

Thomas Aquinas on the End of Life and the Cultivation of Virtues

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, suffering and death have been sensitive topics, often avoided in public discourse. However, attitudes are changing, leading to more open and honest conversations. This paper explores the theological insights of Thomas Aquinas on suffering, death, and human destiny. Aquinas defines death as the separation of the soul from the body. While the body decays, the soul remains incorruptible and will ultimately be reunited with the body at the end of time, transformed in glory. Using document analysis, this study examines Aquinas' understanding of death as a consequence of original sin—rooted in humanity's disobedience to God—and explores the emotional and spiritual challenges the soul faces after death, such as uncertainty, despair, and loss. Aquinas identifies Christ as the ultimate answer to these fears. Through His death and resurrection, Christ conquers death and restores humanity's relationship with God. Embracing Christ and cultivating the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are essential for facing death with peace and trust. This paper not only highlights the redemptive work of Christ but also emphasizes the importance of a virtuous life as the foundation for preparing for a meaningful and peaceful death.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, death, suffering, hope in Jesus, cultivate virtues

Introduction

Death is multifaceted and can be approached from various disciplinary lenses. In biology, death is defined clinically as the cessation of cardiac activity or the irreversible loss of neurological function. Conversely, psychology views death through the lens of individual acceptance and the withdrawal from social engagement, as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.²

This paper explores death from a theological perspective, focusing on the doctrines articulated by Saint Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Aquinas posits that "death is the separation of the soul from

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² Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. *On Death and Dying*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969, 43.

the body.”³ While the soul remains incorruptible due to its spiritual nature,⁴ the body faces corruption as a material entity. However, Thomas Aquinas asserts that at the eschatological culmination, the body and soul will be rejoined, with the body being restored to its perfected state, thereby participating in the ultimate beatitude of the human person.⁵

This paper examines Thomas Aquinas’ view of the separation of the soul at the moment of death. He argues that death is inherently evil, stemming from the consequences of original sin. Thomas Aquinas posits that “people committed sin, and people die, as the just punishment for the refusal to keep God’s will.”⁶ Initially, God created humanity in His image and provided a blissful existence in paradise, granting freedom except for the single prohibition against eating the forbidden fruit. However, the disobedience of the first parents shattered this harmony and introduced death into the world. Death stands in stark contrast to life and brings with it an uncertain fate for the soul. Following death, the soul faces profound challenges, including a sense of fear, despair, and a deep feeling of loss.

How can a person find reliable treatment for their fears and anxieties? Thomas Aquinas offers a profound account for helping individuals confront and overcome the fear of death. He teaches that Christ liberates humanity from the chains of sin and death, inviting us to participate in God’s beatitude through His grace.⁷ This understanding represents a significant turning point; though the fall of Adam brought death to all, the passion of Christ offers the promise of resurrection and new life. According to Thomas Aquinas, if Adam’s sin leads to death, then Christ’s sacrifice not only conquers death but also paves the way for renewed existence. Therefore, accepting Christ as our Savior and cultivating virtues is essential. By doing so, humanity can rise above the fear of death and embrace the divine life of God. Cultivating virtues, particularly theological virtues, is crucial in guiding individuals toward eternal life—an existence in union with the Lord as His children, sharing in the communion of Saints and angels in the Kingdom of heaven.

The Ending of Life and the Suffering of the Soul

As previously stated, discussions surrounding death can be approached from various perspectives. In this instance, we consider the theological viewpoint, drawing on Thomas Aquinas’s profound and intellectually rigorous insights to explore the significance of death. In his works, Thomas Aquinas asserts that death results in the separation of the soul from the body.⁸ This insight highlights two essential aspects of what it means to be human. As articulated by Carlo Leget in his exploration of Thomas Aquinas’s theology, “the soul is viewed as the form, motor, and ultimate purpose of the body, making it, from a metaphysical standpoint, the more powerful of the two.”⁹ In everyday life, the soul can be understood as a function of the body that holds it together. Thus, when the soul is separated from the body, as defined by death, which is the separation of the soul from the body, the soul continues to exist while the body

³ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. (ST) I.76.3-4. All the quotations of Summa Theologica are from the *New Advent* <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>

⁴ This spirit is understood differently from the spirit of angels; since the angels have no flesh, they are understood as pure spirits.

⁵ Joseph Wawrykow. *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas*, 1st ed. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 36.

⁶ ST. I.32.1.

⁷ ST. I.II.109.2.4.

⁸ ST. III. 53.1.1 *Sicut peccatum est casus a iustitia, ita mors est casus a vita.*

⁹ Carlo Leget. *Living with God : Thomas Aquinas on the Relation Between Life on Earth and “Life” after Death* Leuven: Peeters, 1997, 78.

ceases to be. This concept suggests that while the body may dissolve, the soul persists in confronting judgments that may result in rewards or punishments.

Death as Evil: The Separated Soul

The fate of the soul following its separation from the body is, in fact, a more intricate matter. While Thomas Aquinas refers to the human soul after death as a distinct entity, this separated soul is no longer considered a human being. Once the body and soul are separated, the form and matter that constitute human nature are effectively destroyed. The question to be raised here is what the nature of the separated soul is, particularly in cases where the body has genuinely decayed. This raises the question of whether Thomas Aquinas's reflections on the separated soul (*anima separata*) offer any insights into this condition or even into the concept of *life after death*?

