



Thomas Aquinas's and Herbert McCabe's Relational/Friendship Understanding of Christ's Passion

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that Thomas Aquinas's and Herbert McCabe's soteriological paradigms are immensely compatible with one another. In contrast to the presuppositions held by certain interpreters of Thomas, I contend that Aquinas, like McCabe, rejects a primarily juridical/transactional understanding of Christ's Passion, and, in light of this fact, it is a mistake to assert that his soteriology is a precursor to later penal-substitutionary conceptions of the atonement. Once Aquinas's and McCabe's teachings are correctly situated within a relational/friendship rather than juridical context, their similarities and mutual aversion to penal-substitutionary atonement becomes explicit. Likewise, after appropriately identifying McCabe's indebtedness to Aquinas's thought, one can perceive his unique and substantial contribution to the Church's understanding of Christ's salvific work. The comparison between Aquinas and McCabe, in particular, provides clarity to a proper conception of the intrinsic disordering of sin and the essential character of Christ's meritorious love and obedience offered to God the Father.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, Herbert McCabe, Satisfaction, Soteriology, Sacraments

Introduction

In a recent book dedicated to Herbert McCabe's theology, Franco Manni concludes that McCabe's soteriology 'is quite far from the Anselmian model of "vicarious atonement" and, on this point, he

differs also not only from Calvin but also from Aquinas'.¹ Manni continues to offer a few other atonement theories which are congruent with McCabe's portrayal of Christ's Passion. Specifically, he emphasizes McCabe's propensity to be drawn to ways of understanding Christ's work which reject the fundamental premises of theories like penal-substitutionary atonement.² It seems, according to Manni's interpretation, that Aquinas and McCabe differ in their notions of the penal/judicial nature of Christ's atonement. His assertion of the disparity between McCabe's and Thomas's depictions of Christ's saving work, at first glance, seem quite plausible. One of the reasons for this perceived disparity is the obvious fact that the rhetorical and presentational style of the two theologians differs significantly. Likewise, McCabe's writings are offered after centuries of the development of penal-substitutionary atonement as a dominant paradigm for conceptualizing Christ's redemptive activity, so it would be anachronistic to suppose that Thomas would or could have directly refuted this model of the atonement with the same vehemence and directness which McCabe did. With that said, these responses, in and of themselves, do not sufficiently dispel the seemingly apparent disjunction which exists between Thomas's and McCabe's soteriological commitments.

One area where they initially sound quite different from one another is in their use of the language of punishment in relation to Christ's death. For example, Thomas states, 'God's severity is thus manifested; he was unwilling to remit sin without punishment, as the apostle intimates when he says, He did not spare even his own Son.'³ This type of punitive language from Aquinas has led certain scholars to see him as a precursor to later formulations of penal-substitutionary atonement. Gerald O'Collins suggests that Aquinas 'helped to prepare the way, sadly, for the idea of Christ being punished and so propitiating an angry God by paying a redemptive ransom'.⁴ Geoffrey Butler goes so far to assert, 'In Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* one will find as clear a description of [penal-substitutionary atonement] as anywhere else in

¹ Franco Manni, *Herbert McCabe: Recollecting a Fragmented Legacy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), p. 233.

² Manni, *Herbert McCabe*, p. 233.

³ ST. III, q. 47, a. 3, ad. 3.

⁴ Gerald O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 137. O'Collins is explicit that Thomas did not adhere to a penal-substitutionary notion of the atonement, because, as he states, '[Thomas] denied that Christ's work of reconciliation meant that God began to love us again only after the punishment was effected and the ransom paid. God's love for us, he insisted, is everlasting; it is we who are changed by the washing away of sin and the offering of a suitable compensation.' Even with this caveat, O'Collins concludes that Thomas shifted Anselm's theory in the direction that made Christ the substitute and bearer of God's punishment for humanity's sin.

medieval theology.⁵ Nikolaus Breiner has insisted that Thomas's understanding of punishment is both remedial and retributive. For Thomas, according to Breiner, there are 'two purposes for satisfaction: remedying the sinner and penalizing them to establish an order of justice otherwise infringed upon by their past sin'.⁶ The mistake, Breiner believes, is to deny that Thomas's soteriology is shaped, in a significant way, by a juridical framework. He concludes, 'Aquinas does maintain that one way Christ's death functions is as a substitute bearer of a penalty or punishment, even one required by divine justice.'⁷ Aquinas, according to these readings, must be understood as sharing, even if not in every detail, a common conception of punishment as articulated by later adherents of penal-substitutionary atonement.

