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# Did Christ Enjoy the Beatific Vision on Earth? Testing the Soteriological Hypothesis of Thomas Aquinas

Czy Chrystus doświadczał wizji uszczęśliwiającej na ziemi?  
Sprawdzenie hipotezy soteriologicznej Tomasza z Akwinu

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this article is to test Thomas Aquinas's firm conviction that Jesus Christ enjoyed the direct beatific vision of his Father while on earth. The first part presents the variety of objections that may be raised to this hypothesis: the suggestion of a Monophysite Christology; the prejudice against the authentic exercise of Jesus's human freedom and conscious obedience; the impression that Christ did not live by faith like the rest of humanity. The second part offers an overview of Aquinas's texts and teaching on this issue. St Thomas does not deal extensively with the complex anthropological outworkings of a possible earth-bound beatific vision; rather, he starts with the theological argument, referring to the fundamental principle that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of humanity and thus the mediator of all the gifts of grace that God gives humans, including that of beatific vision. This part concludes with the anthropological consequences – since Jesus is the Savior and not the saved, Aquinas explains that the vision was present in him from the moment of the Incarnation; otherwise he would have received it as a reward for his fidelity. In the final third part, we attempt to explain, taking into account present-day Biblical and Patristic exegesis, to what degree beatific vision (1) renders faith unnecessary in Jesus, yet (2) affirms his true freedom and obedience in spite of the suffering that took place on the Cross.

**KEY WORDS:** Thomas Aquinas, beatific vision, Monophysitism, Christology, soteriology, grace, theological anthropology, faith in/of Jesus, suffering and obedience of Jesus

**ABSTRAKT:** Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie hipotezy św. Tomasza z Akwinu, że Jezus Chrystus cieszył się bezpośrednią wizją uszczęśliwiającą swojego Ojca podczas swojego ziemskiego życia. W pierwszej części przedstawiono zastrzeżenia dotyczące tak postawionej hipotezy, gdyż sugeruje monofizytyzm, wydaje się podważać autentyczną ludzką wolność i świadome posłuszeństwo Jezusa oraz sprawia wrażenie, że Chrystus

nie żył wiarą tak jak reszta ludzkości. Kolejna część obejmuje analizę tekstów św. Tomasza z Akwinu oraz jego nauczanie na ten temat. Punktem wyjścia rozważań św. Tomasza nie są szczegóły złożonych antropologicznych konsekwencji ewentualnej ziemskiej wizji uszczęśliwiającej, tylko argument teologiczny – rozpoczyna swoje rozumowanie od fundamentalnej zasady, że Jezus Chrystus jest jedynym Zbawicielem ludzkości, a zatem jest pośrednikiem wszystkich darów łaski, które Bóg daje ludziom, w tym daru widzenia Boga. Stąd św. Tomasz przechodzi do wniosków antropologicznych – Jezus jest Zbawicielem, a nie zbawionym, zatem doświadczal wizji uszczęśliwiającej od momentu Wcienia; w przeciwnym razie otrzymały ją jako nagrodę za swoją wierność. W ostatniej trzeciej części podjęto próbę wyjaśnienia, uwzględniając współczesną egzegezę biblijną i patrystyczną, w jakim stopniu wizja uszczęśliwiająca (1) sprawia, że wiara u Jezusa nie jest potrzebna, choć jednocześnie (2) potwierdza jego prawdziwą wolność i posłuszeństwo pomimo cierpienia, które miało miejsce na krzyżu.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** Tomasz z Akwinu, wizja uszczęśliwiająca, monofizytزم, chrystologia, soteriologia, łaska, antropologia teologiczna, wiara (w) Jezusa, cierpienie i posłuszeństwo Jezusa

Catholic theology has traditionally held that even during the course of his earthly sojourn, Christ in his humanity enjoyed the perfect vision of the divine essence proper to the blessed in heaven. Several Church documents have taught so.<sup>1</sup> This notion, though held valid by many authors,<sup>2</sup> in recent decades

<sup>1</sup> Cf. especially: decree of the Holy Office (1918): Heinrich Denzinger, Peter Hünermann, and Anne Englund Nash, eds., *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) (hereafter: DH), nos. 3645–47; Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943): DH 3812; Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Haurietis Aquas* (1956): DH 3924. It is interesting to note the soteriological tone of these declarations, especially the latter two. Regarding the soteriological issues involved in the perfection of the knowledge of Christ, cf. also Pius XI, "Litterae encyclicaes Miserentissimus Redemptor," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 20 (1928): 174. And in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), no. 473, we read that the "truly human knowledge of God's Son is expressed the divine life of his person. 'The human nature of God's Son, not by itself but by its union with the Word, knew and showed forth in itself everything that pertains to God.' Such is first of all the case with the intimate and immediate knowledge that the Son of God made man has of his Father. The Son in his human knowledge also showed the divine penetration he had into the secret thoughts of human hearts" (citing St Maximus the Confessor, *Quaestiones et dubia*, 66 [PG 90,840a]). The *Catechism* (no. 474) also says: "By its union to the divine wisdom in the person of the Word incarnate, Christ enjoyed in his human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had come to reveal. What he admitted to not knowing in this area, he elsewhere declared himself not sent to reveal." Cf. also the 1985 report of the International Theological Commission, *The Consciousness of Christ Concerning Himself and His Mission* (1985), [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_1985\\_coscienza-gesu\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1985_coscienza-gesu_en.html).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Luigi Iammarrone, "La visione beatifica di Cristo viatore nel pensiero di san Tommaso," *Doctor Communis* 36 (1983): 287–330; Jean-Hervé Nicolas, *Synthèse dogmatique* (Paris:

has been called into question, and in many cases denied outright.<sup>3</sup> And this has been done for solid reasons.<sup>4</sup> In this study I intend to offer an analysis of the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas on the matter. Aquinas in fact clearly teaches and attempts to justify Jesus's beatific vision during his earthly sojourn. He generally states his case in brief terms, yet draws on important principles of his Christology and soteriology, which would be seriously prejudiced should Christ's earthly vision of the divine essence be denied.

