through weakness” (*ST* II-II:83, 13 ad.1).

⁴⁰ *ST* II-II:83, 15 ad. 3. Thomas’s stress on faith as the beginning of prayer (*oratio innititur principaliter fidei*) follows the same stress in the order in the discussion of justification where the soul turns to God in faith. This beginning finds its completion in charity. See *ST* I-II:113, 4 ad.1 where Thomas speaks of *fides formata* or faith formed by love.

his commitment that *gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*. Impetration aptly illustrates the way in which God's operative grace may unfold in the sinner's contingent nature. God's helping and habitual operations do not move human beings as they might move stones, or mules, or even angels. Rather, such graces build up nature as rational and free. In the case of the sinner, grace moves or arouses the intellect to an awareness of its situation. Divine auxilium prompts the sinner to recognize sin as dangerous, as alienating the sinner from God and others, and as risking the communion and happiness that God desires for him. It also awakens the sinner to see perhaps some disorder in his appetites, willing, and knowing. Sinners see that they are sick and cannot make all the movements of health without medicine; in this instance operative grace naturally follows the sinner's newfound awareness of need. Thus moved and opened, God can infuse the habitual gift of faith, a kind of medicine that heals and capacitates the intellect to believe in God as good and ultimate end. Operative graces reveal themselves in the impetrating cry of contrition: "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." This prayer flows freely from the intellect and will which have been inspired and informed by grace, and it may obtain the ends which God wills for the sinner – reconciliation, healing and communion with God. Impetration for Thomas thus illustrates how operative graces build up nature even as a thing moved by God.

Second, impetration reflects Thomas's understanding of causality and God's omni-causal and efficient direction of the cosmos. It complexifies simple conceptions of causality. Causes typically receive credit for their action, and on the face of it, it seems that the sinner has no consequential role in her justification; she is a thing moved. Impetration provides meaningful language for the free will's movement; it indicates movement which is causal in obtaining justification without deserving the outcome. Thomas thus outlines a kind of secondary causality even for sinners which is apart from merit. It manages the tension that oscillates between Thomas's commitment to God as operative cause of justification and the free, consequential motion of sinners who are exhorted to seek God's mercy. Speaking of prayer's relation to predestination, he writes:

In another way, a person is said to be helped by another through whom he carries out his work, as a lord through a servant. In this way God is helped by us; inasmuch as we carry out God's ordination according to I Cor 3:9: "We are God's co-workers." Nor is this on account of any defect in God's power, but because God uses intermediate causes so that the beauty of order in [all] things may be preserved; and also so that God may communicate the dignity of causality to creatures.⁴¹

⁴¹ *ST* I:23, 8 ad.2.

The prayer of impetration does more than illustrate how operative grace unfolds through contingent human nature though that, itself, is quite important. It ultimately draws human beings up into God's plan of providence, giving them a role in bringing God's will to bear in the world. And in doing so, God's grace – the love of the Trinity made explicit in Christ – is placed at the center of the economy of salvation. By grace God saves and perfects human nature, and by grace God shares the causality of salvation with its very subjects.

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