If these readings of Thomas are correct, then Manni would be quite right to see a genuine disjunction between Aquinas's and McCabe's interpretations of Christ's Passion. McCabe is emphatic that a retributive notion of punishment is unfitting for human societies and, most especially, the Triune God. He contends,

If God will not forgive us until his son has been tortured to death for us then God is a lot less forgiving than even we are sometimes. If a society feels itself somehow compensated for its loss by the satisfaction of watching the sufferings of a criminal, then society is being vengeful in a pretty infantile way. And if God is satisfied and compensated for sin by the suffering of mankind in Christ, he must be even more infantile.⁸

Interestingly, McCabe explicitly turns to Aquinas as the way to avoid thinking about God's saving activity in this way. To understand the nature of humanity's salvation in Christ in this manner, McCabe maintains, is to misunderstand Thomas's teaching on Christ's satisfaction. McCabe is convinced that if one allows Thomas to take him/her by the hand and guide him/her into the mystery of humanity's salvation, it will become clear that Jesus's death 'was the supreme expression of Christ's love of the Father and his obedience to the mission his Father had given'.⁹

In this essay, I will argue that the failure to see McCabe's soteriological proposals as Thomistic¹⁰ is due to a misapprehension of Aquinas' and McCabe's positions. Once Aquinas's and McCabe's teachings are correctly situated within a relational/friendship rather than juridical

⁵ Geoffrey Butler, 'Appeasement of a Monster God?: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of Penal Substitutionary Atonement', *Themelios* 46, no. 1 (2021): 136.

⁶ Nikolaus Breiner, 'Punishment and Satisfaction in Aquinas's Account of the Atonement', *Faith and Philosophy* 35, no. 2 (2018): p. 251.

⁷ Breiner, 'Punishment and Satisfaction in Aquinas's Account of the Atonement', p. 254.

⁸ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2012), p. 92.

⁹ McCabe, *God Matters*, 92.

¹⁰ McCabe would not have identified as a Thomist, in a strict sense, but Aquinas was clearly the most influential thinker on his philosophy and theology.

context, their similarities and mutual aversion to penal-substitutionary atonement will become explicit. Likewise, after appropriately identifying McCabe's indebtedness to Aquinas's thought, one can perceive his unique and substantial contribution to the Church's understanding of Christ's salvific work. Specifically, the comparison between Aquinas and McCabe will provide clarity to the proper conceptions of the intrinsic disordering of sin and Christ's meritorious love and obedience offered to God the Father.

Brief Description of Aquinas's and McCabe's Concept of Friendship

Before unpacking Thomas's and McCabe's narrations of Christ's Passion, it seems necessary to give a brief synopsis of their shared vision of the nature and possibility of humanity's friendship with God. Thomas, elaborating on Aristotle's definition of friendship, portrays the radical possibility of humanity's friendship with God.¹¹ McCabe notes the near absurdity of attempting to conceptualize the possibility of God loving his creatures, because, in reality, 'God cannot love his creatures as such – he can merely be kind to them.'¹² Like McCabe, Thomas, as Kerr summarizes, maintains that 'there can be no friendship, in the fullest sense, except between equals – but God has made us equals'.¹³ Presupposed by both Aquinas and McCabe is that God can only participate in a relationship of friendship with his creatures if He acts in such a way to divinize them. Denys Turner explains that this friendship exists 'because in some way the radical inequality of Creator and creature has been overcome, because there is, as it were, a new creation, establishing a new order of relationship between God and human beings'.¹⁴ Divinization becomes a central component to both thinkers' soteriologies, because Christ's saving work is ordered to actualizing a relationship of charity between God and humanity.

Likewise, Kerr maintains that 'what is crucial...is that there is no question of one partner's losing his or her identity in the other. The lover is not infatuated with the beloved. There is no annihilation of self in submission to, or submersion in, the absolute other.'¹⁵ God's divinizing his creatures is the supreme act of inviting them into unwavering freedom.¹⁶ In this relationship, like all real friendships, both parties

¹¹ ST. II-II q. 23, a. 1

¹² Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (London, England: Continuum, 2005), p. 7.

¹³ Fergus Kerr, 'Charity as Friendship', in *Language, Meaning, and God: Essays in Honour of Herbert McCabe*, ed. Brian Davies (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), p. 21.

¹⁴ Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 149.

¹⁵ Kerr, 'Charity as Friendship', p. 22.

¹⁶ McCabe, *God Still Matters*, p. 10. McCabe contends, 'To love others is: we can put it two ways: we can say it is to give them themselves or we can say it is to give them nothing

must be allowed to be fully themselves. Fundamentally, the teleological idea that pervades both thinkers' imagination is centered on God's redemptive work that makes humanity's freedom possible through uniting them to Himself in friendship.

