

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

The Role of Faith in the
Eucharistic Doctrine of
Thomas Aquinas in the
Summa Theologiae

A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
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By
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PREFACE

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INTRODUCTION

In my thesis, I have examined the role of faith in the Eucharistic doctrine of Thomas Aquinas in the Summa Theologiae (III, 73-83), in order to determine Thomas' perception of the nature and extent of the human dimension of the encounter with Christ in the sacrament. In accordance with Aquinas' own analysis, this examination of faith has proceeded along two main lines: (1) the portrayal of the role of faith in Thomas' exposition of his doctrine of real presence, which has principally involved the discussion of the function of faith in resolving the epistemological problem created, in part at least, by the subsistent accidents of the bread and wine; and (2) the account of Thomas' delineation of the role of faith in the Eucharist within the context of his theology of grace, which has emphasized the necessity of faith for the worthy reception not only of the grace offered to men in non-sacramental ways but, indeed, even of that grace which is consequent upon Christ's actual presence in this sacrament. I believe that this manner of analysis has allowed me to develop and describe the various affirmations made by Thomas about the role of faith in this part of his theology in a systematic

and comprehensive way.

My theme has been developed in four chapters. The three sections of the first chapter are devoted to the treatment of a number of introductory concerns, the proper understanding of which is necessary for a correct evaluation of the argument of the later chapters. In the first section, I have examined the place of faith in the appropriation of grace outside of the sacramental structure, principally as this is described by Thomas in his treatment of justification by faith in the Second Part of the Summa (I-II, 106ff.). Then, I have tried to demonstrate the continued need for faith even in the reception of sacramental grace by recounting Thomas' discussion of the role of faith in relation to the sacraments of the Old and of the New Law (in his analysis of the sacraments in general in III, 60ff.). Finally, in anticipation of the later argument about the Eucharist in particular, I have ended the first chapter with a brief description of Thomas' specific contention about the necessity of faith for the reception of the grace offered through the Eucharist itself.

Chapter two concentrates on Aquinas' account of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and is divided into three main sections. The first section has tried to identify briefly the problem of real presence as formulated in the tradition before St. Thomas. The second section has

analyzed his account of the mode of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, in three parts. Since Thomas explains his doctrine of real presence in terms of his understanding of substance and describes it as being the result of a process of change, it has been necessary (a) to provide a short summary of these concepts (substance and accidents, and, change in general) as employed elsewhere in Thomas' thought. But, because Thomas both departs in some respects from his usual portrayal of substance and accidents in his teaching on the Eucharist, and, moreover, emphasizes the uniqueness of this miraculous conversion, in the explication of real presence according to Thomas, (b) sufficient care has been taken to underscore specifically the unique aspects of Thomas' argument. In turn, the emphasis on distinctiveness has forced me (c) to examine the principal cause of the Eucharistic conversion, the act of God in fulfilling the promise of Christ. Finally, the discussion in Chapter two has been concluded with the examination of the two ways in which faith contributes to the exposition of the doctrine of real presence: (a) the role of faith in the resolution of the epistemological problem posed by Thomas' notion of substantial conversion, and the concomitant idea of subsistent accidents, has been noted; and (b) against the background of his discussion of sacramental causality, I have described the secondary role, in the achievement of the

conversion, of the so-called "faith of the Church," which is expressed in the intention of the minister to consecrate the species.

In the five sections of the third chapter, I have turned to the detailed discussion of the role of faith in the reception of the grace bestowed as the result of real presence. In the first section I have briefly sketched the effects of worthy reception of the Eucharist, the infusion of justifying grace and charity, and, the actual enjoyment of 'spiritual sweetness' which is consequent upon 'contact' with the Lord. Then, I have described in some detail the precise requirements for this fruitful encounter of Christ in the sacrament, man's abiding union with God in Christ through faith and love. This analysis of the continued role of justifying faith in the Eucharist itself, in turn, has allowed me to pay particular attention in the third section of this chapter to the structural similarities between Eucharistic reception, and, the experience of God and Christ in both the initial act of justification by faith and the beatific vision, in order to enable us to perceive more clearly the precise place of the Eucharist in the spiritual life. The fourth section of Chapter three considers the implications of Thomas' teaching about the two main roles of faith in the Eucharist and attempts to decide whether the different aspects of his Eucharistic theory are entirely compatible. Here, Thomas'

description of the distinction between 'sacramental' and 'spiritual' eating, which is proposed specifically in relation to the question of the requirements for fruitful reception of Christ in the Eucharist, have been emphasized and evaluated in terms of the understanding of real presence disclosed in the second chapter. Finally, I have concluded the third chapter by noting two final and less important aspects of the role of faith in the Eucharist, namely, the need for faith in the reception of the grace of the Eucharist made available on account of its sacrificial nature, and, Thomas' notion of faith in the real presence as a meritorious act.

Chapter four attempts to evaluate some representative positions in the contemporary discussion of real presence in the Eucharist in the light of Thomas' understanding of the role of faith in this sacrament. This evaluation of the work of such thinkers as Schillebeeckx, Schoonenberg, and Davis, has allowed me to propose some significant conclusions about the abiding validity, and limitations, of Thomas' approach to the general question of the role of faith in this sacrament.

