

## “I Go To Prepare a Place For You”: *The Ascension of Christ as Cause of Salvation*

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The teaching of St. Thomas on salvation is centered on Christ's Passion and the cross. That Christ's Passion is the cause of salvation is a teaching without dispute and expressed clearly in the *Summa Theologiae* where St. Thomas deals with the topic at length. Questions 48 and 49 address both the efficiency and the effects of Christ's Passion, with a dozen articles between them. In question 48 he states that “Christ by His Passion merited salvation, not only for himself, but likewise for all His members,”<sup>1</sup> one of numerous places where man's salvation is explicitly connected to Christ's Passion. However, St. Thomas does not allow the cross to dominate the soteriological discussion to the exclusion of the rest of the events of the Paschal Mystery: he is adamant that the death,<sup>2</sup> burial,<sup>3</sup> descent into hell,<sup>4</sup> resurrection,<sup>5</sup> and ascension of the Lord<sup>6</sup> also contribute in their own way to the plan of redemption.

<sup>1</sup> ST III, q. 48, a. 1, resp. All citations from the *Summa Theologiae*, unless otherwise noted, are from the translations done by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> cf. ST III, q. 50, a. 6. The death of Christ is a cause of salvation not by way of merit, as was his passion, but “by way of causality,” since even in death the body of Christ was still united to the Godhead, thereby destroying death's sway over soul and body.

<sup>3</sup> cf. ST III, q. 51, a. 1. In his response to the second objection, Thomas states: “As Christ's death wrought our salvation, so likewise did His burial.” Thomas sees the burial of Christ as completing the mystery of his death, into which the faithful are baptized as he relates in the body of the article: “Wherefore the baptized likewise who through Christ's death die to sins, are as it were buried with Christ by immersion, according to Rom. 6:4: *We are buried together with Christ by baptism into death.*”

<sup>4</sup> cf. ST III, q. 52, a. 1. Christ's descent into hell is the specific manner in which his Passion is applied to those who had died, as the Sacraments are the manner in which the merits of his Passion are applied to the living.

<sup>5</sup> cf. ST III, q. 53, a. 1, ad. 3: “Christ's Passion wrought our salvation, properly speaking, by removing evils; but the Resurrection did so as the beginning and exemplar of all good things.” See also ST III, q. 56, a. 1, ad. 3 where Thomas also teaches that Christ's resurrection is the efficient and exemplar cause of the resurrection of every other body.

<sup>6</sup> cf. ST III, q. 5, a. 6.

It is the purpose of this essay to examine in depth St. Thomas' teaching on the place which the Ascension occupies in the Paschal Mystery, and its soteriological contribution. In his book *Ascension and Ecclesia*, Douglas Farrow points out that the doctrine of the ascension is largely passed over in contemporary discussion: "Once it was seen as the climax of the mystery of Christ... Once too it was celebrated as the crown of Christian feasts and the ground of the sacraments. Today it is something of an embarrassment."<sup>7</sup> Though this may be the case with modern scholarship,<sup>8</sup> tainted by the Enlightenment presupposition to ignore anything that smacks of superstition and myth (as the mystery of the ascension does to some), this has not been the situation through much of the Christian tradition. I contend that for St. Thomas, the Common Doctor of the faith, the ascension occupies a pivotal space in his theology and understanding of the mission of Christ.

Though an investigation of this sort could be undertaken in various ways, I would like to make the case that St. Thomas understands the ascension according to the following threefold schema: (1) that Christ's humanity is glorified as a reward for his obedience unto death, and that his glorification makes space for mankind in heaven; (2) that Christ, as the eternal high priest, brings his blood into heaven before the Father to atone for sin and make intercession for the Church; and finally (3) that Christ's ascension inaugurates the kingdom, and from his place in heaven bestows gifts on the Church in the person of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, I hope to show that even though the *Summa Theologiae* takes up specific questions on the mystery of the ascension, it is in St. Thomas' commentaries on Scripture<sup>9</sup> that his understanding of the event stands forth most clearly. It is my hope that this essay will contribute in a small way towards recovering an understanding of the ascension as the crowning mystery of the Christ event, for as the Catechism of Trent teaches, "to the ascension, as to their end, are referred all other mysteries, and that in it is contained their whole perfection and completion."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Farrow notes this demythologizing tendency: "Our perfection or deification was gradually detached from its dependence on the heavenly humanity of Jesus, belief in which seemed to become more and more difficult... In more radical circles, those of Hegel and Strauss, for example, the ascent of the Son became a symbol of the ascent of Man." See Douglas Farrow, "Karl Barth on the Ascension: An Appreciation and Critique," *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 2.2 (July 2000), 129.