In examining Thomas Aquinas' thoughts on the soul after death, Carlo Leget contends that Thomas Aquinas views death as a negative occurrence. He argues that, like any form of evil, "death has no positively identifiable cause. It appears only as the side-effect of something else, and if any cause at all should be assigned to it, this cause should be called *causa deficient*."¹⁰ Death is frequently perceived through a negative lens, yet it is essential to recognize it as a profound sense of loss. Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of this negativity deserves careful examination. Death signifies the separation of body and soul, which is inherently regarded as evil. This disjunction disrupts the essence of human nature, as it contradicts the fundamental drive of any being to sustain its existence and achieve its fullest potential. The severing of body and soul does not yield any positive results; rather, it brings forth a cascade of deprivation, suffering, anxiety, and fear.

In light of our challenges, engaging with Thomas Aquinas's conceptualizations of post-mortem existence is crucial. Examining his theological perspectives may yield significant insights and direction in addressing these complex existential inquiries. First, "his discussion of the knowledge of the separated soul is based on the account of the soul united to the body."¹¹ It is reasonable to affirm that Thomas Aquinas perceives the separated soul as a diminished substance, neither fully a person nor a component of human nature. The detachment of the soul eliminates the functions of the vegetative and sensitive elements, which are intrinsically linked to the bodily aspect of humanity. As a result, the rational component remains, which cannot be corrupted due to its immaterial nature.¹² The evidence is found in *Summa Theologica*: "Therefore, the soul apart from the body has perfect knowledge of other separated souls, but it has an imperfect and defective knowledge of the angels so far as its natural knowledge is concerned. But the knowledge of glory is otherwise."¹³

In another explanation, Thomas Aquinas notices that separating the soul and body in the case of a form, "existing apart from the material it was meant to inform, is against human nature."¹⁴ As the language of Thomas Aquinas, the soul, "when united to the body, consistently with that mode of existence, has a mode of understanding, by turning to corporeal phantasms, which are in corporeal organs."¹⁵ However, here the situation is different. When the soul is separated

¹⁰ Carlo Leget, *ibid.*, 79–80.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹² Ref. *Ibid.*, 81.

¹³ *ST*. I.89.2.

¹⁴ Carlo Leget, *ibid.*, 81.

¹⁵ *ST*. I.89.1.

from the body, it has no natural mode of being, and “likewise to understand without turning to the phantasms is not natural to it.”¹⁶

It is crucial to recognize that phantasms cannot be employed for a human mode of knowing; instead, we must believe that the separation of the soul is contingent upon God. This separation between soul and body ceases to be detrimental because “it has lost the human flexibility of will which makes it possible that the process of a growing relationship with God does not take place.”¹⁷ This paper will further explore the notion that death is a decision made by God and represents a profound opportunity for communion with Him in love. Additionally, it is important to address the soul’s suffering, as Thomas Aquinas considers death a form of punishment.

Death as a Punishment of the Soul

Thomas Aquinas explores the state of Adam’s soul in a detailed discussion. He draws from the story in the book of Genesis, chapter three, to highlight that God created man in His image, making man Godlike. God fashioned man in righteousness, bestowing upon him the weighty responsibility to use this righteousness to subdue His creatures, as per God’s divine intention. Notably, God viewed man as the superior creature among all others. Traditionally, theologians explain that “perhaps God used to speak to the first man as He speaks to the angels; by shedding on his mind a ray of the unchangeable truth, yet without bestowing on him the experience of which the angels are capable in the participation of the Divine Essence.”¹⁸ This means that, through this gift, humanity knew God more clearly than we do today. Furthermore, God provided them with a beautiful home filled with freedom while advising them not to eat the forbidden fruit, warning that doing so would lead to death.

This saying serves as an excellent starting point to confirm the initial condition of humanity at the ‘point of departure’ in the relationship between humankind and God. However, life in paradise was ultimately forfeited.¹⁹ When Adam disobeyed the law, what prompted him to do so? What drove him to sin? Why did this particular sin have profound repercussions for him and subsequent generations? Therefore, in this section, the author will explore Thomas Aquinas’ understanding of original sin. The discussion is limited to the significance of death, particularly regarding the human condition following original sin. Doing so will allow the author to interpret the theological implications of evil and the moral and spiritual corruption that entered the world through Adam’s transgression, with death regarded as the most dreadful aspect of human existence on earth.

Regarding humanity’s condition in paradise, God endowed man with various powers to govern creation and foster a joyful relationship with Himself and his partner. In the case of the human soul, God entrusted the sensitive aspect to achieve this harmony, ensuring it remains completely guided by the intellective aspect. The soul, “as a rational form of the body, contains the source completely, and nothing occurs which runs counter to internal harmony.”²⁰ Therefore, “the rational soul controls all passions according to their function at the sensitive level. The intellective part of the soul is endowed with the gifts of sanctifying grace, enabling it to know

¹⁶ ST. I.89.1.

¹⁷ Carlo Leget, *ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸ ST. I.94.1.

¹⁹ Goodwill is a well-ordered will, but the will of the first man would have been ill-ordered had he wished to have, while in the state of merit, what had been promised to him as a reward. (ST. I.94.2.)