## Difficulties Relating to the Earthly Beatific Vision of Christ

Three principal difficulties may be mentioned: Christological, anthropological, and spiritual.<sup>5</sup> The first difficulty involves insistence upon the authenticity of Christ's true, historical humanity.<sup>6</sup> This of course raises the more fundamental question of *what it means to be authentically human*, a question we shall

Beauchesne, 1985), nos. 341–65; Angelo Amato, *Gesù il Signore: Saggio di cristologia*, 5th ed., Corso di teologia sistematica 4 (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1999), 472–89; Fernando Ocáriz, Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, and José Antonio Riestra, *Il mistero di Cristo: Manuale di cristologia*, Sussidi di teologia (Roma: Apollinare Studi, 1999), 159–71; Anton Ziegenuas, *Jesus Christus, die Fülle des Heils: Christologie und Erlösungslehre*, Katholische Dogmatik 4 (Aachen: MM Verlag, 2000), 420–42; Christoph Schönborn, *Gott sandte seinen Sohn: Christologie*, Amateca 7 (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2002), 159–76. Cf. also Jean-Miguel Garrigues, “La conscience de soi telle qu'elle était exercée par le Fils de Dieu fait homme,” *Nova et Vetera* 79, no. 1 (2004): 39–51; Thomas Joseph White, “The Voluntary Action of the Earthly Christ and the Necessity of the Beatific Vision,” *The Thomist* 69, no. 4 (2005): 497–534, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2005.0001>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gerald O'Collins and Daniel Kendall, “The Faith of Jesus,” *Theological Studies* 53, no. 3 (1992): 403–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399205300302>.

<sup>4</sup> Christ's beatific vision would provide a useful solution to the question of the knowledge he had of being divine: cf. Paul Galtier, *De incarnatione ac redemptione* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1947), 256f.; and especially Paul Galtier, *L'unité du Christ: Être... personne... conscience*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1939), 358–64. The theme of the consciousness of Christ is a delicate one and more apt than others to suffer from the extrapolations and comparisons in respect of our personal consciousness. Still it is hard to defend that Christ would not have been conscious of his divine sonship were he to enjoy the beatific vision, as Galot seems to claim in his work: Jean Galot, *Who Is Christ? A Theology of the Incarnation* (Rome: Gregorian University Press; Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980), 357–59.

<sup>5</sup> For a summary cf. Simon Francis Gaine, *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation, and the Vision of God* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 3–14.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the important article of Jean Galot, “Le Christ terrestre et la vision,” *Gregorianum* 67, no. 3 (1986): 429–50.

return to presently. The principal danger authors perceive in the affirmation of Christ's earthly vision is that of a return to *monophysitism*, a relegation of the humanity of Christ to the level of mere appearance, a more sophisticated version of Docetism. Insistence on Christ's earthly beatific vision would seem to take away from the extraordinary seriousness of the Incarnation, death and resurrection of the divine Word.

Several medieval authors maintained that Christ enjoyed an intuitive vision of God on earth, putting this down simply to the fact of the hypostatic (or personal) union between the humanity and divinity in Christ. This was called the "principle of perfection": the hypostatic closeness of the divinity to the humanity of Christ would require the latter to be elevated by the former.<sup>7</sup> According to XII-century author Hugh of St Victor, for example, the human soul of Jesus possessed by grace what God himself possessed by nature; the divine and the human nature enjoyed identical fullness and perfection of knowledge and wisdom.<sup>8</sup> Hugh's contemporary, Gerhoh of Reichersberg, shared this position.<sup>9</sup> Precedents for this understanding may be found in patristic authors such as Fulgentius of Ruspe,<sup>10</sup> who attributes to Christ's humanity the entirety of divine wisdom.<sup>11</sup> However, the position lends itself readily to a confusion of the two natures in Christ, a confusion obviated by the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>12</sup> A more refined version of the theory was developed by Peter Lombard,<sup>13</sup> Alexander of Hales<sup>14</sup> and others, in which the distinctness of one

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Joshua Lim, "The Principle of Perfection in Thirteenth-Century Accounts of Christ's Human Knowledge," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 24, no. 3 (2022): 352–79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12541>.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Hugh of St Victor, *De sapientia animae Christi* (PL 176:845–56, especially 853A–B); Hugh of St Victor, *De sacramentis* II, 1:6 (PL 176:383D–384A).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gerhoh of Reichersberg, *De gloria et honore Filii hominis* 17:3–5 (PL 194:1135B–1136A), following Hugh of St Victor.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Epistula* 14, q. 3, 25–34 (PL 65:415–24), especially no. 31.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the question of the knowledge of Christ among the Fathers, cf. William G. Most, *The Consciousness of Christ* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Publications, 1980), 93–133. On Augustine, cf. André-Marie Dubarle, "La connaissance humaine du Christ d'après saint Augustin," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 18 (1941): 5–25.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. DH 302.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Peter Lombard, *III Sent.*, d. 14, no. 2 (PL 192:783f.). A similar position may be found in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Tertia Pars et Supplementum* (Taurini: Marietti, 1956), III, q. 9, a. 4 (hereafter: *S.Th.* III).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Alexander of Hales, *Summa Theologica*, III, inq. 2, tract. 1, cap. 4, 694 (Alexander of Hales, *Summa Theologica: Pars Tertia* [Veneriis: Franciscius Senensis, 1576], accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb11205426?page=1>).

and the other nature is retained, at least ostensibly, though founded monophysite suspicions would remain over this explanation that are not easy to shake off.

Here a second difficulty arises. Karl Adam and Karl Rahner<sup>15</sup> cogently argue that the beatific vision of Christ on earth would seriously prejudice his real exercise of human freedom. It would distort the doctrine of Christ's loving and obedient self-offering to the Father, which reconciled us to him. How meaningful would Christ's suffering on the Cross be if he enjoyed the vision of God constantly? It would make the horrors of his passion and death seem like a charade. Karl Adam leaves the question in the air, and Rahner, unconvincingly, suggests that Christ possessed a direct though non-beatific vision of the divine essence during his earthly sojourn.<sup>16</sup>

In the third place, closely connected with the question of the true exercise of Jesus's human freedom and the realism of his sufferings is that of whether or not he had *faith*. In spite of the fact that the Gospel texts do not at first sight speak of the faith of Jesus, but rather of our faith in him (which the Johannine texts consistently present as equivalent to faith in the Father), it is sometimes claimed that Christ indeed had faith,<sup>17</sup> that he had no choice but to trust unseeingly in his Father like the rest of mortals, perhaps that he experienced the "dark night" of abandonment at the hour of his crucifixion and death as part of the common mortal human condition. And of course if Jesus had faith, *ipso facto* he would not have had vision. Later on we shall return to this issue, and attempt to clarify *what kind of faith* could be involved in this context.