<sup>9</sup> Specifically his treatments of the Gospel of John, the Epistle to the Ephesians, and the Epistle to the Hebrews.

<sup>10</sup> Catechism of the Council of Trent, Part I, Chapter 7.4. See Theodore Alois Buckley, *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (London: George Routledge and Co., 1852).

*I: The Glorification of Christ's Humanity*

The glorification of Christ is a common theme in the New Testament, so common in fact that we must make do with but a few examples since a complete treatment of the matter is impossible in the limited space present here. Though the entire Gospel of John deals with the concept of glory, chapter 17 is perhaps the most conspicuous of the passages that deal directly with Christ's glorification, as he himself prays for this very thing to be accomplished: "Father, the hour has come, glorify your son."<sup>11</sup> The beautiful hymn in Philippians declares that it is on account of the Son's obedience that he is exalted and glorified: "Therefore, God has highly exalted him, and given to him the name above every name, that in the name of Jesus every knee might bend, in the heavens and in the earth and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord unto the glory of God the Father."<sup>12</sup> The Epistle to the Hebrews begins in praise of the Son: "Having made purification of sins, he took his seat at the right hand of majesty in the heights, having become so much greater than the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs."<sup>13</sup>

It is clear from the examples given that Christ's glorification and cession to the right hand of the Father is intimately connected to his obedience in the event of the Passion. Though John speaks of the Passion as the hour of glory, it is certainly not to the exclusion of the ascension; the Philippians hymn and the Epistle to the Hebrews, however, are very explicit in their identification of Christ's ascension as the definitive moment of exaltation and glorification. As a direct result of Christ's obedience unto death,<sup>14</sup> he is glorified, and exalted above every creature. With St. John, St. Thomas can affirm that Christ possesses glory even before his ascension,<sup>15</sup> but it is clear that he understands this glorification to be made complete in the ascension. "By ascending into heaven Christ acquired no addition to His essential glory either in body or in soul: nevertheless He did acquire something as to the fittingness of place, which pertains to the well-being of glory."<sup>16</sup> As the hypostatically united God-man Christ possessed glory of the soul from the first moment of his conception,<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Jn 17:1. All translations of Scripture are my own and are taken from Michael W. Holmes, *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition*, (Lexham Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Phil 2:9-11.

<sup>13</sup> Heb 1:3b-4.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Phil 2:8.

<sup>15</sup> One need only read the account of the Transfiguration in the Synoptic Gospels to realize that even the Apostles understood that Christ possessed a certain kind of heavenly glory before his resurrection and ascension.

<sup>16</sup> ST III, q. 57, a. 1, ad. 2.

<sup>17</sup> cf. ST III, q. 34, a. 4, ad. 1; q. 45, a. 1, resp.

but his body did not possess the same glory as he had not yet suffered the Passion. "That the glory of his soul did not overflow into his body from the first moment of Christ's conception was due to a certain Divine dispensation . . . [that] he might fulfill the mysteries of our redemption in a passible body."<sup>18</sup>

Here, then, is the distinction: though Christ possessed glory from the first moment of the Incarnation, it was of his soul alone. The glorification of Christ's body was a direct result of the resurrection,<sup>19</sup> and his ultimate glorification and exaltation came to pass in his ascension into heaven. The Epistle to the Hebrews states that Christ "took his seat at the right hand of the throne of God,"<sup>20</sup> and St. Thomas, commenting on this text, states the following: "the exaltation of Christ's humanity was the reward for his passion."<sup>21</sup> This exaltation and glorification, moreover, is the efficient and exemplar cause of our hoped-for future glorification and ascension into heaven. "Christ's ascension is the direct cause of our ascension, as by beginning it in him who is our head, with whom the members must be united."<sup>22</sup> St. Thomas goes on: "Christ by once ascending into heaven acquired for himself and for us in perpetuity the right and worthiness of a heavenly dwelling-place."<sup>23</sup>