²⁰ Carlo Leget, *ibid.*, 84.

and love God in the mode that perfects its natural capacity. Thus, the first man processes the theological virtues of hope, faith, and charity, or cardinal virtues.”²¹

The first man, endowed with all virtues, communicated effectively with God, himself, and his neighbors in paradise. The existence of harmony was not isolation; it involved meaningful connections. With his virtues, he could cultivate a remarkable social community. This relationship is one of equality, as both man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God, empowering them to govern over lesser creatures. As it is written in Genesis, “that he may have dominion over every creature.”²² In the state of innocence, a man had mastery over the animals by using them, but not by commanding or abusing them.

According to Carlo Leget, humans were endowed with the gift of original justice, which maintained their unity in this condition. This unity governed the incorruptible soul over the corruptible body. The soul serves as the form of the body, while the matter aligns itself with this form. Therefore, an incorruptible soul should inhabit a body of similar quality. Positioned at the center of creation, a man was given a body composed of earth, water, air, and fire, along with supernatural gifts that enabled the soul’s dominion over the body, including its preservation from mortality.²³ Theologically, through this preservation from mortality, man remained in a state of original justice, grace, and a life intimately united with God.

Reaching this point, we can easily understand how terrible it was when the relationship with God was broken. Saint Augustine writes in his *The City of God*, “As soon as they disobeyed the Divine command, and forfeited Divine grace, they were ashamed of their nakedness, for they felt the impulse of disobedience in the flesh, as though it were a punishment corresponding to their disobedience.”²⁴ The loss of grace dissolved the obedience of the flesh to the soul. Indeed, by nature, God granted man a gift of original justice, a certain incorruptibility of the body, but death occurs for man’s disobedience. As Thomas Aquinas says, “It is in this sense that it is said that *God made not death* and that death is the punishment of sin.”²⁵ This thought is the core of original sin, and death is the punishment for it. Thus, the meaning of original sin should be interpreted according to this thought.

The punishment for the men is the loss of Divine grace. First, the parents were expelled from paradise, illustrating a profound loss of a life filled with grace (*vita gratiae*). This represents a disorder in their lives, as they are no longer in a relationship with God. They were cast out of the garden, facing hard labor and deep suffering. Carlo Leget claims, “Apart from this, he is punished in terms of body and soul. The soul loses its dominion over the body and can no longer save it from corruption. The rational part of the soul loses its dominion over the lower parts, and solicitude, anxiety, and conflicts between the sexes appear. The man is not only punished by mortality but also by the inescapable thought of his future death.”²⁶

The punishment is severe and evident; it is ascribed to them on the part of the soul in three ways, as Aquinas writes in *Summa Theologica*:

First, because of the confusion they experienced at the rebellion of the flesh against the spirit, it is written: “Their eyes were opened; and [...] they perceived themselves to be naked.”²⁷ Secondly, by the reproach for their sin, indicated by the words,

²¹ Ibid., 85.

²² Gen. 1:26.

²³ Carlo Leget, *ibid.*, 84–85.

²⁴ *De Civ. Dei XIII*, 13.

²⁵ *ST. I.II.85.6.*

²⁶ Carlo Leget, *ibid.*, p. 89. See *ST. II.II.164.1.2.*

²⁷ Gen 3:7.

“Behold, Adam is become as one of us.”²⁸ Thirdly, it reminded him of their coming death when it was said to him: “Dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return.”²⁹ This also pertains to the fact that God made them garments of skin as a sign of their mortality.³⁰

The struggle between our carnal desires and spiritual essence is a fundamental punishment for humanity. This inner conflict not only results in death but also manifests as physical ailments and imperfections. In the letter to the Romans, Saint Paul writes: “It was through one man that guilt came into the world; and, since death came owing to guilt, death was handed on to all³¹ by one man.”³² By the bride, Adam “wanted to be like gods, knowing good and evil.”³³ By their weakness, when “the woman took some fruit from the tree and ate it, and she gave some to him, and Adam ate with her,”³⁴ he betrayed God, causing the death of the whole world. This situation signifies a profound loss that each person must face: the deprivation of the inherent right to experience joy and fulfillment, akin to an idyllic state that can be achieved through divine grace and a profound, substantive relationship with God. Furthermore, this terrible punishment of the soul “is being abandoned by its body by corporal death, and eventually abandoned by God by eternal death.”³⁵

As a result, natural life becomes disconnected from God, leaving humanity adrift and questioning its very purpose.³⁶ In other words, the “visible natural life no longer serves the invisible life of grace, the relationship with God for which it was designed.”³⁷ Undoubtedly, physical death symbolizes and signifies the spiritual death of grace. This represents one of the most alarming consequences of original sin, often perceived as a punishment from God. What implications does this hold for humanity, and how tragic is it that we must endure suffering following the Fall of Man? The punishment of physical death resulting from original sin embodies our greatest fear, as it leads to a separation from the life of grace and disconnection from union with God.

Original sin is a universal condition that makes all of us imperfect. Despite our differences in gender, wealth, or age, we are all destined to face mortality. We share the human experience of suffering and the hope for God’s salvation. In this shared condition, we all need God’s grace to

²⁸ Gen 3:22.

²⁹ Gen 3:19.

³⁰ ST. II.II.164.2.