The Place of Friendship in Aquinas's Soteriology

Aquinas's articulation of the nature of Christ's work on the cross is easily presupposed to fit within Anselm's exposition of satisfaction. It is clear that Aquinas has received significant insights from Anselm, but as Romanus Cessario also explains, 'Aquinas's model...suffers from the baggage accumulated from the satisfaction theory of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?* And from having been later conflated with substitutional theories of Christ's saving work.'¹⁷ The attempt to simply conflate Aquinas's understanding into a rearticulation of Anselm's conception of the atonement distorts the nuance and complex beauty of his theological vision. It is a vision that unwaveringly displays Christ's fitting actions as ones which make humanity's friendship with God possible. Rik Van Nieuwenhove illuminates the difference between Aquinas and Anselm:

Anselm considered the self-gift of Christ sufficient to outweigh the number and gravity of our sins, given the lofty value of the person of Christ as the sinless Son of God. Aquinas subtly shifts the focus to a far less transactional and more interpersonal dimension: through charity (friendship with God) Christ's satisfaction compensates for sin and restores our friendship with God in accordance with standards that prevail among friends.¹⁸

Daniel Schwartz describes friendship as Aquinas's 'original contribution to the understanding of satisfaction'. Anselm's satisfaction model, in contrast, is devoid of explicit mention of friendship; instead, his understanding, as Schwartz maintains, was driven almost exclusively by the need to show how Christ's Passion restores the proper honor that is due God, which justice requires.¹⁹ Fundamentally, it is

– the priceless gift of nothing, which means space in which to move freely, to grown and become themselves.'

¹⁷ Romanus Cessario, *The Godly Image: Christian Satisfaction in Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), p. 3.

¹⁸ Rik Van Nieuwenhove, 'Saint Thomas Aquinas on Salvation, Making Satisfaction, and the Restoration of Friendship with God', *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 83, no. 4 (2019), p. 544.

¹⁹ Daniel Hans Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 144-45. It is important to clarify, as Van Nieuwenhove does, Anselm has often been improperly characterized as asserting that Christ's satisfaction means that he has taken on 'the demands of vindicative punishment' that human beings deserve to experience. Anselm

the category of friendship that must function as the interpretive guide for comprehending the essential character of satisfaction.

The distinction between a juridical and friendship understanding of Christ's Passion is seen with clarity in the definition one gives to sin. Aquinas maintains that in the act of sin, 'God does not turn away from man, more than man turns away from Him.'²⁰ For him, the disordering that one experiences in the act of sinning is itself the punishment that a human being endures. As Cessario explains, sin is not primarily a rejection of a purely extrinsic law; it is 'an action that lacks due order with respect to human perfection, that is, the truth about the good of the human person'.²¹ Aquinas is explicit that God's punishment of sin, which is permissive, is not ordered to retribution; instead, God permits one to sin for the sake of the sinner's own amendment and/or to help others pursue virtue.²² The aim of punishment, as Aquinas explained, is the restoration of humanity into a rightly ordered relationship with God and one another. Eleonore Stump perceptively notes that 'God is not concerned to balance the accounts...What he wants is for [a sinner] to love what God loves and to be in harmony with God. His aim, then, is to turn that person around; and what will satisfy him is not punishment and repayment, but the goodness and love of his creature.'²³ The problem of sin is distorted when framed primarily or solely as a transactional and/or extrinsic dilemma, because sin's definitive damage is done through the intrinsic disordering of human beings from their nature.

When sin's character is properly understood, it is easier to decipher Aquinas's notion of Christ's redemptive activity. For him, as previously alluded to, Christ's work of salvation is entirely ordered to the real

does not understand satisfaction as a form of punishment; in his work, he distinguishes satisfaction from punishment. This allows Van Nieuwenhove to conclude that 'Anselm's view on the relation between satisfaction and punishment implies a critique of the popular misinterpretation of his theory.' Van Rik Nieuwenhove, "'Bearing the Marks of Christ's Passion": Aquinas' Soteriology', in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Joseph P. Wawrykow, and Van Rik Nieuwenhove (Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 288. For another argument against dominate mischaracterizations of interpreters of Anselm see David Bentley Hart, 'A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm's *Cursus Deus Homo*', *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 7, no. 3 (1998), pp. 333-349.

²⁰ *ST*. II-II, q.24, a. 10., co. 'Even when God punishes men by permitting them to fall into sin, this is directed to the good of virtue. Sometimes indeed it is for the good of those who are punished, when, to wit, men arise from sin, more humble and more cautious. But it is always for the amendment of others, who seeing some men fall from sin to sin, are the more fearful of sinning. With regard to the other two ways, it is evident that the punishment is intended for the sinner's amendment, since the very fact that man endures toil and loss in sinning, is of a nature to withdraw man from sin.' All *Summa Theologiae* references are from Aquinas.

²¹ Cessario, *The Godly Image*, p. 146.

²² *ST*. I-II, q. 87, a. 2, ad. 1.