Quite apart from the legitimate desire to isolate an important aspect of Thomas' eucharistic teaching and reveal its relation to his general teaching on grace and justifying faith, this study has been motivated by other, more contemporary concerns. Not the least of these is my

conviction of the abiding value of Thomas' exposition of the central tenets of the faith for our own understanding of the Christian message. This conviction clearly runs counter to the prevalent view of Thomas in some influential quarters of contemporary theology. If one may generalize in this regard, the popular view of Aquinas' system which has arisen in recent years is that the importance given in his theological synthesis to the consideration of questions and positions not immediately relevant to the concerns of biblical Christianity has resulted in the neglect, if not the actual subversion, of the basic Christian proclamation of God's salvific work in Christ.¹ That I find this analysis of Aquinas untenable will emerge, hopefully, from the thesis as a whole. In the first place, the discussion of Thomas' positions on faith, grace and the sacraments in the first three chapters will challenge, indirectly at least, the accuracy of this common view. Moreover, the fourth chapter is designed particularly to highlight more vividly those aspects of his eucharistic thought in which Thomas has anticipated the concerns of the modern proponents of a viable and progressive re-interpretation of the Eucharist. Thus, granted the limitations inherent in a work of this type, I hope that this thesis will also serve to increase to some degree the awareness of the continued relevance of Thomas' witness to the truth of the Christian faith for modern theological reflection.

CHAPTER ONE

Justification by Faith and the Sacraments

The purpose of this chapter is to establish an adequate foundation upon which the analysis of the following chapters may be based. This entails primarily the description of the role of faith in the soteriology of Aquinas, with special reference to faith's part in the reception of both sacramental and extra-sacramental grace. Naturally, given the breadth and profundity of his portrayal of faith in the different parts of the Summa (for example, in his discussion of the grace of the New Law in I-II, 106ff., and, in his formal treatise on faith, II-II, 1ff.), this chapter makes no claim to exhaustiveness. Rather, only those elements of his discussion which contribute directly to the development of our theme are here included.

As described in his treatise on the grace of the New Law, for Thomas the situation of the unjust or unredeemed man is characterized by estrangement, bondage and disorder. By his sin, both original and actual, man has destroyed the original relationship to God of loving obedience which he enjoyed in the pristine state. Having been made for God, man is naturally meant to offer himself

in devoted service to his maker. But, by his sinful rebellion and offence against God,¹ man removes himself from subordination to God--rather than conform to the will of God, man allows his own willfulness to be his guide. Consequent upon this estrangement and withdrawal from God² is a further disruption within man himself. In the original state, there is a natural hierarchy of powers in man, the lower, less perfect or complete powers ultimately being responsible to man's reason. But, once sin comes to dominate man, this situation no longer applies: just as the whole man, and especially his reason and will, no longer is subject to God, neither do his lower faculties remain subject or fully responsive to the reason.³ In turn, this freedom from the restraint of reason, which itself is corrupted and darkened by sin,⁴ has further disastrous consequences for man, for the reckless abandon of these powers causes them to turn outward for fulfillment in the things of the world, thereby culminating in the loss of the whole man to inferior powers.⁵ Thus, in place of the original freedom in subordination to God, sin establishes in human life the slavery and debasement inherent in bondage to the world.

Corresponding to this vision of the human predicament, the justification of the impious is depicted by St. Thomas as the establishment of a new relationship of man to God: by his saving act in Christ freely appropriated by man

through faith, God liberates man from the consequences of his sin and draws him back to his proper order to God. In this process of reconciliation by which sin is forgiven and a new relationship is formed, the grace of God works to overcome the results of human rebellion. Thus, for example, grace serves to heal the nature of man,⁶ resolving the conflict in the inner being of man by re-establishing the proper harmony between his lower and higher parts.⁷ This new harmony, however, is never complete in this world: faithful to the Christian notion of the 'not-yet' quality of redemption, Thomas argues that the power of God's grace, though real and creative, does not work to restrain completely the passionate aspect of man or make it fully compliant to the dictates of reason. Hence, although there is a real renewal of human nature consequent upon justification, there always remains for the justified the constant possibility of further (especially venial) sin⁸--and, thus, the necessity for God's further justifying work for the duration of life by the constant renewal and recreation of a man's justifying faith.⁹ In addition to this restorative aspect of grace, God's grace has an elevating function, for it also grants to man those capacities required for the willing performance of the virtuous, God-serving acts which are in accordance with the life of grace and a relationship of love to God.¹⁰