³¹ As Adam has passed it on, sin and death are indeed universal to human nature and lack original justice. However, this is not true of Christ, whose bodily substance derived from Adam through the Blessed Virgin but in whose generation the active principle was not Adam but the Holy Spirit. We derive human nature from Adam, both in bodily substance and his role as active principle in our generation. For this reason, we inherit the lack of original justice he passed on with human nature. However, this is not true of Christ. (Javier Di Noia. “Christ Brings Freedom from Sin and Death: The Commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas on Romans 5:12–21.” *The Thomist* 73, no. 3 (2009), 389.)

³² Rom 5:12.

³³ Gen 3:5.

³⁴ Gen 3:6.

³⁵ Carlo Geget, *ibid.*, 90.

³⁶ By generation, therefore, human nature is passed on along with the defect it acquired from the first parent’s sin. According to Thomas Aquinas, this defect is nothing other than the lack of original justice, which was conferred by God upon the first parent not only as a person but also as the source of human nature. Original justice was to have been passed on to his progeny along with human nature. Instead, having lost it by his sin, the first parent could not pass on original justice. This defect has the expert of guilt in his descendants in the way that the guilt of a person’s members’ members derives from the actual sin that he willfully commits. (Javier Di Noia, *ibid.*, 388)

³⁷ Carlo Leget, *ibid.*, 91.

overcome fear, transcend death, and reconnect with the divine. Indeed, “one man commits a fault, and it brings condemnation upon all; one man makes amends, and it brings to all justification, that is life.”³⁸ The world certainly needs the one who controls death and brings new hope and eternal life: Jesus Christ.

Christ Destroying Death and Bringing New Life

This theme—the victory of Christ over death—represents an important point in our discussion of original sin and salvation. Thomas Aquinas thoughtfully utilizes Paul’s letter to the Romans to illustrate the relationship between the gracious gift of Christ and the consequences of Adam’s transgression. According to Thomas Aquinas, Saint Paul turns from the history of sin to the history of grace, as he states: “All the more lavish was God’s grace, shown to a whole multitude, that gift He made us in the grace brought by one man, Jesus Christ.”³⁹ The grace of Christ surpasses Adam’s sin in strength and effectiveness. While human will is often weak and prone to sin, grace flows abundantly from the depths of divine goodness. Indeed, the power of grace triumphs over every sin, offering hope and redemption to all.

In Javier Di Noia’s study, Thomas Aquinas’s writings regarding the grace of Christ are a central focus. It is argued that while Adam’s sin resulted in death for many, God’s grace not only offers forgiveness for Adam’s sin but also removes actual sins and imparts abundant blessings.⁴⁰ Javier Di Novia continues his argument: “Saint Paul compares the grace of Christ and Adam’s sin by considering their effects: And the gift is not like the effect of one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the gift following many trespasses brings justification. Christ’s grace had a more significant effect than Adam’s sin.”⁴¹ Thankful for the grace of Christ, we recognize its more powerful impact compared to the control of Adam’s sin. In addition, Christ’s grace instills a greater hope in the world. Moreover, the grace of Christ eliminates any condemnation of humanity associated with Adam’s sin and “extends not only to original sin but also to many actual sins and brings the complete cleansing of justification.”⁴²

We continue to explore Aquinas’s commentary on this passage. In verse 17, Saint Paul provides the first part of a twofold proof for the assertion made in the preceding verse: “And if death began its reign through one man, owing to one man’s fault, more fruitful still is the grace, the gift of justification, which bids men enjoy a reign of life through one man, Jesus Christ.”⁴³ According to Thomas Aquinas, the evidence indicates that, due to one man’s sin, the entire world is condemned, with death being governed by that man. Those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of justification exemplify the minor premise. Thomas Aquinas underscores that no individual, by their efforts or merits, can overcome the effects of sin; instead, this becomes possible solely through Christ’s grace. Therefore, according to Javier Di Noia, to end this argument, Thomas Aquinas refers to verse 18: “Well then, one man commits a fault, and it brings condemnation upon all; one man makes amends, and it brings to all justification, that is life.”⁴⁴ For Thomas Aquinas, grace is a divine gift God bestows through Jesus, empowering individuals with the free will to embrace it. Moreover, God orchestrates all aspects of existence, directing humanity towards justice in alignment with our nature. Through grace,

³⁸ Rom 5:12.

³⁹ Rom 5:15.

⁴⁰ Ref. Javier Di Noia, *ibid.*, 390.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 390.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 390.

⁴³ Rom 5:17.

⁴⁴ Rom 5:18.

God inspires the human will, allowing them to consciously accept the transformative, justifying, or sanctifying grace that liberates their souls from the burden of sin.⁴⁵

However, it is important to emphasize that it is through Jesus—and only through Jesus—that God grants all men justification and new life. Thus, to Javier Di Noia, “This conclusion seems to be false [...], because, although all men do die as a result of the sin of Adam, not all men are justified by Christ.”⁴⁶ This claim is essential because all justified people receive their justification through Christ. In other words, while Christ’s justification has the potential to offer grace to everyone, it impacts explicitly those who have faith in Him; strictly speaking, this justification is meant for those who accept baptism. Just as no one dies if Adam had not sinned, similarly, no one is justified except through the righteousness of Christ. Hence, “one man makes amends, and it brings to all justification, that is life.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, the complete condition to receive this grace-filled life is faith. By placing faith in Jesus, people can attain eternal life, which includes the promise of resurrection.