What Thomas states here by way of passing is dealt with more in depth in his commentary on the Gospel of John, specifically his lecture on John 14:1-3. In discussing the purpose of chapters 13 through 15 of John's Gospel, St. Thomas states that it is in chapter 14 that "[Christ] comforts them in regard to his going away."<sup>24</sup> In the beginning verses of John 14 Jesus comforts his disciples, telling them: "In the house of my father there are many rooms. If there were not, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? If I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will gather you to myself, in order that where I am you also shall be."<sup>25</sup> Though St. Thomas gives a lengthy exposition on the meaning of this passage, one point stands out: "When [Jesus] says, *in the house of my Father are many mansions*, he adds the promise that it is through Christ that

<sup>18</sup> ST III, q. 45, a. 2, resp.

<sup>19</sup> cf. ST III, q. 54, a. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Heb 12:2.

<sup>21</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, cap. 12.1: Exaltatio enim humanitas Christi fuit praemium passionis eius. The Latin text of St. Thomas' commentaries on Scripture are taken from the compilation housed at [www.dhspriority.com](http://www.dhspriority.com). All translation of the commentaries are my own.

<sup>22</sup> ST III, q. 57, a. 6, ad. 2.

<sup>23</sup> ST III, q. 57, a. 6, ad. 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, cap. 14.1: confortat eos contra primum, scilicet contra eius recessum.

<sup>25</sup> Jn 14:2-3.

they shall draw near and be introduced to the Father."<sup>26</sup> It is clear that Thomas understands this "place" of which Jesus speaks to be both the body of Christ<sup>27</sup> and God himself.<sup>28</sup> However, Thomas' preferred interpretation for the "place" is the latter, that it refers primarily to God himself, and that even though this preparation was accomplished by Christ in the eternal predestination, "[Christ] even prepared [this place] in his going away."<sup>29</sup> In sum, it is the ascension of Christ that completes the glorification of Christ's soul and body, and manifests to all creation his pre-eminent place and glory with the Father: "For the complement to Christ's glorification was in his ascension."<sup>30</sup>

## *II: Jesus Christ our High Priest*

Although implicit elsewhere in the New Testament, Christ's priesthood is most explicitly considered in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "He had to be likened to his brethren in all things, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in those things which pertain to God, in order to make atonement for the sins of the people."<sup>31</sup> Christ's ascension does not, therefore, simply reward his humanity with glorification and become the locus of our future dwelling place with God. The ascension directly completes Christ's saving work on the cross by way of merit, atonement (or satisfaction), redemption, and sacrifice. As St. Thomas states:

Christ's Passion . . . in so far as it is compared with the will of Christ's soul it acts in a meritorious manner: considered as being within Christ's very flesh, it acts by way of satisfaction, inasmuch as we are liberated by it from the debt of punishment; while inasmuch as we are freed

<sup>26</sup> *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, cap. 14.1: cum dicit in domo patris mei mansiones multae sunt, subiungit promissionem quae est ut per Christum accedant, et introducantur ad patrem.

<sup>27</sup> "Since the house of any person is that in which they dwell, that in which God dwells is called the house of God . . . On this account, the house of God is twofold. One is the Church militant . . . the other is [the Church] triumphant" [cum uniuscuiusque domus sit in qua habitat, illa dicitur domus Dei in qua habitat Deus . . . Duplex est ergo domus Dei. Una est militans Ecclesia . . . Alia est triumphans]. (*Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, cap. 14.1).

<sup>28</sup> "But the house of the Father is not only where he himself dwells, but [the house] is his own self, for he exists in himself. It is into this [latter] house that we are gathered" [Sed domus patris dicitur non solum illa quam ipse inhabitat, sed etiam ipsemet, quia ipse in seipso est. Et in hac domo nos colligit]. (*Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, cap. 14.1).

<sup>29</sup> *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, cap. 14.1: Praeparavit autem per recessum suum.

<sup>30</sup> *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, cap. 14.1: Complementum autem glorificationis Christi fuit in eius ascensione.