²³ Eleonore Stump, 'Atonement According to Aquinas', in *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology*, vol. 1 (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 275.

actualization of humanity's friendship with God. Through sin, humanity has lost the proper charity which is constitutive of its relationship with God. Christ's satisfaction is ordered by a desire to restore this charity and is predicated by the fact that this charity is genuinely shared between human beings and Christ. Reinhard Hütter explains, '(1) satisfaction restores the order of charity by way of satisfaction accepted voluntarily in charity for the person wronged and for the wrongdoer; (2) substitutionary satisfaction presupposes a union of charity between the wrongdoer and the person who makes satisfaction'.²⁴ He approvingly cites Stump who emphasizes that 'on Aquinas's view, the point of making satisfaction is to return the wrongdoer's will to conformity with the will of the person wronged, rather than to inflict retributive punishment on the wrongdoer or to placate the person wronged'.²⁵ Even a description of Christ as substitute is not correctly understood as an essentially extrinsic activity. As Frederick Bauerschmidt explains, 'While Thomas sees *satisfaction* as involving the bearing of a "penalty," his emphasis is not on the exaction of divine justice, but on the love-motivated willingness with which one takes on that penalty.'²⁶ Christ's substitutionary act of satisfaction, as interpreted by Thomas, is, Bauerschmidt notes, distorted if one fails to see that Thomas is not working within a paradigm of vindicative justice.²⁷ He is not dying on behalf of humanity in such a way that diminishes real participation on the part of humans; instead, his work of satisfaction is only efficacious to the extent that the sinner, through his/her genuine participation, is brought back into friendship with God.

Thomas makes it clear that friendship is the foundational to understanding how Christ is able to offer satisfaction for the sins of humanity. Through the love that exists between friends, Thomas maintains that there is a unique and genuine unity between them.²⁸ This unity makes it possible for Christ to genuinely offer himself for the satisfaction of the sins of the world. Aquinas writes that 'the love of charity in him who suffers for his friend makes the satisfaction more acceptable to God than if he suffered for himself; the former comes of the eagerness of charity, but the latter comes of necessity. Hence we infer that one man may satisfy for another, so long as both remain in charity.' For Aquinas, it is friendship that provides the context for thinking about Christ's redemptive active, and, as Nieuwenhove notes, this is

²⁴ Reinhard Hütter, 'The Debt of Sin and the Sacrifice in Charity a Thomistic Echo to Gary Anderson's *Sin: A History*', *Nova et Vetera* 9, no. 1 (2011), p. 139.

²⁵ Hütter, 'The Debt of Sin and the Sacrifice in Charity', p. 139. His citation comes from Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), p. 435.

²⁶ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ* (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 216.

²⁷ Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 216.

²⁸ ScG III, 158, 7. 'What we do by our friends, we seem to do by ourselves, because friendship, especially the love of charity, binds two persons together as one.'

an immensely participatory conception of Christ's offering satisfaction for his friends.²⁹

As McCabe will highlight, Aquinas's understanding of what makes Christ's act on the cross meritorious is his love and obedience to the Father. For Aquinas, it is not Christ's suffering, in and of itself, that was the reason for Christ's merit; rather, it was, as just mentioned, the love and obedience that he offered his Father. Aquinas maintains that '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'.³⁰ The sufferings, which Christ bore out of love and obedience, efficaciously provide a superabundant remedy for the effects of sin that have infected the entire human race. Aquinas beautifully depicts the superior power of Christ's crucifixion in comparison with the hatred and hostility of his executioners. He contends, 'Christ's love was greater than his slayers' malice: and therefore, the value of his Passion in atoning surpassed the murderous guilt of those who crucified Him: so much so that Christ's suffering was a sufficient and superabundant atonement for his murderer's crime.'³¹ The accent of Aquinas's understanding of the cross is that Christ's love is more potent than the hatred and hostility that is exuded by the world enslaved to sin.

Again, Christ's charity and obedience are not sufficiently understood as the means of cancelling an extrinsic debt. As Hütter maintains, 'The debt of punishment is not simply cancelled in Christ. Rather it becomes the very occasion for the sinner's restoration to the order of charity and the sinner's soul to the splendor that comes from cleaving to God in charity.'³² This cleaving to God in charity is a supernatural participation in friendship with God which is predicated on God's grace. Cessario highlights that 'the Scriptures, moreover, insist that reconciliation amounts to more than the removal of some obstacle which previously separated two parties. Because the satisfaction made by Christ results in our being given a full share in his (risen) life, it constitutes something positive'.³³ The 'share in his (risen) life' is not, for Aquinas, a nice add-on to Christ's real soteriological work, which was the cancelling of our extrinsic debt of sin; instead, Christ's work of satisfaction procures the grace necessary for the healing and elevation that is needed for human beings to share in God's very own life.

For Aquinas, this healing and elevating grace is mediated through the sacraments of the Church. Aquinas reveals the connective tissue that

²⁹ Rik Van Nieuwenhove, 'St Anselm and St Thomas Aquinas on "Satisfaction": or How Catholic and Protestant Understandings of the Cross Differ', *Angelicum* 80, no. 1 (2003): p. 174.

³⁰ *ST. III*, q. 48, a. 2, co.

³¹ *ST. III*, q. 48, a. 2, ad. 2.

³² Hütter, 'The Debt of Sin and the Sacrifice in Charity', p. 147.