In this paper we shall concentrate principally on the first and third difficulties, the Christological and the spiritual. Elsewhere we have explained that to speak of the identity of Christ from an openly anthropological angle can easily lead to a reductionist Christology, seeing God's Incarnate Word as a projection of the situation we, as fallen human beings, find ourselves in. Not only is Christ God's Incarnate Son, the Lord of the Universe, but he is also the Saviour of

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Karl Adam, *The Christ of Faith: The Christology of the Church* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 302–7; Karl Rahner, "Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; Baltimore: Helicon, 1974), 193–215.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Alberto Galli, "Perché Karl Rahner nega la visione beatifica in Cristo," *Divinitas* 13 (1969): 417–54.

<sup>17</sup> For example, cf. Claude Richard, *Il est notre Pâque: la gratuité du salut en Jésus Christ* (Paris: Cerf, 1980), 196–206; Jacques Guillet, *La foi de Jésus Christ* (Paris: Desclée, 1980); O'Collins and Kendall, "The Faith of Jesus." The notion of Christ being a "believer" is also explored by Karl Rahner and Wilhelm Thüsing, *A New Christology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 143–54 and by Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Fides Christi," in *Sponsa Verbi*, vol. 2 of *Saggi teologici*, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Opere 21 (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1970), 41–72.

humanity. His humanity is authentic but special; he is the paradigm and perfection of being human, but is not merely “one of us.” Otherwise he would be the prototype of “the blind leading the blind” (Matt 15:14). Whereas in fact it is his authentic humanity that defines and saves ours: “Christ manifests man to man,” as *Gaudium et Spes* teaches.<sup>18</sup> And as we shall see, it is this fundamental identity of being the Savior of humanity that makes it appropriate for us to speak of his earthly beatific vision.

## The Position of Thomas Aquinas on Christ's Earthly Vision of the Divine Essence

### The Teaching of Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas deals with the question of Christ's earthly beatific vision openly. He does not attempt to resolve the problems arising from the abandonment of Christ by the Father in the Passion (cf. Matt 27:46), or with the apparent incompatibility between the suffering on the Cross and the joy afforded by the beatific vision. Nonetheless, he clearly maintains that Christ had beatific vision on earth.<sup>19</sup> Though many authors do not accept it, recent studies of Thomas confirm the coherence of his position.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See the chapter “Jesus Christ the Redeemer,” in my work: Paul O’Callaghan, *Children of God in the World: An Introduction to Theological Anthropology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 64–85. It attempts to develop the Vatican II teaching “Christ manifests man to man” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *S.Th.* III, q. 46, a. 8. Cf. Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology*, Thomistic Ressourcement Series 5 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 236–74.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Robert Wielockx, “Incarnation et vision béatifique: Aperçus théologiques,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 86, no. 4 (2002): 601–39, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rspt.864.0601>; Gaine, *Did the Saviour See the Father?*; White, *The Incarnate Lord*; Dominic Legge, *The Trinitarian Christology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017); Simon Francis Gaine, “The Beatific Vision and the Heavenly Mediation of Christ,” *TheoLogica* 2, no. 2 (2018): 116–28, <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v2i2.7623>; Charles Rochas, *La science bienheureuse du Christ simul viator et comprehensor: Selon les commentaires bibliques et la Summa theologiae de saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Cerf, 2019); Simon Francis Gaine, “Must an Incarnate Divine Person Enjoy the Beatific Vision,” in *Thomas Aquinas and the Crisis of Christology*, ed. Michael Dauphinais, Andrew Hofer, and Roger W. Nutt (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2021), 126–38; Joshua Lim, “The Necessity of Beatific Knowledge in Christ’s Humanity: A Re-Reading of Summa Theologiae III, Q. 9,” *The Thomist* 86, no. 4 (2022), 515–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00402577.2022.704111>.

It is interesting to note that this final doctrine is not to be found in earlier works, such as the *Commentary on the Sentences*. This fact does not take away from the firmness of his teaching but in some ways adds to it. For it simply goes to prove that he did not receive it from previous Scholastics such as Hugh of St Victor or Peter Lombard, but developed it personally. That is why Thomas' position should be aired independently of theirs.

Both earlier Scholastics and Thomas draw on the so-called “principle of perfection”: that Christ, due to his proximity to the divine Person of the Word, should enjoy in his humanity the fullness of all possible divine graces, among them, the beatific vision. Yet the apparent similarity between this understanding and the one explained by Thomas, is deceptive. For whereas the former tend to draw directly on the ontological (hypostatic) constitution of the God-man (“deducing” beatific vision by extrapolation and proximity), the latter takes his cue principally from the *saving purpose of Christ's life*. That is, beatific vision is not based on the perfection of his being, but rather on that of his mission. He is quite clear that the hypostatic union *per se* is not a sufficient reason to actually *require* the beatific vision in Christ, though it may be fitting (*conveniens*) since “the divinity is united to the humanity of Christ in person, not in essence or nature; with the unity of person remains the distinction of natures.”<sup>21</sup> However appropriate earthly beatific vision may be for Christ, Aquinas is not prepared to allow theological enthusiasm run away on him. Yet, the method of focusing on Christ's beatific vision from a soteriological viewpoint is a singular and significant contribution of his.

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doi.org/10.1353/tho.2022.0034; Matthew Levering, *Reconfiguring Thomistic Christology*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Simon Francis Gaine, “Some Recent Arguments for Christ's Earthly Beatific Vision and Aquinas's Own Argument in *Summa Theologiae* III, qq. 9 and 34,” *The Thomist* 88, no. 1 (2024): 77–97, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.2024.a914473>.