<sup>31</sup> Heb 2:17.

from the servitude of guilt, it acts by way of redemption: but in so far as we are reconciled with God it acts by way of sacrifice.<sup>32</sup>

The ascension, as the Epistle to the Hebrews makes clear, takes what was accomplished on the cross into heaven. "When Christ arrived as high priest of the good things to come through the greater and more perfect tent not made by hands - that is, not of this creation - nor through the blood of goats and calves but through his own blood, he entered once for all into the holies, obtaining an eternal redemption."<sup>33</sup> The author of Hebrews clearly sees the ascension through the lens of sacrifice, perfecting and bringing to fulfillment what was begun on the cross. It is this same sentiment that Marshall sees present in the Lukan account of the ascension, noting that Luke's use of ἀναφέρω is meant to call to mind the way that sacrifices are borne up to God.<sup>34</sup>

It is precisely as our eternal high priest that Christ enters heaven, for as Hebrews notes: "So if he were upon earth, he would not be a priest."<sup>35</sup> In keeping with his understanding of Christ's work as a trajectory,<sup>36</sup> encompassing his entire life from conception to glorification, St. Thomas concludes that "if Christ was as yet upon earth, thus, namely, that he had not yet ascended, he would not be a priest, for his priesthood would not have been completed."<sup>37</sup> As the high priest, he fulfills the role which the high priest of the old covenant occupied, especially in regard to his work in the ritual of Yom Kippur.<sup>38</sup> Having made atonement for the sins of the people, he has "passed through the heavens"<sup>39</sup> and "entered into the inner sanctuary of the veil"<sup>40</sup> where he fulfills the ritual of Yom Kippur. Christ brings about the reality to which the Yom Kippur rite tended, "for [the old high priest] enters with blood into the figurative holy place; but Christ enters into the holy place through his own blood,

<sup>32</sup> ST III, q. 48, a. 6, ad. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Heb 9:11-12.

<sup>34</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 909.

<sup>35</sup> Heb 8:4.

<sup>36</sup> Farrow comes to much the same conclusion: "Jesus' ascension, considered as a priestly act, begins already on the cross; or rather his whole life is seen as an act of self-offering that culminates on the cross. In the ascension this offering is received on high. It is Jesus in the totality of what he was and did who 'passed through the heavens' to the divine sanctuary" *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 34.

<sup>37</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, cap. 8.1: si Christus adhuc esset super terram, ita scilicet quod nondum ascendisset, non esset sacerdos, quia non complevisset sacerdotium suum.

<sup>38</sup> cf. Heb 9:7-12; 9:25.

<sup>39</sup> Heb 4:14.

<sup>40</sup> Heb 6:19.

that is, the heavenly holy place."<sup>41</sup> In his teaching on the Old Law, St. Thomas is very explicit about the purpose of the ceremonial precepts: "The end of the ceremonial precepts was twofold: for they were ordained to the Divine worship, for that particular time, and to the foreshadowing of Christ."<sup>42</sup> The figurative reason for the tabernacle and the holy of holies, moreover, was to point to the time when Christ would come as the high priest of the New Covenant who would bring God's people into grace and glory. "The inner tabernacle, which was called the Holy of Holies, signified either the glory of heaven or the spiritual state of the New Law to come. To the latter state Christ brought us; and this was signified by the high-priest entering alone, once a year, into the Holy of Holies."<sup>43</sup>

When Christ ascends and enters into the presence of the Father, he takes his own blood shed upon the cross to make atonement for the sins of the world. "For Christ has not entered into a sanctuary made by hands, the antitype of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to be manifest before the face of God on our behalf. Nor [has he entered] in order to offer himself many times, as the high priest used to enter into the sanctuary once a year with blood not his own."<sup>44</sup> Commenting on this text, St. Thomas remarks that it "alludes to the rite of the old law, whereby the high priest who enters the holy of holies stands in the presence of the propitiatory that he might pray for the people; thus also Christ enters heaven . . . that he might stand before God for our salvation,"<sup>45</sup> and having come into the presence of the Father, "he ascended that he might prepare the way for us."<sup>46</sup> In his passion and death, Jesus offered himself as both priest and victim in the perfect sacrifice once for all to atone for sin; in his ascension, he is glorified and lives forever to intercede for mankind before the Father<sup>47</sup> and, in virtue of the presence of his glorified humanity, he has prepared the way for the mystical body of Christ as well.<sup>48</sup> Not only has Christ taken up his own humanity into heaven, but as our head he has prepared the way for us and led us there,

<sup>41</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, cap. 4.3: Ille enim intrat cum sanguine in sancta figuralia; sed Christus per proprium sanguinem intravit in sancta, id est, sacra caelestia.