According to the Gospel of Saint Matthew, God will separate people into two groups at the moment of judgment: one for the righteous and another for the unrighteous. To the righteous, on Judgment Day, God will say, “Come, you that have received a blessing from my Father, take possession of the kingdom which has been prepared for you since the foundation of the world... when you did it to one of the least of my brethren here, you did it to me.”⁴⁸ Then he will say to the unrighteous ones: “Go far from me, you that are accursed, into that eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels... when you refused it to one of the least of my brethren here, you refused it to me.”⁴⁹

God is righteous, and His rewards and punishments for humanity are clear. However, God is also merciful; He desires for all people to be saved. To fulfill this desire, God sent His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to save people from death. As Saint Matthew states in chapter 4, verse 16, “The people that abode in darkness have seen a great light.” Indeed, those who dwell in the shadow of death have been illuminated. Jesus was sent by God, the Mighty Father, to rescue those who are trapped in darkness. Additionally, the Apostles often depicted Jesus as a source of healing for those who fear death, as illustrated by his raising of Lazarus from the dead. Thus, Jesus is the one who brings life to the dying.

Dying with Christ to Share His Resurrection

Having examined Aquinas’s account of death and original sin, this paper now turns to a constructive reflection on Romans 5, highlighting how Christians may understand dying with Christ as participation in His resurrection. Indeed, “it was through one man that guilt came into the world; and, since death came owing to guilt, death was handed on to all mankind by one man by one man.”⁵⁰ Sin and death entered the world through the fall, leaving all who share human nature burdened by the fear of death. Drawing on Romans 5, Joseph Wawrykow notes that Thomas Aquinas presents Christ as the Second Adam within his Christology. Just as the first Adam introduced sin and death, Christ’s passion overcomes them, revealing the contrast between death and resurrection. Although humanity suffers from Adam’s fault, union with Christ remains possible through faith and charity. By believing, individuals participate in

⁴⁵ Ref. *ST*. I.II.113.3.

⁴⁶ Javier Di Noia, *ibid.*, 392.

⁴⁷ Rom 5:18.

⁴⁸ Mt 25:34, 40.

⁴⁹ Mt 25:41, 45.

⁵⁰ Rom 5: 12.

Christ's death and resurrection and receive justification, transforming death from a sign of defeat into a passage toward new life; therefore:

In Christ, they die to sin, and the consequences of sin are overcome in principle. In Christ, they receive the promise of eternal life in the presence of God. Moreover, their physical death will not be the final word when it comes to the existence of the body-soul composite. Those who belong to Christ will physically die by their natural union with the First Adam. However, they will rise again, as patterned on and made possible by the resurrection of the Second Adam, and will come to enjoy, in both soul and body, the richness of life in the presence of God.⁵¹

Traditionally, the Catholic Church teaches that original sin brings death into the world. This understanding suggests that Adam's sin resulted in death for humanity, which is viewed as a punishment for the soul. This perspective leads to several questions, such as whether sin is a consequence of death or if death is an inherent aspect of life and merely the punishment for sin. If the latter is true, then it follows that everyone fears death and the judgment they must face before God after this life. Undoubtedly, as mentioned earlier, death carries negative connotations. One might argue that God created everything, including life and death. This raises intriguing considerations: God created all humanity, foreseeing their eventual mortality, or, in a different view, Adam would have never died. As previously noted, there are various perspectives on understanding death—be it biological, ethical, theological, and more.

Returning to the book of Genesis, we confirm that God created males and females in His image and likeness; however, God did not claim, *I created you, and you will never die*. Instead, God tells Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to establish a clear distinction between freedom and the avoidance of sin. This command served to illustrate the boundary that exists between God and humanity, as well as between heaven and earth. When that boundary was violated, sin entered the world, resulting in a separation between God and humankind, with death being the ultimate consequence.

Fortunately, God took an initial step to rescue people from death by making a promise. As written in the Letter to Corinthians, Saint Paul said, "Where then, death, is thy victory; where, death, is thy sting?"⁵² This string is probably considered the consequence of sin and death. It must be the power of death. However, "God will give us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."⁵³ Therefore, Thomas Aquinas explains this idea in his *Summa Theologica*: "By sinning, a man offends God as stated above. Now an offense is remitted to anyone, only when the soul of the offender is at peace with the offended."⁵⁴ Thus, from this perspective, death, often viewed as a negative consequence of sin and a punishment for the soul, is now seen as an opportunity to die with Christ and to rise with Him on the day of resurrection. Therefore, faith in Jesus not only promotes healthier living but also diminishes the fear of death.

How can we attain this extraordinary state of grace? In what ways can we genuinely embrace a life filled with divine grace? How can one die in Christ and rise anew with Him? These profound questions warrant our exploration of Aquinas and his insights. Yet, we must emphasize the Sacraments as our focal point, for they are powerful signs pointing to deeper spiritual truths. Ultimately, Sacraments reveal sacred realities, with Christ Himself being the ultimate sacrifice

⁵¹ Joseph Wawrykowr, *ibid.*, 104.

⁵² 1Cor 15:55.

⁵³ 1Cor 15:57.