<sup>21</sup> *S.Th.* III, q. 9, a. 2, ad 1; cf. III, q. 9, a. 1, ad 3. Humbert Bouëssé, commenting on Aquinas's teaching states that “on ne peut démontrer simplement à partir de l'union hypostatique l'existence de cette vision dans l'âme du Christ. Il est en effet impossible d'établir la répugnance d'une âme d'Homme-Dieu non dotée de la vision de Dieu. . . . L'argumentation ne peut procéder que dans l'ordre de la sagesse. Il faut donc la situer en fonction de la finalité rédemptrice qui est la finalité même de l'union” (H. Bouëssé, *Le mystère de l'Incarnation*, vol. 2 of *Le Sauveur du monde* [Paris: Office général du livre, 1953], 377); K. Adam (*The Christ of Faith*, 302) says: “the hypostatic union does not signify assumption into the nature of the Logos, but only into his person.”

## Principal Texts of Thomas Aquinas

There are the two principal texts we shall draw upon as the centerpieces of this reflection: one from the *Summa Theologiae*, and the other, somewhat later, from the *Compendium Theologiae*.

*Summa Theologiae* III, q. 9, a. 2, c. reads: “Utrum in Christum fuerit scientia beatorum vel comprehensorum,” (“whether in Christ was to be found the knowledge of the blessed, of those who comprehend God”). It may be noted that this question is an extension of Aquinas’s study on Christ’s “capital” grace (q. 8), which explains that Christ as the head of humanity and the Church, his body, contains within himself all possible graces.

What is in potentiality is reduced to act by what is in act . . . Now man is in potentiality to the knowledge of the blessed, which consists in the vision of God, and is ordained to it as an end; inasmuch as he is made in the image of God, the rational creature is capable of that blessed knowledge. Now humans are brought to this end of beatitude by the humanity of Christ, according to Hebrews 2:10: “As it was his purpose to bring a great many of his sons to glory, it was appropriate that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make perfect through suffering, the leader who would take them to their salvation.” And hence it was necessary (*or fitting, oportuit*) that the beatific knowledge which consists in the vision of God, should belong to Christ pre-eminently (*excellentissime*), since the cause ought always be more efficacious than the effect.<sup>22</sup>

This is the only reason Aquinas gives for Christ’s earthly beatific vision in the *Summa Theologiae*. Though expressed in philosophical terms, it is not a purely philosophical argument, because the minor premise is clearly of faith, that is, that Jesus Christ, God’s only-Begotten Son, is the savior of the world and the source of all grace. Thus he says that “humans are brought to this [ultimate] end of beatitude by the humanity of Christ.” Obviously God is the only ultimate

<sup>22</sup> “. . . illud quod est in potentia, reducitur in actu per id quod est actu: oportet enim calidum esse id per quod alia calefiunt. Homo autem est in potentia ad scientiam beatorum, quae in visione Dei consistit et ad eam ordinatur, sicut in finem: est enim creatura rationalis capax illius beatae cognitionis, inquantum est ad imaginem Dei. *Ad hunc autem beatitudinis finem homines reducuntur per Christi humanitatem*, secundum illud Heb 2:10. . . . Et ideo oportuit quod cognitio ipsa in Dei visione consistsens excellentissime Christo homini conveniret: quia semper causam oportet esse potiorem causato.” Cf. also *S.Th.* III, q. 34, a. 4; q. 49, a. 6, ad 3.

source of grace which brings about the divinization of the spiritual creature. But the immediate source is the humanity of Christ which, as we shall see, serves as an “animate instrument” of the divine action.

The same issue arises, more extensively, in the *Compendium Theologiae I*, c. 216:

Even as man, Christ has a twofold knowledge. The one is godlike, whereby he sees God in his essence, and other things in God, just as God himself, by knowing himself, knows all other things. Through this vision, God himself is happy, as is every rational creature admitted to the perfect fruition of God. Therefore, *since we hold that Christ is the author of man's salvation*, we must also hold (*necesse est dicere*) that such knowledge as befits the author of salvation pertains to the soul of Christ.

But a principle must be *immovable*, and must also be *pre-eminent in power*. Hence that vision of God in which human beatitude and eternal salvation consist, ought to be more excellent in Christ than in others, and indeed, ought to be found in him as in an *immovable principle*. The difference between what is moveable and what is immovable comes to this: moveable things, so far as they are moveable, do not possess their proper perfection *from the beginning*, but acquire it in the course of time; but immovable things, as such, always possess their perfections from the first moment of their existence. Accordingly Christ, the author of man's salvation, should rightly (*conveniens*) have possessed the full vision of God *from the very beginning of his Incarnation*; propriety would not allow him to have attained to it in the course of time, as other saints do [Emphasis added].<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> “Hominis autem Christi est duplex cognitio. Una quidem deiformis, secundum quod Deum per essentiam videt, et alia videt in Deo, sicut et ipse Deus intelligendo seipsum, intelligit omnia alia, per quam visionem et ipse Deus beatus est, et omnis creatura rationalis perfecte Deo fruens. Quia igitur Christum dicimus esse humanae salutis auctorem, necesse est dicere, quod talis cognitio sic animae Christi conveniat ut decet auctorem. Principium autem et immobile esse oportet, et virtute praestantissimum. Conveniens igitur fuit ut illa Dei visio in qua beatitudo hominum et salus aeterna consistit, excellentius prae ceteris Christo conveniat, et tamquam immobili principio. Haec autem differentia invenitur mobilium ad immobilia, quod mobilia propriam perfectionem non a principio habent, inquantum mobilia sunt, sed eam per successionem temporis assequuntur; immobilia vero, inquantum huiusmodi, semper obtinent suas perfectiones ex quo esse incipiunt. Conveniens igitur fuit Christum humanae salutis auctorem ab ipso suae incarnationis principio plenam Dei visionem possedit, non autem per temporis successionem pervenisse ad ipsam, ut sancti alii pervenient” (Thomas Aquinas, “Compendium Theologiae,” in *De re dogmatica et*

In the *Compendium Theologiae*, I, c. 216, Aquinas goes on to explain other kinds of human knowledge possessed by Christ, the “infused” and the “acquired,”<sup>24</sup> and then adds a further, secondary reason – based on the classical “principle of perfection” – to explain his beatific vision on earth:

It is also appropriate that the soul which was united to God *more closely than all others* should be beatified by the vision of God beyond the rest of creatures. Gradation is possible in this vision, according as some see God, the cause of all things, more clearly than others . . . Accordingly, the soul of Christ, possessing the highest perfection of the divine vision among all creatures, *clearly beholds in God himself all the divine works and the exemplars of all things that are, will be, or have been*; and so he enlightens not only men, but also the highest of the angels. Hence the Apostle says in Colossians 2:3 that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” of God; and in Hebrews 4:13 he points out that “all things are naked and open to his eyes.”<sup>25</sup>

And Aquinas adds: “No perfection conceded to creatures may be withheld from Christ’s soul, which is the most excellent of creatures.”<sup>26</sup>

He goes on to explain that in Christ are to be found different kinds of knowledge: experimental, like all humans; infused, in view of the perfection of created reality. And he comments: “It was proper from human nature assumed by God’s Word would be lacking in nothing, because through it the whole of human nature had to be restored.”<sup>27</sup>

But then he adds:

<sup>24</sup> *morali*, vol. 1 of *Opuscula Theologica*, ed. Raymundi A. Verardo [Torino: Marietti, 1954], no. 435; hereafter: *Comp. theol.*).

<sup>25</sup> *Comp. theol.* I, c. 216 (ed. Marietti, no. 438f).

<sup>25</sup> “Et inde est quod eorum qui essentiam Dei vident, aliqui plures effectus vel rationes divinorum operum in ipso Deo inspiciunt, quam alii qui minus clare vident . . . Anima igitur Christi summam perfectionem divinae visionis obtainens inter creaturas ceteras, omnia divina opera et rationes ipsorum, quaecumque sunt, erunt vel fuerunt, in ipso Deo plene intuetur, ut non solum homines, sed etiam supremos angelorum illuminet, et ideo Apostolus dicit ad Coloss., 2, 3, quod in ipso sunt omnes thesauri sapientiae et scientiae Dei absconditi: et ad Hebr. 4, 13, quod omnia nuda et aperta sunt oculis eius” (*Comp. theol.* I, c. 216 [ed. Marietti, no. 438f]).

<sup>26</sup> “Nulla perfectio creaturis exhibita, animae Christi, quae est creaturarum excellentissima, deneganda est,” (*Comp. theol.* I, c. 216 [ed. Marietti, no. 439]).

<sup>27</sup> “Conveniens enim fuit ut humana natura a Dei verbo assumpta in nullo a perfectione deficeret, utpote per quam tota humana natura restauranda esset,” (*Comp. theol.* I, c. 216 [ed. Marietti, no. 439]).

Since Christ according to his human nature is not just the restorer of nature, but *also the propagator of grace*, there would have to be a third kind of knowledge, by which he knew at the widest possible level whatever belonged to the mystery of grace, for this exceeds natural human knowledge, but may only be known by humans through the gift of wisdom, or by the gift of prophecy.<sup>28</sup>

From this dense reflection Aquinas concludes: “It is clear (*patet igitur*) from what has just been said that the soul of Christ obtained the supreme grade of knowledge from among other creatures in respect of the vision of God by which the essence of God is seen and all other things in him.”<sup>29</sup>

From these texts we may conclude that the principal reason Aquinas gives in favour of Christ enjoying the beatific vision on earth is soteriological, simply because *he must provide it for us*. His perfection is not “metaphysical” in character, based on the hypostatic closeness of the humanity of Christ to his divinity,<sup>30</sup> but rather is “economic” in kind, “based on the ordering of Christ’s humanity to the incarnation’s concrete and soteriological end.”<sup>31</sup> In that sense Thomas takes the realism of Incarnation very seriously, and is doctrinally situated far away from both Nestorianism and Monophysitism. In the words of Joshua Lim:

If his humanity is to be the source of grace for the rest of humanity, its perfection must be unambiguously human. Christ, therefore, possesses the perfection of grace and knowledge because his humanity is the instrument through which God causes our salvation (specifically, communicating grace, illuminating minds, and leading men to the vision of God). In order to be such an instrument, according to the principle of the causality of the maximum, it is necessary that

<sup>28</sup> “Sed quia Christus secundum humanam naturam non solum fuit reparator naturae, sed et gratiae propagator, affuit ei etiam tertia cognitio, qua plenissime cognovit quidquid ad mysteria gratiae potest pertinere, quae naturalem hominis cognitionem excedunt, sed cognoscuntur ab hominibus per donum sapientiae, vel per spiritum prophetiae,” (*Comp. theol.* I, c. 216 [ed. Marietti, no. 439]).

<sup>29</sup> “Patet igitur ex praedictis, quod anima Christi summum cognitionis gradum inter ceteras creaturas obtinuit quantum ad Dei visionem, qua Dei essentia videtur, et alia in ipsa,” (*Comp. theol.* I, c. 216 [ed. Marietti, no. 439]).

<sup>30</sup> In the words of J. Lim: metaphysical “perfection is due to the human nature of Christ on account of its union to the Word (that is, independent of a consideration of the concrete end of redemption). Consequently, Christ’s perfection as man is in some way an immediate result of his divine perfection in such a way that, unhindered, would compromise the integrity of his human nature. . . . It argues from the bare fact of the hypostatic union” (Lim, “The Principle of Perfection,” 360).

<sup>31</sup> Lim, 361.

Christ possess the fullness of grace and knowledge. . . . Christ must be full of grace to communicate grace to others; his fullness of grace enables him, in his humanity, to be principle of grace for others. . . . Christ must perfectly possess the grace that he alone mediates to the rest of humanity.<sup>32</sup>

But is this really a convincing explanation? In particular, the following questions must be asked. *First*: to what degree does Christ truly communicate God's gift of eternal life to humans, and (with it) beatific vision? And *second*, even if his humanity *does* play an instrumental role in obtaining beatific vision for believers, what need is there for him to enjoy vision while *on earth*, when such a vision would only seem proper to his glorious state?

Simon Francis Gaine in a recent study<sup>33</sup> examines Lim's explanation to the effect that Thomas justifies Christ's earthly beatific vision from conception onwards soteriologically. But he specifies that the term *conveniens*, 'appropriate', 'fitting' is frequently used in these texts, the ones we have just cited. In other words, Thomas does not hold that Christ's universal saving mission strictly determines or requires that Jesus enjoyed the vision of God while on earth, but holds rather that it is very appropriate. "In fact, the mark of fittingness in Aquinas's approach instead allows the possibility of critics proposing alternative views of when it was fitting for Christ to be blessed with the beatific vision,"<sup>34</sup> especially in respect of its beginning at conception.