<sup>42</sup> ST I-II, q. 102, a. 2, resp.

<sup>43</sup> ST I-II, q. 102, a. 4, ad. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Heb 9:24-25.

<sup>45</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, cap. 9.5: alludendo ritui veteris legis, secundum quam pontifex qui intrabat sancta sanctorum, stabat coram propitiatorio ut oraret pro populo: ita et Christus intravit caelum . . . ut astaret Deo pro salute nostra. The rite that St. Thomas is referring to here is clearly Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, narrated in Leviticus 16.

<sup>46</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, cap. 9.5: enim ascendit ut pararet nobis viam.

<sup>47</sup> cf. Heb 7:25.

<sup>48</sup> "The presentation of Jesus' perfected humanity before God (flesh and blood no longer subject to death and corruption) has finally resolved the problem of sin and opened the way for God's people to gain access to his heavenly throne and the enduring world to come." See David M. Moffitt, "Unveiling Jesus' Flesh: A Fresh Assessment of the Relationship

granting us "confidence for entrance into the holies in the blood of Jesus, a new and living way which he inaugurated for us through the veil, that is his flesh."<sup>49</sup> Thus St. Thomas: "Therefore this is the way to go into heaven. It is new because before Christ no one had found it. . . . And so the one who desires to ascend ought to adhere in him as a member to the head."<sup>50</sup> Since Christ our head has passed into glory, we must cleave to him in order that we might do the same as members of his body.

In the ascension, "he prepared the way for our ascent into heaven. . . . for since he is our head the members must follow whither the head has gone."<sup>51</sup> This is the ground upon which St. Thomas understands Christ's promise to prepare a place for his disciples in the house of the Father: as members of the body of Christ, Christians already possess a certain access to the Father through Jesus (who is now seated at the right hand of the Father) and have hope that they too may one day come to share in the glory which the Son now possesses. As Brian Donne has shown, this access is intimately linked with the constant intercession of Christ before the Father in heaven:

It is by his Ascension that Christ has borne our humanity, which he assumed at the Incarnation, to the throne of the Godhead. . . . He continues as Heavenly Intercessor in the widest possible sense, since his intercession is more than prayer; it is his entire heavenly life by which he enters fully into every human situation in a way which was not possible during the days of his flesh. Moreover, his perpetual intercession is no less needful for our acceptance than was his death on Calvary, because his presence before the Father is the standing guarantee of our being presented and accepted in heaven.<sup>52</sup>

Not only does this prepare the way, but in taking his glorified humanity into heaven "the very showing of himself in the human nature which he took with him to heaven is a pleading for us, so that for the very reason that God so exalted human nature in Christ, he may take pity on them for whom the Son of God took human nature."<sup>53</sup> As Thomas understands it, this is the result of Christ's intercession for us before the face of God: in presenting his humanity to the Father,

Between the Veil and Jesus' Flesh in Hebrews 10:20," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (2010), 72.

<sup>49</sup> Heb 10:19-20.

<sup>50</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, cap. 10.2: Haec est ergo via eundi in caelum. Et est nova quia ante Christum nullus invenit eam. . . . Et ideo qui vult ascendere, debet ipsi tamquam membrum capiti suo adhaerere.

<sup>51</sup> ST III, q. 57, a. 6, resp.

<sup>52</sup> Brian K. Donne, "The Significance of the Ascension of Jesus Christ in the New Testament," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 30 (1977), 564-565.

<sup>53</sup> ST III, q. 57, a. 6, resp.



the same humanity that suffered and died for our salvation, Christ's very body is a living intercessory prayer.