⁵⁴ ST. I.II.113.2.

we honor and embody. In other words, “Sacraments are the ‘powers that come forth’ from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving.”⁵⁵

In Thomas Aquinas’ analysis of the sacraments, there is relentless consistency. According to Joseph Wawrykow, Thomas Aquinas insists repeatedly that the spiritual power of the sacraments is rooted in the cross of Christ: “By the sacraments, Christ’s grace is proclaimed and conveyed. The centrality of the cross is underscored in Aquinas’s comparison of the sacraments of the Old Law and those of the New Law.”⁵⁶ The question at hand is whether the sacraments of the Old Law could be justified. These sacraments served as a testament to the coming of Jesus Christ, who was destined to die for humanity’s sins and whom people were encouraged to trust. However, the significance of these Old Law sacraments is realized only upon Christ’s arrival and sacrificial death for sins. Promptly, both sacraments signify and cause what they signify, that is, “both proclaim Christ as sanctifier and confer his grace on the recipients of the sacraments. Causing grace is reserved for the sacraments of the New Law, which come after Christ and are employed by Christ to convey the spiritual effects of the cross.”⁵⁷

On one hand, Jesus established all the Sacraments; on the other, the liturgical life of the Catholic Church is centered around prayers and Sacraments. The Church recognizes seven Sacraments: “Baptism, Confirmation (or Chrismation), Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony.”⁵⁸ Joseph Wawrykow notes that Thomas Aquinas draws a parallel between sacramental life and corporeal existence in discussing these seven Sacraments collectively. Furthermore, Joseph Wawrykow interprets: “Incorporeal life, a human comes to be, grows in strength, uses food to sustain life and to grow, faces difficulties that need overcoming, and forms associations for mutual support and to aid in coming to perfection.”⁵⁹

Baptism initiates spiritual life by renouncing sin and uniting the person with Christ. Confirmation strengthens this life, granting courage and firmness in faith. The Eucharist provides essential nourishment, as Christ offers Himself to sustain believers on their journey toward God. These three Sacraments orient Christians toward their ultimate end. When sin disrupts this path, the Sacrament of Penance restores it through confession and forgiveness. The Anointing of the Sick brings healing, offering pardon of sins and seeking both spiritual and physical restoration, helping the faithful return to God and continue their pilgrimage in hope.

In Thomas Aquinas’s view, the final two Sacraments are oriented more towards community. Through holy orders, priests are ordained to serve as representatives of Christ, sharing the good news, governing the Church, and administering the Sacraments for the benefit of the congregation. Finally, matrimony symbolizes the profound “unity between Christ and the Church.”⁶⁰ And provides for the material and spiritual growth of the Church. Matrimony represents the union of husband and wife, aimed at the generation and education of children, following the teachings of the Church.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1994, No. 1116, p. 289. In the rest of this paper, we will briefly say that CCC refers to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

⁵⁶ Joseph Wawrykow, *ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁸ CCC., no. 1113.

⁵⁹ Joseph Wawrykow, *ibid.*, 129.

⁶⁰ Eph 5:32.

⁶¹ Ref. Joseph Wawrykow, *ibid.*, 129.

As members of the Church, when we engage in these Sacraments—whether as individuals or as a community—according to the unique characteristics of each Sacrament, we receive the fruits of these sacramental lives with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, both on a personal and ecclesial level. Indeed, the effects of the Sacraments are varied. As the teaching of the Catholic Church, “for every one of the faithful on the one hand, this fruit is life for God in Christ Jesus; for the Church, on the other hand, it is an increase in charity and her mission of virtues.”⁶² For the Church and her people, the practice of the Sacraments serves as a means of sanctification through the words and actions of Christ’s sacrifice. This enables us to achieve our ultimate goal: union with God, both in the heavenly realm and in our earthly existence. As Thomas Aquinas noted, three elements can be considered the causality of the Sacraments: first, the very cause of our sanctification is Christ’s passion; second, the form of our sanctification is grace and the virtues; and third, the ultimate end of our sanctification is eternal life.⁶³

In discussing Thomas Aquinas’ account of the Sacraments, Joseph Wawrykow elucidates the concept of final causality, noting that God utilizes the Sacraments to guide individuals toward the ultimate goal that He has freely determined for them. On one hand, the Sacraments facilitate the successful culmination of the journey toward God as an end; on the other hand, the role of efficient causality also plays a significant part in the analysis of the Sacraments. Therefore, Joseph Wawrykow adds:

[Thomas] Aquinas saw the sacraments simply in terms of dispositive causality; they exercised a moral force, preparing the recipient for the infusion of grace by God. Eventually, however, [Thomas] Aquinas came to see the sacraments as possessed of an efficient causality since they were the instruments by which God conveys grace. Given how he roots the sacraments in the cross, [Thomas] Aquinas’s treatment of efficient causality is even more nuanced.⁶⁴

We firmly believe that Jesus Christ is the second person of God who, while remaining completely divine as the Word of God, took on all aspects of humanity, including both body and soul. Hence, as God, by the mystery of incarnation, Jesus grants grace as “the principal efficient cause of human nature of Christ stands to the divinity as its conjoined instrument, through which, efficiently, grace is caused and conferred.”⁶⁵ Participating in the Sacraments of the Church is the most effective way for individuals to steer clear of sin and restore a meaningful relationship with God. Additionally, we should strive to be integral members of “the mystical body of Christ.”⁶⁶ In doing so, we can receive Christ’s grace and foster a deep connection with Him through the faith and love that He desires.