Let us examine these issues one by one; in doing so, it should be possible to eventually validate Thomas's position as a reasonable hypothesis.

### The Gratuitous Character of Beatific Vision and the Universal Mediation of Christ

The first thing to be said is that for the rational creature, beatific vision – immediate intuitive knowledge of the divine essence – is a *gratuitous gift of God*. Though we may be naturally capable of seeing God (Thomas says that humans are *capax Dei*), beatific vision is a divine gift and it is entirely beyond the bounds of human nature.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Lim, 361.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Gaine, "Some Recent Arguments for Christ's Earthly Beatific Vision and Aquinas's Own Argument in *Summa Theologiae* III, qq. 9 and 34," 84–89.

<sup>34</sup> Gaine, 90.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. O'Callaghan, *Children of God in the World*, 367–405.

Interestingly, some of the early redactions of the Apostles' Creed termed this the “*invisibility*” of God.<sup>36</sup> For Tyrranius Rufinus<sup>37</sup> and others, the affirmation of the invisibility of God was an anti-Sabellian reaction, which meant that the Son and not the Father became incarnate (or visible). Still, whatever reasons were given, “*invisibility*” is a significant divine attribute,<sup>38</sup> one which succinctly expresses several fundamental aspects of Christian faith and life: the need to believe; the chasm between the personal knowledge of God Christians have through revelation, on the one hand, and the limited knowledge of the divine nature available to reason alone, on the other. God in his essence is completely invisible for man, absolutely invulnerable and untouchable; he cannot be idolized or manipulated.<sup>39</sup> If, due to this very invisibility, one is led to think that “*God is dead*” or has gone into hiding, what it really means is that *humans* have rejected his revelation, and erected their own (visible, tangible, manipulable) gods.

The conclusion of this is simple: the divinity can only be seen in his essence by humans *if God makes himself seen*, in other words by a gift man is capable of receiving without losing his nature, but which he has no native capabilities of achieving.

But where does Christ enter here? In what way would our beatific vision depend on him? The thesis being put forward by Thomas is that *precisely insofar*

<sup>36</sup> Cf. G. Ludwig Hahn and August Hahn, eds., *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der alten Kirche*, 3rd ed. (Breslau: E. Morgenstern, 1897), no. 47 (Augustine: also in DH 21); no. 134 (Auxentius of Milan – Arian); no. 48 (Quodvultdeus of Carthage: also in DH 22); no. 212 (John of Jerusalem); no. 36 (Tyrranius Rufinus: also in DH 16); no. 49 (Fulgentius of Ruspe); no. 64 (Gallican *Auscultate Expositionem*); no. 76 (Bangor Antiphonary: also in DH 29).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Tyrranius Rufinus, *Comm. in Symb. Apost.* (Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, trans. John Norman Davidson Kelly, Ancient Christian Writers 20 [Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 1954]); Francis John Badcock, *The History of the Creeds* (London: SPCK, 1938), 103.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Michael Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik*, vol. 1 (Munich: M. Hüber, 1953), 220–24 (#36, 2b); Johann Auer, *Gott der Eine und Dreieine*, vol. 2 of *Kleine katholische Dogmatik* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1978), #9, 1.

<sup>39</sup> The following text of Joseph Ratzinger (*Introduction to Christianity* [London: Herder / Herder, 1969], 31) is worth transcribing: “Between God and man there is an infinite abyss; because man was created in such a way that he can only see what is not God, and hence God is essentially invisible for man, who always remains outside the human field of vision. God is essentially invisible. This expression of the biblical faith in God which rejects the visible character of the gods is, perhaps above all, an affirmation regarding man: man is a being who sees and attempts to reduce the space of his real existence to that of what he can see and understand. But in man's visual field, which situates him in the world, God does not, indeed cannot, appear, no matter how much that visual field is widened.... God is the one who remains *essentially* outside our visual field.”

as the beatific vision is a gratuitous concession, a gift of grace, it can only come to us through the mediation of Christ. As Aquinas says in the text cited above, “humans are brought to beatitude by the humanity of Christ.”<sup>40</sup> This is simply an expression of the doctrine of the *universal mediation of Christ* in the order of salvation, a doctrine fundamental to Christianity. And when Aquinas asserts that Christ possessed the fullness of all divine gifts destined for man, he is not doing so in order to overdecorate and dehumanize the Savior, but simply to emphasize that “of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved” (Act 4:12); “there is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). Certainly the creation of the world refers to the divinity of the Word, “through whom all things were made” (John 1:2),<sup>41</sup> but in the supernatural sphere, which includes the beatific vision, the mediation of Christ in his humanity is required. If bound to seek an alternative, one would have to claim that, besides Christ, there would have to be another form of mediation parallel to and independent of his, *or* that man has native power to receive the beatific vision (that it is natural to him), *or* simply that God gives man the gift of vision without any form of mediation. Let us examine the latter possibility.

### Difficulties Concerning the “Mediation” of Beatific Vision

What is being said here is that the humanity of Christ is in some way involved in providing us with the beatific vision. Two significant problems arise in this regard. *Firstly*, it would seem that the mediating role of Christ in the beatific vision would destroy the very nature of such vision, which occurs “face to face,” “without the mediation of any creature as a seen object,” in the words of Benedict XII’s 1336 constitution *Benedictus Deus*.<sup>42</sup> *Secondly*, once the just

<sup>40</sup> *S.Th.* III, q. 9, a. 2, c.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Paul O’Callaghan, *God’s Gift of the Universe: An Introduction to Creation Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022).