### *III: The Inauguration of the Kingdom*

In commenting on the mystery of the ascension, St. Thomas has made clear that in this mystery Christ has first, as head, prepared the way for our ascent and, second, entered into heaven as high priest to intercede for us before the Father. Rounding out his threefold schema of the saving purpose of the ascension, he concludes thirdly "that being established in his heavenly seat as God and Lord, He might send down gifts upon men, according to Eph. 4:10: *he ascended above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.*"<sup>54</sup> In his commentary on this passage in Ephesians, St. Thomas gives what one might call a pithy summary of the ascension, and even the Christ event as a whole: "he descended that he might ascend."<sup>55</sup> Consonant with his teleological view of history as a whole, and based on a careful reading of Scripture, St. Thomas is able to see that everything which Christ accomplished in the flesh served the purpose of salvation, and that every mystery of his life was recapitulated and taken up into the event of the ascension. Though his teaching on the ascension in the *Summa* places it under the ratio of efficient cause alone, here St. Thomas seems to intimate that we might also view the ascension as the final cause of the Incarnation: the Word was made flesh in order that he might accomplish the mystery of our redemption on the cross and be glorified.

Ephesians 4 gives a wonderful summary of the *ad extra* mission of the Son into the economy of redemption: "Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.' But what is 'he ascended' if not that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth? The one who has descended is himself also the one who ascended above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things."<sup>56</sup> Christ's act of descending into hell and then being taken up and glorified is an act of liberation: he frees all of those held captive by sin and the devil. "He ascends, but not alone, for *he led captivity captive*, those, namely, whom the devil had captured. For the human race was held captive, and the saints who had died in charity, and who had merited glory, they had been detained as captives by the devil in limbo . . . Christ therefore liberated those who had been held captive and led them with himself into heaven."<sup>57</sup> Not only those in

<sup>54</sup> ST III, q. 57, a. 6, resp.

<sup>55</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, cap. 4.3: *descenderat, ut ascenderet.*

<sup>56</sup> Eph 4:8-10.

<sup>57</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, cap. 4.3: *Ascendens, inquam, sed non solus, quia captivam duxit captivitatem, eos scilicet quos Diabolus captivaverat. Humanum enim genus captivatum erat, et sancti in charitate decedentes, qui meruerant gloriam, in captivitate*

hell, however, but those who are alive as well: "[Christ] made them the slaves of justice . . . and thus led them in a certain way into a captivity, though not into destruction but unto salvation."<sup>58</sup>

As Thomas notes, however, "for not only had he torn men away from the captivity of the Devil, and subjected them to his own servitude, but he even gave them spiritual goods. Hence it is said that *he gave gifts to men*, namely of grace and glory."<sup>59</sup> What are these gifts, then? Primarily it is the gift of the Holy Spirit: "It is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the paraclete shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."<sup>60</sup> In his treatment of the Divine missions, Thomas says that "the Holy Spirit is possessed by man, and dwells within him, in the very gift itself of sanctifying grace."<sup>61</sup> St. Thomas teaches that "Gift" is itself a proper name of the third person of the Trinity,<sup>62</sup> a concept at the heart of the New Testament witness to the person and mission of the Holy Spirit.<sup>63</sup>

Not only is the Holy Spirit the gift which Christ sends from heaven, but there are two other well-attested senses of "gift" present in the New Testament associated with Christ and the Spirit. The first is the gift of salvation/justification. St. Paul's letter to the Romans is practically a primer on the salvation accomplished through the gift of grace. Early on he states that justification is accomplished "as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus,"<sup>64</sup> and examples could be multiplied both within the letter to the Romans and in the other Pauline literature.<sup>65</sup> The other major use of the term concerns the gifts of the Spirit, gifts which are given through grace: "Now to each one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ."<sup>66</sup> So then it is the righteous gift of Christ which imparts gifts to the faithful, gifts which are primarily sanctifying grace in the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit and, secondarily, actual graces in such forms as prophecy and healing.<sup>67</sup> Far from

Diaboli detinebantur quasi captivi in Limbo . . . Hanc ergo captivitatem Christus liberavit, et secum duxit in caelum.

<sup>58</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, cap. 4.3: servos fecit iustitiae . . . et sic quodammodo eos in captivitatem duxit, non ad perniciem sed ad salutem.