Thomas' more refined analysis of justification

isolates and stresses two factors in the establishment of this new relationship between God and man which are absolutely crucial to the correct appreciation of this process. On the one hand, affirms Thomas, justification is the free and unmerited work of God, occasioned only by God's love for the individual sinner. There seems to be at least two reasons for Thomas's frequent observation in his treatise on the grace of the New Law that justification and all it entails is precisely the work and gift of God. First, in the formulation of his teaching, Thomas was conscious of the consistent testimony of Scripture, as well as that of the Augustinian stream of Catholic tradition, to the grace of God as the sole ground of salvation.¹¹ But, secondly, it also seems clear that Thomas' own analysis of the human condition and the consequences of sin had convinced him of this truth. For Thomas, justification, and the renewal which it brings, means for the individual that he rises up from sin and returns to God. But, he continues, rising up from sin does not simply mean to refrain from sinning (even though this, too, is not a simple possibility for man). Rather "rising" here denotes, especially, the freedom from the consequences and entanglement of his sin, both past and present, and man is clearly incapable of achieving this absolution by his own devices: after all, it is impossible for him to re-establish the harmony in his inner being which his own sin has destroyed,

or, to free himself from the bondage to inferior things created by his own sin; and, again, given that sin is offence against God, it is simply not within the purview of man to remit the debt of punishment owing to this sin.¹² Thus, concludes St. Thomas, justification can only be the gift of God: man, as he stands apart from God in sin, can do nothing to earn God's love or to flee his sin; rather, the restoration of order and peace is dependent on the initiative of God alone.¹³

But, on the other hand, Thomas similarly suggests that justification must also be viewed, in one sense at least, as the work of man. For St. Thomas, God respects the integrity of his creatures and prosecutes his will for them only in accordance with their natures. Now, it is a distinguishing mark of man that he is a being of free choice.¹⁴ Hence, says Aquinas, the process of justification also requires on man's part a freely-made decision in faith for God and against sin.¹⁵ Naturally, however, in light of his emphasis on justification as the gift of God's grace, Thomas is careful to refrain from suggesting that this free decision is in any way a human achievement which causes or necessitates the descent of God's grace. On the contrary, Thomas safeguards his initial insight by further arguing that this free decision of faith, the human response to God required in justification, is itself the effect of God's interior moving of

man by grace.¹⁶ This means, then, that just as Augustine had done before him,¹⁷ Thomas concluded that justifying faith is itself the gift of God, for he recognized that man only turns to God in faith when God has first moved him to do so.

The conclusion that faith itself is a gift of God (inasmuch as man is moved to faith by God) is repeated, albeit on slightly different grounds, by Thomas in some passages of his formal treatise on faith. Thus, for example, we read in his discussion of the 'meritorious' nature of faith in II-II, 2, 9c, that to believe is an act of mind assenting to the divine truth by virtue of the command of the will as this is moved by God through grace. It is possible to discern in this description of the interior act of faith, which incorporates aspects of Thomas' earlier analysis,¹⁸ his attempt to do justice to the complexity of faith by delineating the human and divine 'contributions' to its act. On the one hand, the first part of this description clearly defines the human faculties involved in the interior act of faith. In the first place, Thomas assigns believing to the intellect as its subject and states that it involves an assent to the truth. Yet, the further description of the role of the will serves to distinguish this assent from other acts of the intellect in which a decision about the true and the false is involved. As Thomas had argued earlier in this treatise,¹⁹

the assents involved in understanding and science are immediately or mediately occasioned by their respective objects, for these objects are 'seen', that is, are themselves capable of actuating the assent of the mind. But, the objects of faith transcend man's natural capacities for knowledge and hence, Thomas notes, are incapable of so moving the mind in such a direct way to assent. For the assent of faith to occur, then, Thomas argues that the will must assume an integral role in this process--it is necessary that the will command or influence the intellect to give its assent to the truth presented for its consideration. Yet, Thomas adds, on the other hand, for the will to command the intellect to assent requires, in the first instance, a prior movement of the will by God to this action: only when God moves the will by 'interiorly inviting' man to believe through an interior inspiration²⁰ does faith become an actuality in any man's existence. Hence, even in the treatise on faith, Thomas asserts that the 'aid of God's grace', which help God grants in his mercy,²¹ acts as the foundation, the unmerited source, of the human return to God in faith.²²

Thomas' effort to coordinate this twofold conviction of the utter gratuity of justification as God's act, and, of the need for man's free response in faith, is perhaps more clearly reflected in his discussion, in the treatise on grace, of the different 'stages' in the initial conversion

of man to God. Although initial justification is instantaneous and its 'stages' simultaneous, Thomas has discerned four elements in the process of conversion, regarding which there is a definite priority of nature: first, the infusion of grace; second, the movement of free choice directed to God; third, the movement of free choice directed at sin; and, finally, the forgiveness of sins.²³ That the infusion of grace has priority demonstrates clearly Aquinas' basic belief that human justification is God's gift and has its initiative from God alone. Yet, as suggested by his placement at the end of the process of the forgiveness of sins, which surely is also God's achievement,²⁴ Thomas knew that justification also demanded an appropriate human response. However, in turn, the knowledge of this necessity did not blind Aquinas to the full significance of the central problem of human existence, that the intrusion of sin has rendered man incapable of rectifying his situation by redeeming himself from his sin. Hence, Thomas notes this appropriate free action of man in justification only after he has mentioned the infusion of grace. This secondary placement of the double movement of free choice required in the conversion of man to God thus clearly signifies that for Aquinas, that any man actually come to realize in his own life God's offer of justifying grace depends on God's prior act giving this man the power to respond to God's love.