On the other hand, those who are not part of Christ’s body, the Church, act insincerely when they partake in the Sacrament, as its efficacy does not apply to them in this instance. In essence, grace is consistently conveyed through the Sacrament; however, it is only received by those who belong to Christ. For those who are separated from Him, a lack of faith, charity, and the presence of mortal sin will obstruct their access to sacramental grace. For Thomas Aquinas, baptism is necessary “since neither sacramentally nor mentally are they incorporated in Christ, through Whom alone can salvation be obtained.”⁶⁷ Thomas Aquinas clearly articulates his

⁶² CCC., no. 1134.

⁶³ Ref. ST. III.60.3.

⁶⁴ Joseph Wawrykow, *ibid.*, 130.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁶⁶ ST. III.8.1.

⁶⁷ ST. III.68.2. Additionally, in reply to objection 3, he writes: “The Sacrament of Baptism is said to be necessary for salvation in so far as man cannot be saved without, at least, Baptism of desire; *which, with God, counts for the deed.*” (Augustine).

position against the idea that grace is granted automatically as a result of performing the Sacraments. He emphasizes that the bestowal of grace requires genuine intention and a proper disposition rather than being a mechanical outcome of ritual participation.

Cultivating Virtues to Lead Man toward God

After discussing the significance and necessity of Sacraments for achieving union with God through Jesus Christ, we must focus on the virtues as Thomas Aquinas understood. According to Thomas Aquinas, virtue is the perfection of the soul's faculties, and he dedicates considerable effort to elucidating this essential topic. We pose two questions regarding Thomas Aquinas's perspective: What is virtue? How crucial is it for human flourishing? Aquinas ultimately draws from Augustine to define virtue, stating that "virtue is a good quality in the mind by which one lives righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us without us."⁶⁸ This definition underscores the importance of virtues, a topic we shall further explore. One may state that virtues are concerned with "the right life," that the good quality of life that follows the order of justice—the morally good life.⁶⁹ Additionally, as Carlo Feget highlights, Thomas Aquinas also references Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomacheia* in his definition of virtue: "A virtue is that which makes its possessor good, and his work good likewise."⁷⁰

Thomas Aquinas identifies four principal virtues, known as the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Prudence is the intellect's capacity to discern how to act under reason. Justice represents the will's ability to render what they are due to each person. Temperance is the refinement of the *vis concupiscible*, enabling this sensitive faculty to manage its emotions in line with reason. Fortitude, also called courage, performs a similar function for the *vis irascible*.⁷¹ Thus, through the cardinal virtues, human beings are guided toward the path of the 'right life.'

In his exploration of virtues, Thomas Aquinas emphasizes the significance of theological virtues, which he regards as exceptional means of engaging with God's life of grace. He distinguishes between two categories of virtues. On one hand, he describes theological virtues as perfect and refers to them as virtues *simpliciter* because they uniquely guide individuals toward their ultimate purpose. On the other hand, the cardinal virtues are categorized as virtues in a specific sense. Only the theological virtues direct a person toward true and perfect happiness. As a result, Thomas Aquinas considers these virtues, especially *Caritas*, crucial for any action's moral goodness.⁷²

We firmly stand by our belief that human life is a journey of development in which individuals strive toward perfection. Everyone is invited to partake in life's grace and unite with God in heaven and here on earth. It is fundamental to recognize that God first approached humanity by creating them and offering a life of goodness in paradise. Although humanity fell into corruption through pride, breaking divine law, and severing their relationship with God, the Father took the initiative to send His Only Son into the world to restore that relationship. Thus, everyone is invited "to participate in the life of God via *vita gratiae*, which is to be recognized as a gratuitous perfection of the intellectual faculties of the soul: the theological virtues."⁷³

⁶⁸ ST. I.II.55.4, based on Augustine in II *De libro ratio* 19.

⁶⁹ Ref. Pham Trong Quang. "A Catholic Response Regarding Terminally Ill Cancer Patients Who Seek Euthanasia." Thesis (S.T.L. Moral Theology/Ethics)--Catholic University of America. 2023, 10.

⁷⁰ ST. I.II.56.1, based on II *Ethics* 6.

⁷¹ ST. I.II.61.2.

⁷² Carlo Leget, *ibid.*, 154.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 154.

Since the function of theological virtues is to direct God to the last end of human life as *finis ultimus humanae vitae*, “faith, hope, and charity are of crucial importance to understanding what human life is.”⁷⁴

The ultimate goal of human existence is to embrace a life of grace, which encompasses both the eternal joy of heaven and the fulfillment of a good life here on earth. This understanding implies that when we actively live by and practice virtues such as compassion, humility, and integrity, we create opportunities to experience the profound grace God graciously bestows upon us. This grace is not limited to our life after death; it enriches our daily experiences, enabling us to cultivate a deeper sense of purpose, connection, and fulfillment in our earthly lives. Through our commitment to virtue, we align ourselves with divine intention and open ourselves to the transformative power of grace that can enhance our relationships and lead us to a more meaningful existence.