<sup>59</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, cap. 4.3: Non solum autem homines a Diaboli captivitate eripuit, et suae servituti subiecit, sed etiam eos spiritualibus bonis dotavit. Unde subditur *dedit dona hominibus*, scilicet gratiae et gloriae.

<sup>60</sup> Jn 16:7.

<sup>61</sup> ST I, q. 43, a. 3, resp.

<sup>62</sup> cf. ST I, q. 38.

<sup>63</sup> cf. Jn 20:22; Acts 2:38; 10:45.

<sup>64</sup> Rom 3:24.

<sup>65</sup> cf. Rom 5:15-17; 11:5-6; 1 Cor 4:7; Eph 2:8.

<sup>66</sup> Eph 4:7.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 2:12-14; 12:4-31.

being a kind of theological appendix, the ascension "is based on a complete plan for the salvation of the world and on the Presence of Christ Glorified in the Church, that Presence being realised through the Holy Spirit in his different gifts of grace, a mysterious but real presence."<sup>68</sup> The absence of Christ is actually a transformed type of presence, a presence only possible through his departure and sending of the Spirit. Once again St. Thomas, as *magister sacra pagina*, understands the relevant passage in Ephesians to be saying exactly this: "The fruit of the ascension is *that he might fill all things*, that is that he might fill every race of men with spiritual gifts."<sup>69</sup>

#### IV: Conclusion

In his first letter to Timothy, St. Paul includes a dense creedal statement that sums up the Paschal Mystery and concludes with Christ's glorification: "The mystery of our religion is most certainly great: He was made manifest in the flesh, and justified in the spirit; seen by angels, and proclaimed among the nations; believed on in the cosmos, and taken up in glory."<sup>70</sup> It is the same Christ who was incarnate of the virgin Mary. The same Christ who lived, suffered, and died upon the cross. The same Christ who was raised from the dead and taken up in glory, all as the most profound gesture of God's great love for mankind. In the words of St. Thomas: "For he descends as the Son of God, assuming human nature, but he ascended the son of man (according to human nature) to the sublimity of immortal life. And thus he is the same: the son of God who descended and the son of man who ascended."<sup>71</sup> It is this reality - that the preexistent Son of God took on flesh, suffered the Passion, was raised from the dead and then ascended into glory - of which St. Thomas stands in awe in his wide ranging teaching on the ascension of Christ.

In preparing a place for us, sending the Spirit upon the Church, and making perpetual intercession for us at the right hand of the Father, Jesus Christ has not abandoned his Church. Far from it, he has been made present in a wholly new way, "'Ascension' does not mean departure into a remote region of the cosmos but, rather, the continuing closeness that the disciples experience so strongly that it

<sup>68</sup> Boris Bobrinsky, "Ascension and Liturgy: The Ascension and High Priesthood of Christ in Relation to Worship," *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 3.4 (1959), 23.

<sup>69</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, cap. 4.3: ascensionis fructum, cum dicit *ut adimpleret omnia*, id est omne genus hominum spiritualibus donis repleret.

<sup>70</sup> 1 Tim 3:16.

<sup>71</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, cap. 4.3: Descendit enim, sicut dictum est, filius Dei assumendo humanam naturam, ascendit autem filius hominis secundum humanam naturam ad vitae immortalis sublimitatem. Et sic est idem filius Dei qui descendit et filius hominis qui ascendit.

becomes a source of lasting joy."<sup>72</sup> Not only this however, for though we possess not only the reality of grace but hope of glory and of one day passing through the portals of death to enter into the presence of God and into our home, the heavenly Jerusalem. The Epistle to the Hebrews ends with an exhortation to faithfulness in the following of Christ in light of one simple fact: "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is coming."<sup>73</sup> The ascension of Christ point ahead to our eschatological destination, "for our end is neither in the things of the law, nor in temporal things . . . but where Christ is . . . For it is to he himself that we desire to be transferred, as to our place and altar."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two: Holy Week* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 281.

<sup>73</sup> Heb 13:14.

<sup>74</sup> *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, cap. 13.2: Finis enim noster non sunt legalia, nec temporalia . . . sed ubi est Christus . . . Ad ipsum enim intendimus transferri, sicut ad locum et altare nostrum.