<sup>42</sup> DH 1000: “nulla mediante creatura in ratione obiecti visi se habente.” On this important document, cf. Christian Trottmann, *La vision beatifique: des disputes scolastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1995); Josep Gil i Ribas, “El debat medieval sobre la visió beatífica. Noves aportacions (I),” *Revista Catalana de Teología* 27, no. 2 (2002): 295–351, <https://raco.cat/index.php/RevistaTeologia/article/view/71249>; Josep Gil i Ribas, “El debat medieval sobre la visió beatífica. Noves aportacions (II). La polèmica sobre el «quan» de la visió beatífica,” *Revista Catalana de Teología* 28, no. 1 (2003): 135–96.

have received their eternal prize, the mediating role of Christ's humanity seems superfluous. Since the role of an instrument is normally a *transitory* one, it could hardly be said that Christ's humanity would be required to *maintain* the beatific vision eternally. Or could it?

The following could be said regarding the *first problem*. As a reaction to Arianism, there tended to arise among some theologians, such as Theodoret of Cyrrhus,<sup>43</sup> a position which distinguished really between the divine essence on the one hand, which is absolutely invisible for creatures – not even God could make it visible – and, on the other, the divine glory, power and splendour (*doxa*), which is visible for creatures, was encountered by Moses on the holy mountain, and likewise by Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration. In the time of Theodoret, however, Gregory the Great made the point that to *see* the one (the glory) and not the other (the essence) may lead to prejudicing the divine simplicity<sup>44</sup>; either God is seen intuitively and directly – though never of course “comprehensively”<sup>45</sup> – or he is not seen at all. To say that God is simple in his essence means it is impossible to see “a bit of God” without seeing the rest. This is the point the doctrine of Benedict XII – *nulla mediante creatura* – attempted to clarify when teaching there is no intermediary involved in the beatific vision: God is simple in his essence.

Clearly, therefore, the humanity of Christ is not the medium *through which* the divinity is seen. The blessed are immediately conscious of seeing God, One and Three, and *as a result*, they behold other things and persons *in God*, – this includes for example the glorified humanity of Christ – “just as God himself, by knowing himself, knows all other things,”<sup>46</sup> to cite Thomas. One might say that God himself mediates their knowledge of the rest of reality, but nothing mediates their conscious knowledge of God. So where does the mediation of Christ fit in? What role does he play in communicating beatific knowledge to Christians?

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Eranistes seu Polymorphus*, dial. I (Theodoret, *Eranistes*, ed. Gerard H. Ettlinger [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975], 75f.). Cf. Paul B. Clayton, *The Christology of Theodoret of Cyrus: Antiochene Christology from the Council of Ephesus (431) to the Council of Chalcedon (451)*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Vasilije Vranic, *The Constancy and Development in the Christology of Theodoret of Cyrrhus*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 129 (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Gregory the Great, *Moralium in Job*, 18, 54, 90 (PL 76:93).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae. Pars Prima et Prima Secundae* (Rome: Marietti, 1952) I, q. 12, a. 7 (hereafter: *S.Th. I* [I-II]).

<sup>46</sup> *Comp. theol.* I, c. 216 (ed. Marietti, no. 435).

The doctrine of creation makes it clear that here is a distinction between what is seen and known (in this case God, immediately and intuitively), and the knowing subject itself.<sup>47</sup> From the point of view of the conscious activity of the blessed, there is no mediator between themselves and God: they are directly aware of God. But at no stage do the blessed become ontologically “amalgamated” with the divinity; rather they remain always as creatures, elevated creatures, and require as a divine gift a special “gnoseological apparatus” with which they behold the divinity. We may call it a “received capacity to see God” – Church documents speak of the *lumen gloriae*<sup>48</sup> – which they may be as unaware of as someone absorbed in thought is oblivious to their thought process and the workings of their brain.

Insofar as the *reception* of the *lumen gloriae* represents the culmination of saving grace, the blessed are indeed in need of a mediator, Christ, the source of all grace as we saw above. The humanity of Christ would not mediate the beatific vision *as such* – the blessed do not see Christ’s glorified humanity “first,” directly, and the divine essence “behind” as it were, indirectly – but he does mediate the grace which makes it possible, what Aquinas calls a *vis cognoscendi*.<sup>49</sup> In fact, Aquinas speaks of three kinds of mediation in human knowledge:<sup>50</sup> *firstly*, what he calls the medium *sub quo*, “under which,” that

<sup>47</sup> Cf. O'Callaghan, *God's Gift of the Universe*, 1–35.

<sup>48</sup> This term is used in the Council of Florence (1312): DH 895. In Aquinas, cf. *C.G.* III, 53ff; *S.Th.* I, q. 12, a. 2 & 5.

<sup>49</sup> “Non dicitur cognitio mediata: *quia non cadit inter cognoscentem et rem cognitam*, sed est illud quod dat cognoscenti *vim cognoscendi*” (Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis: Liber IV, Distinctiones 23–50* [Parma: Petri Fiaccadori, 1858], D. 49, q. 2, a. 1, ad 15, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/snp40492.html>) (hereafter: *IV Sent.*).

<sup>50</sup> “Quod medium in visione corporali et intellectuali invenitur triplex. Primum est medium sub quo videtur; et hoc est quod perficit visum ad videndum in generali, non determinans visum ad aliquod speciale objectum, sicut se habet lumen corporale ad visum corporalem, et lumen intellectus agentis ad intellectum possibilem. Secundum est medium quo videtur; et hoc est forma visibilis qua determinatur uterque visus ad speciale objectum, sicut per formam lapidis ad cognoscendum lapidem. Tertium est medium in quo videtur; et hoc est id per cuius inspectionem ducitur visus in aliam rem, sicut inspiciendo speculum ducitur in ea quae in speculo repraesentantur, et videndo imaginem ducitur in imaginatum; et sic etiam intellectus per cognitionem effectus ducitur in causam, vel e converso. In visione igitur patriae non erit tertium medium, ut scilicet Deus per species aliorum cognoscatur, sicut nunc cognoscitur, ratione cuius dicimus nunc videre in speculo; nec erit ibi secundum medium, quia ipsa essentia divina erit qua intellectus noster videbit Deum, ut ex dictis patet; sed erit ibi tantum primum medium, quod elevabit intellectum nostrum ad hoc quod possit conjungi essentiae increatae modo praedicto. Sed ab hoc medio non dicitur cognitio mediata, *quia non cadit inter cognoscentem et rem cognitam*, sed est illud quod dat cognoscenti *vim cognoscendi*,” (*IV Sent.*, D. 49, q. 2, a. 1, ad 15. Cf. *S.Th.* I, q. 12, a. 5).

does not determine the content, but makes it possible; *secondly*, the medium *quo*, “by which,” that is the “forms” of the things to be known; and thirdly the medium *in quo*, “in which,” for example a mirror through which things may be seen. In the beatific vision, neither the second nor the third are to be found: the second, “by which,” because the divine essence (and not a separate concept) is what makes our intellect see God directly; the third, “in which,” for God is seen directly, face to face. But in beatific vision, there is a medium *sub quo* that is not God and gives the power to know, the *vis cognoscendi*.