First, in the second part, question 17, Thomas Aquinas calls faith the ‘beginning of eternal life.’ From the outset, Thomas Aquinas states that faith is understood to transcend life on earth: “Living on earth, however, the perspective of eternal communion with God may cause great distress as regards the possibility of attaining it.”⁷⁵ In the context of our intimate and friendly dialogue with God, theological virtue plays a vital role in guiding us toward the fulfillment of this promised future—a reality that, while demanding, is ultimately within our reach through faith. This journey may present significant challenges and obstacles that test our resolve and perseverance. However, it is important to recognize that this path is not insurmountable. Within this framework, we uncover the profound significance of the theological virtue of hope. Hope serves as a guiding light, urging us to remain steadfast in our pursuit of that promise, instilling in us the confidence that, despite our difficulties, we can attain the divine goal that awaits us.

In the second part of the second section, especially from questions 17 to 22, Thomas Aquinas explores the virtue of hope, emphasizing its connection to our relationship with God. He describes hope as an essential aspect of our life in communion with God, characterized as the will’s desire directed toward the perfection of God’s knowledge and love, granted to us through grace. Thomas Aquinas highlights that God is the ultimate object of our hope, representing His essence, goodness, and truth. Intriguingly, he also suggests that God hopes for our attainment of eternal life.⁷⁶ This dual dimension of hope underscores its active role in our faith. Hope becomes particularly vital during times of struggle—be it anxiety, suffering, pain, or fear of death. It empowers us to overcome challenges and reinforces our trust in God’s presence and promises, enriching our journey toward a deeper relationship with God.

Ultimately, when Thomas Aquinas examines the nature of these fears, he introduces an exploration of the third theological virtue: charity. In his analysis, Thomas Aquinas identifies three distinct degrees of charity, as highlighted by Carlo Leget: “the love of those who begin, those who advance, and those who are perfect.”⁷⁷ In the first degree, individuals possess the capacity to recognize and avoid sin, along with any obstacles that might impede their love for God. This foundational level of charity marks the beginning of a relationship with the Divine, cultivating an awareness of God’s presence and aligning one’s actions accordingly. As individuals progress to the second degree of charity, they become motivated to engage in activities and behaviors that strengthen their charitable disposition. This stage reflects a deeper

⁷⁴ Ibid., 154.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁷⁶ Ref. ST. II.17.2.

⁷⁷ Larlo Leget, *ibid.*, 163.

commitment to living a life characterized by good works, kindness, and a tangible expression of love toward others, ultimately fostering a more profound connection with God.

The final stage describes those firmly resolved to embrace God and find happiness in communion with Him. Saint Paul expresses this longing in 2 Corinthians 5:8: “We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” Here, attachment to God surpasses all earthly concerns. Therefore, believers must actively cultivate virtues, especially charity, which draws them into a deeper relationship with God and prepares them for eternal life. By growing in love, they learn to value heavenly communion more than temporary bodily existence and to live according to humanity’s ultimate purpose: loving and serving God wholeheartedly. When hearts turn toward God and hope rests in Him, believers can await union with Him and the saints. Death is then no longer an end, but a passage into new life and the fulfillment of communion with God.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the meaning of death within Thomas Aquinas's theological framework. For Aquinas, death is fundamentally the separation of soul and body and the consequence of original sin introduced by the first parents. Through humanity's disobedience, the harmony that once existed among human beings and between humanity and God was disrupted. Humanity lost its original state of justice and the capacity for full communion with God, the ultimate end of human existence.

Turning away from God resulted in exclusion from paradise, where humanity had been endowed with intelligence, virtue, and the ability to love. The only prohibition—the forbidden fruit granting knowledge of good and evil—became the point of rupture. Once violated, humanity lost not only innocence but also its direct relationship with God. Consequently, human beings require divine assistance to restore this communion. According to Aquinas, this assistance is granted by grace, made available through Jesus Christ. As expressed in Scripture, if death entered through one man's fault, life now reigns through one man, Jesus Christ.

Through Adam's sin, death entered the world; through Christ's passion, new life began. Christ conquered death and opened the path to eternal life, offering hope and revealing salvation. However, Aquinas emphasizes that salvation is not automatic. To receive grace, individuals must become members of the Mystical Body of Christ. Christ's passion provides the grace and virtues necessary for faith, hope, and love, yet each person must freely choose to belong to Him. Without this incorporation, salvation cannot be attained.

Participation in the Church's sacred life is therefore essential because divine grace is communicated through the sacraments. Those separated from Christ often struggle in faith and charity, and mortal sin further obstructs sacramental grace. The Church consequently plays a crucial role in guiding believers toward deeper union with Christ and helping them realize their spiritual destiny.

Aquinas also teaches that eternal life begins already within the soul through faith. Hope directs the person toward trust in God and longing for perfect union with Him, while charity fosters communion with God in daily life. By cultivating these virtues, believers overcome fear of death and confidently anticipate reunion with God.

Baptism is particularly necessary, since incorporation into Christ—the sole source of salvation—occurs sacramentally or through explicit desire. The sacraments function as instrumental causes of salvation, strengthening moral life on earth and signifying heavenly happiness. While this teaching has faced theological reflection, especially in interreligious

dialogue, it calls the Church to pastoral sensitivity: caring for non-Christians, promoting faith formation, and fostering respectful dialogue.

Ultimately, Aquinas presents death not as annihilation but as a passage whose meaning is understood only in Christ. This study opens further possibilities for theological research and dialogue, encouraging a deeper understanding of salvation, grace, and humanity's final union with God.

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Biodata

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