³³ Cessario, *The Godly Image*, p. 57.

binds the Church's sacraments and Christ's Passion when he claims that 'Christ's Passion is a sufficient cause of man's salvation. But it does not follow that the sacraments are not also necessary for that purpose: because they obtain their effect through the power of Christ's Passion.'³⁴ The manner in which, Aquinas maintains, the saving effects of Christ's Passion are efficaciously applied to individuals is through the reception of the sacraments.³⁵ Cessario summarizes that 'Thomas's sacramental theology forms warp and woof of his mediation on Christ and the Church. At the very start of the *tertia pars*, he refers to the sacraments as those things "by which we attain salvation" (*quibus salute consequimur*), "for they mark the road we walk along with Christ".'³⁶ For Aquinas, the telos of the sacraments is the restoration of the image of God in human beings. As instruments of Christ's Passion, 'The sacraments effect image-restoration.'³⁷ This 'image-restoration' is ordered to humanity's final end of sharing in God's very own life, which, as Aquinas insists, is a supernatural knowledge of God with his own knowledge.³⁸

In particular, friendship is the explicit paradigm Aquinas provides for conceptualizing the purpose and efficacy of the sacraments. He, in unpacking the nature of the sacrament of penance, explains, 'Because charity demands that a man should grieve for the offense committed against his friend, and that he should be anxious to make satisfaction to his friend; faith requires that he should seek to be justified from his sins through the power of Christ's Passion which operates in the sacraments of the Church.'³⁹ Participating in Christ's Passion, through the sacraments of the Church, is the means of restoring the loss of friendship that was/is destroyed by humanity's sin. Christ's atoning work is not merely ordered toward the restoration of sinners based on the requirements of vindictive justice; rather, as seen in the act of penance, the restoration the sacraments effect, through the power of Christ's Passion, is ordered toward friendship. For Aquinas, friendship is what determines the substance of sacramental acts, because it is what provides the fundamental intelligibility of the essence of the sacramental economy.⁴⁰

³⁴ *ST. III*, q. 60, a. 1, ad. 3.

³⁵ *ST. III*, q. 62., a. 5, co.

³⁶ Cessario, *The Godly Image*, p. 212.

³⁷ Cessario, *The Godly Image*, p. 226.

³⁸ *ST. I-II*, q. 3, a. 8, co.

³⁹ *ST. III*, q. 84, a. 5, ad. 2.

⁴⁰ *ST. III*, q. 90., a. 2, co. Thomas notes, '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, which is accomplished by the offender making atonement according to the will of the person offended.'

Herbert McCabe's Narration of Christ's Passion

Herbert McCabe's depiction of the significance of Christ's crucifixion, as Bauerschmidt suggests, 'might strike us at first as quite radical, and in ways it is. Yet its radicalism lies in the depth of its *ressourcement* of the tradition'.⁴¹ McCabe is able to offer an account of Christ's salvific work,⁴² which locates itself explicitly within a Thomistic framework, that is expressed with intriguing originality. This originality must not distract from the crucial fact that McCabe, like Aquinas, situates his teaching about Christ's passion within a relational/friendship perspective. McCabe expressly rejects the idea that Jesus's mission was to placate and/or appease an angry God who needed to vent his wrath. The overly transactional picture of redemption, according to McCabe, presents a distorted image of God and impedes humanity from catching a glimpse of the Triune God who reveals Himself most clearly in Christ crucified.⁴³

In contrast to this view, Aquinas's use of *satisfactio*, McCabe insists, provides the proper categories for thinking about the significance of Christ's death. Aquinas's depiction of Christ's satisfaction rightly maintains that humanity's sin cannot in any way affect God. McCabe explains, 'It is indeed true that we could not afford to pay damages to God, but it is also true that such payment could not be needed for plainly God cannot be damaged by my sin.'⁴⁴ Provocatively, he asserts that 'sin matters enormously to us if we are sinners; it doesn't matter at all to God. In a fairly literal sense He doesn't give a damn about our sin.'⁴⁵ As McCabe's quote indicates, sin is not properly framed as an extrinsic problem which primarily stands outside of the intrinsic existence of real human beings; instead, as Cessario elaborates, 'Sin...never points to some merely extrinsic reality, such as human law or moral obligation, but always involves intrinsic objects of human concern and meaning.'⁴⁶ 'Sin and evil', McCabe assesses, 'are not the name of things. They are defects, failures, nonbeing in otherwise good

⁴¹ Frederick Bauerschmidt, 'Theological Cool: The McCabe Reader', *Modern Theology* 34, no. 4 (2018), p. 673.

⁴² McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 92. McCabe is explicit that he is not attempting to offer an exhaustive account of the meaning of the cross or work within the more theory-based mode of discourse about Christ's atonement; instead, he is 'offering...one way of seeing the significance of the cross'.

⁴³ McCabe, *God Matters*, pp. 91-92. It is important to add the caveat that not all juridical accounts of the atonement are the same, and McCabe seems to be more critical of those that resemble penal-substitutionary atonement. With that said, he is also concerned with any 'theory' that emphasizes the problem of sin as taking place primarily extrinsically from lives of human beings.

⁴⁴ McCabe, *God Matters*, 91.

⁴⁵ Herbert McCabe, *Faith within Reason* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007), p. 157.

⁴⁶ Cessario, *The Godly Image*, p. 146.

things.⁴⁷ Sin is not, as both McCabe and Cessario illuminate, essentially a name given to the breaking of an arbitrary rule; it is the rejection of one's identity, which is grounded in the reality that his/her essence is impressed with God's image.⁴⁸ Ultimately, when read through an exclusively juridical lens, as Aquinas and McCabe show, one obfuscates the proper articulation of the telos of Christ's work and the nature of sin.

For McCabe, humanity's sin has resulted in a world that no longer has the capacity to cultivate the necessary societal conditions that are essential for the possibility of genuine love; in other words, it is a world that has ceased to be conducive for human flourishing. Individuals, according to McCabe, have settled for self-created images rather than embracing the image of God with which they have been endowed. McCabe maintains that 'we settle for our own self-image because we are afraid of being made in the image of God'.⁴⁹ This preference of self-creation has led to establishing communities that are dominated by fear.⁵⁰

The crucifixion must, McCabe explains, be interpreted within this specific context, because it is in this concrete world, which is dominated by fear, that Christ enters. This is crucial for McCabe's narration of the reason for Christ's death. The death of Christ is the result of Jesus living a fully human life in a world that is inhospitable to genuine human existence. McCabe explains, '[Jesus's] very humanity meant that he put up no barriers, no defenses against those he loved who hated him. He refused to evade the consequences of being human in our inhuman world.'⁵¹ Jesus died on the cross, in one respect, because he was sent into the world to live a fully human life which truly manifested and actualized the friendship that God intends for humanity. One natural question which arises is what exactly does it mean to be fully human? McCabe explains, 'The aim of human life is to live in friendship – a friendship amongst ourselves which in fact depends on a friendship, or covenant, that God has established between ourselves

⁴⁷ McCabe, *Faith within Reason*, p. 99.

⁴⁸ McCabe, *Faith within Reason*, p. 99. McCabe reveals the way in which the nature of sin as a privation distorts the beautiful created character in human beings; he maintains, 'If I am sinful it is because I am failing to live up to what my humanity demands of me. I am failing to be just, kind, gentle, or loving. I am failing to have that intense, passionate love for God's creation and God himself that would make me a fully developed human being.'

⁴⁹ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 94.

⁵⁰ McCabe, *God Still Matters*, p. 173. McCabe believes that fear is the root of the inability of fallen humanity to have the capacity to embrace the genuine love of God and others. He maintains, paraphrasing the first epistle of John, 'The opposite of love is fear; the first characteristic of people deprived of love is that they are afraid, and the first effect of love is to cast out fear.'

⁵¹ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 97.

and him.⁵² What humanity has lost, in light of the world its sin created, is the gift of charity that makes it possible for friendship with God and neighbor.⁵³ It is a world that makes it impossible for love to break in, because, as McCabe insists, 'This is no world for love. There is a twist or a contradiction in our human life that means we build a world unfit for humans.'⁵⁴

The conflict between Jesus's perfect human existence and the world's hostility to this form of humanity offers one explanation for the reason of Jesus's crucifixion. McCabe asserts, 'Jesus accepted the cross in love and obedience, and his obedience was to the command to be human.'⁵⁵ This theme of love and obedience,⁵⁶ McCabe believes, is an insight that he has received directly from Aquinas. He states, 'St. Thomas finds the rationale of the atonement in the loving obedience of the man Jesus.'⁵⁷ McCabe's adaptation of Aquinas's insight is that this love and obedience coincides with living a life that is perfectly human. This allows him to emphatically avoid the interpretation that God, in any sense, killed Jesus on the cross. He contends 'that to be human means to be crucified is not something that the Father has directly planned but what we have arranged. We have made a world in which there is no way of being human that does not involve suffering.'⁵⁸ It is important to recognize that McCabe is not implying that Jesus's death was a tragic accident that caught God by surprise or was utterly meaningless. Earlier, in this same chapter, he asserted, 'The meaning and purpose of the life of Jesus is presupposed by the Christian activity of "preaching Christ crucified" two thousand years after the event. For our purposes, then, we can rule out the idea that it was all a tragic misunderstanding which need never have happened.'⁵⁹ The cross is the fitting instrument by which God redeems humanity, but it is not to

⁵² McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 95.

⁵³ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 95. McCabe explains that 'we [human beings] cannot live without love and yet we are afraid of the destructive creative power of love. We need and deeply want to be loved and to love, and yet when that happens it seems a threat, because we are asked to give ourselves up, to abandon ourselves; and so when we meet love we kill.'

⁵⁴ McCabe, *God Still Matters*, pp. 96-97.

⁵⁵ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 93.

⁵⁶ For a succinct account of McCabe's understanding of obedience see McCabe, *God Matters*, pp. 226-234. The aim of obedience, according to him, is that obedience is not properly understood as an authority causing his/her subordinates into submission against their wills; instead, 'obedience only becomes perfect when the one who commands and the one who obeys come to share one mind' (229). This is the perfect obedience that the Son shares with the Father. McCabe writes, 'The obedience of Christ just is the eternal dependence of the Son of the Father, the procession of the Son from the Father, of true God from true God, projected into history, so we have the obedience of an equal.'

⁵⁷ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 99.

⁵⁸ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 93.

⁵⁹ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 90.

be disastrously confused with God's need to vent his vindicate justice upon his innocent Son.

McCabe is within the interpretive framework of Aquinas, even if he states things differently, about the Father's mode of causality in Christ's crucifixion. Aquinas provides 'three respects' in which the Father delivered up the Son: (1) He preordained Christ's Passion to deliver humanity from sin; (2) 'By infused charity, He inspired him with the will to suffer for us'; and, (3) He did not protect Christ from the Passion, but He '[abandoned] Him to his persecutors'.⁶⁰ Aquinas does not believe that God the Father actively handed over his Son into the hands of his persecutors; instead, He 'inspired Him with the will to suffer for us'.⁶¹ One of the central themes in this question, for Aquinas, is to meaningfully distinguish the causality that is exercised by Christ's persecutors and God the Father. He summarizes, 'The Father delivered up Christ, and Christ surrendered Himself, from charity, and consequently we give praise to both: but Judas betrayed Christ from greed, the Jews from envy, and Pilate from worldly fear, for he stood in fear of Caesar; and these accordingly are held guilty.'⁶² McCabe's understanding of Christ's Passion is, like Aquinas's, insistent upon the fact that the Triune God's causality, in relation to this event, is supremely marked by charity. The reoccurring affirmation of Christ's love and obedience is his way of avoiding the false idea that God the Father is, in any way, like Christ's persecutors.

McCabe highlights that the crucifixion of Jesus, paradoxically, reveals two radically distinct realities. He notes, 'From one point of view the cross is the sacrament of the sin of the world – it is the ultimate sin that was made inevitable by the kind of world that we have made. From another point of view, it is the sacrament of our forgiveness, because it is the ultimate sign of God's love for us.'⁶³ First, Christ's death on the cross made explicit the fact that the world, which fallen humanity created, was radically opposed to a fully actualized human life. As McCabe further explains, 'After the crucifixion, to interpret the defect of the world as sin, to interpret it, that is, as involving the rejection of the Father's self-giving, is the same as to say that given the sin of the world, the crucifixion was bound to happen. It is to say that this is the kind of world we have, a crucifying world, a world doomed to reject its own meaning.'⁶⁴ In the event of the crucifixion, it is revealed with piercing clarity that humanity's disordered forms of life, after the fall, are in contradiction with its own nature. Christ's death exposes the utter

⁶⁰ *ST* III, q. 47, a. 3, co.

⁶¹ *ST* III, q. 47, a. 3, ad. 1.

⁶² *ST* III, q. 47, a. 3, ad. 3.

⁶³ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 98.

⁶⁴ Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language* (London, England: Continuum, 2009), p. 132.

absurdity of the self-enclosed and fear-based existence that humanity, outside of God's grace, creates for itself. As Denys Turner explains, commenting on McCabe's teaching, the world is incapable, on its own, of correctly telling the truth about sin. There is, according to Turner, a type of circularity to the world's sinfulness and its inability to truthfully acknowledge and name its sin. He contends, 'Because of the way the world is, its sin not only causes misperception of the fallen world in general; it recursively generates the misperception of the sin that causes it to be fallen.'⁶⁵ Christ's crucifixion, McCabe declares, is the means of dismantling the illusion and deception by which humanity's imagination has been captured.

Second, as McCabe succinctly confessed, the cross is also the clearest revelation of God's immense love and forgiveness for humanity. He depicts the profundity and uniqueness of Christ's death when he notes that '[Christ's] was the first human death that was not a symptom of sin but a sign of loving obedience: a sacrament of response to God's love. And the answer of God was to pour out renewed life upon Jesus, to pour out the Holy Spirit in such abundance that the Spirit not merely raised Jesus from the dead but poured out through the risen Christ upon the rest of humankind.'⁶⁶ It is here that McCabe, again, is explicit about the participatory and non-extrinsic nature of Christ's salvific action for humanity. He insists that the telos of Christ's work is the transformation of real people. The overflow of God's Spirit, which has been poured out on all humanity, makes it possible, McCabe explains, for the death of human beings to 'be a conquest of death in resurrection'.⁶⁷ He speaks of the 'conquest of death in resurrection' as something that has broken, through Christ, into human history. 'What [Jesus] came to do', McCabe insists, 'was to bring a new life, a new form of human communication out of this crucifying world. his resurrection means that this is possible.'⁶⁸

Like Aquinas, McCabe affirms that this new life is mediated through the Church. He argues that 'the resurrection meant not just that a church was founded, it meant that the world was different: the Church exists to articulate this difference, to show the world to itself.'⁶⁹ In particular, this is realized in the sacramental life of the Church. He maintains, 'the sacramental life is the creative interpretation of the world in terms of the presence of Christ, its future'.⁷⁰ In this somewhat peculiar articula-

⁶⁵ Denys Turner, 'The Price of Truth: Herbert McCabe on Love Politics and Death', *New Blackfriars* 98, no. 1073 (2016), p. 15.

⁶⁶ Herbert McCabe, *God, Christ and Us* (London, England: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), pp. 148-49.

⁶⁷ McCabe, *God, Christ and Us*, p. 149.

⁶⁸ McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, p. 133.

⁶⁹ McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, p. 142.

⁷⁰ McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, p. 143

tion, McCabe is emphasizing that through partaking in the sacramental life of the Church, one is able to begin to participate in a fully human existence. It is a sharing in a form of life that is elevated by grace,⁷¹ and what is significant to notice is that this sacramental form of life is the means by which Christ's healing and elevating grace is given to humanity. The sacraments are, according to McCabe, 'an entry into the deep meaning of human existence – an entry which is not merely a theoretical study but an actual encounter with future reality that lies at the heart of human meaning'.⁷² When insisting on the sacraments causing an eschatological reality to be made present in the time preceding the eschaton, he is explaining that they are a partial share in God's life in history. The sacraments, for him, are the means that the teleological actualization of Christ's salvific work is mediated to humanity. He teaches that 'we must return to the classical tradition in which [the sacraments] are seen as our living contact with the humanity of Christ through which alone we share in divine life'.⁷³ This sharing of the divine life is the supernatural gift of friendship with God; it is the telos of Christ's Passion, because through his Passion, it becomes possible for humanity to participate in his resurrected life that is no longer dominated by the fear of death.

McCabe concludes, 'The cross and resurrection are the eternal dialogue of Father and Son as projected on to the screen of human history, what it looks like in history. If you want to know what the Trinity looks like be filled with the Holy Spirit and look at the cross.'⁷⁴ Importantly, the true perception of this event requires a participation, being 'filled with the Holy Spirit', in God's very own life. It is not that Christ's cross merely reveals something that humanity must subsequently imitate; rather, our imitation and proper seeing require a type of sharing in the Triune love of God. For McCabe, this sharing is most intensely realized in the Eucharist, which he calls 'the principal sacrament of Calvary'. It is the event in the Church's life which is most soaked with the symbolism of God's friendship with humanity and humanity's friendship with one another.⁷⁵ With that said, for McCabe, it is also where God, through his grace, does not merely symbolize but ac-

⁷¹ Herbert McCabe, *The New Creation* (London, England: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p. 3. McCabe explains that 'besides creating us as the highest kind of material creature, God has called us to share in his own uncreated life. This share in the life of God Himself is what we call grace... Grace does not make man a better kind of creature, it raises him beyond creaturehood, it makes him share in divinity.'

⁷² McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, p. 145.

⁷³ McCabe, *The New Creation*, p. xii.

⁷⁴ McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 100.

⁷⁵ McCabe, *The New Creation*, 'The first symbolism of the eucharistic meal is friendship; we eat and drink together to show that we are united in love. We share a divine food because we share a divine life.' McCabe's insistence that Christians 'share a divine life' make it explicit that the Eucharist is no mere symbol for him.

tualizes the Church's union with Himself and one another. As with Aquinas, McCabe describes the friendship brought about by the sacraments as both efficaciously realized in the present and anticipatory by nature. He concludes:

The sacramental order of this world points towards and partially realizes a further third level of meaning, the ultimate mystery that is signified-and-not-a-sign of anything deeper (*res tantum*). This the *agape*, the *caritas*, the love which is the Godhead. The liturgy of the Eucharist and its attendant sacraments, our life in the Church, is itself a sacramental sign and realization of our life in the kingdom. Then there will be no more Eucharist, no more sacramental religion, no more faith or hope. All this will wither away. And there will be simply the unimaginable human living out of love which is the Spirit of God in eternity.⁷⁶

For McCabe, Christ's Passion is unequivocally motivated by his love for humanity. Christ's salvific work is definitively ordered to efficaciously actualizing humanity's experience of real eschatological friendship with the Triune God.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has attempted to reveal the mistake one makes when driving a wedge between Aquinas's and McCabe's understandings of Christ's Passion. Both theologians are captivated by a robust and holistic conception of Christ's redemptive work, which they maintain is primarily ordered and properly grasped within a relational/friendship framework. Once this has been established, McCabe's work is able to provide clarity and substance to the way in which the Church conceptualizes Christ's love and obedience to the Father and the devastated world that is created as result of the intrinsic disordering of sin. Fundamentally, Aquinas and McCabe help to illuminate the inexhaustible richness of Christ's Passion.

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⁷⁶ McCabe, *God Still Matters*, pp. 134-35