According to Aquinas, in the words of José Antonio Riestra, “the beatific vision was not communicated in itself through the instrumentality of Christ, but directly by his divinity. But as man, Christ gave us the *lumen gloriae*, and as God he united himself directly to the human intelligence fortified and prepared in this way.”<sup>51</sup>

### On the Permanence of the Incarnation

Let us now examine the *second problem* referred to above: how permanent or continuous need the mediating work of Christ’s humanity be? What need do we have of the Incarnation once definitive salvation (and with it beatific vision) is conceded to the elect, and the *Parousia* has taken place? It is interesting to note that over the centuries, the *logion* of 1 Cor 15:28 – which speaks of God being “all in all” at the end of time once Christ places the kingdom in the hands of the Father – has, not uncommonly, been interpreted as a sign of an ultimate cessation of the Incarnation of the Word.<sup>52</sup> A brief study of these positions should afford useful insights into the significance of the permanence, or otherwise, of the Incarnation of the divine Word.

#### In Patristic Times

The doctrine of the impermanence and eventual ending of the Incarnation was rejected at Constantinople in 381 by the addition of the phrase “and his kingdom

<sup>51</sup> José Antonio Riestra, *Cristo y la plenitud del cuerpo místico: Estudio sobre la Cristología de Santo Tomás de Aquino*, Colección teológica 44 (Pamplona: Eunsa, 1985), 176. The delicate question of the mediating role of Christ in the beatific vision is carefully handled here: Riestra, 170–76.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. the useful article of J. F. Jansen, “I Cor. 15. 24–28 and The Future of Jesus Christ,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40, no. 4 (1987): 543–70, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0036930600018561>, which we shall draw upon considerably in the following pages.

shall have no end” to the Nicene creed,<sup>53</sup> most probably as a refutation of the position of Marcellus of Ancyra, a IV century theologian.<sup>54</sup> He was convinced that the Incarnation of the Word was not eternal, and that its continuance will become quite unnecessary once Christ “delivers the kingdom to God the Father” (1 Cor 15:24). Likewise, this doctrine may be found in a variety of followers of Origen, and especially in Marcellus’s contemporary Evagrius Ponticus.<sup>55</sup>

Leaving aside a host of other issues which go to explain this position, it may be said that these authors have in common a *soteriology* with a somewhat Gnostic<sup>56</sup> or Manichaean taint,<sup>57</sup> one in which the unequivocal gratuitousness of salvation – and hence of beatific vision – is unclear. To some degree this involved a doubtful doctrine regarding the full corporeity of the risen body; and obviously

<sup>53</sup> Cf. DH 150. Cf. Karl Anton Maly, *De verbis symboli nicaeno-constantinopolitani «cuius regni non erit finis»* (Munich: Druck der Salesianischen Offizin, 1939).

<sup>54</sup> On Marcellus, cf. Jansen, “I Cor. 15. 24–28 and The Future of Jesus Christ,” 546–55. Eusebius records 127 fragments from his works: cf. Erich Klostermann, *Eusebius Werke*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Berlin: Nabu Press, 1972).

<sup>55</sup> “We know the temptation which I Cor. 15.24–28 has been to theologians: the Arians found in it their thesis of the inferiority of the Son to the Father, and Marcellus of Ancyra, Evagrius and the Origenists wanted to derive from it the abolition of the incarnation and the separation of the Logos from the flesh, so that in the return of the Logos to the Father the latter became all in all” (Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* [London: A.R. Mowbray, 1965], 399). Cf. also: Eckhard Schendel, *Herrschaft und Unterwerfung Christi: 1. Korinther 15, 24–28 in Exegese und Theologie der Väter bis zum Ausgang des 4. Jahrhunderts*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese 12 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1971). On Evagrius, cf. François Refoulé, “La christologie d’Évagre et l’Origénisme,” *Orientalia christiana periodica* 27 (1961): 221–66.

<sup>56</sup> Marcellus took a somewhat Gnostic approach to soteriology, according to Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 274–96, especially 295. Cf. also Klaus Seibt, *Die Theologie des Markell von Ankyra*, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 59 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994). Something of a kind may be said of Origenism: cf. Jean Daniélou, *Origène, Génie du christianisme* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1948), 100, 294–95. Salvation is not perceived as truly gratuitous since the soul is naturally “divine,” though at present encumbered by matter. Evagrius Ponticus has a somewhat intellectualist view of Christ’s saving work: cf. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 297: “the result (of the work of redemption) is the equality of all spirits with Christ in the vision of God.”

<sup>57</sup> In frag. 117, 118, Marcellus interprets John 6:63 (“The spirit makes alive, the flesh is useless”), and Rom 8:21 (which speaks of the Christian being freed from the “slavery of decadence”) in a way contrary to matter. Origenists on the whole held that the world was created in order to punish man: Daniélou, *Origène*, 207–17; 277–83. This is certainly the case for Evagrius, for whom matter is created to redeem fallen souls (Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 297). “Corporeality no longer has any real significance for the restored world. It is merely the temporal manifestation of the *nous-Christos* for us. . . . Only the spirit has significance, and knowledge of all spiritual acts” (Grillmeier, 298).

if the risen body of Christ is not truly corporeal and material, then the “Incarnation” in real terms can only be temporal. So if salvation consists primarily in the acquisition of divine knowledge and the shaking off of corporeal matter, it is easy to conclude that the Incarnation may be considered as a temporary measure.

### Among Protestant Authors

Similarly the permanence of the Incarnation was called into question by John Calvin, and in present times by the Calvinist scholar Arnold A. van Ruler.<sup>58</sup> It is not that Calvin expressly affirms the eventual termination of the Incarnation *as such*, but it would seem that he makes its permanence superfluous.<sup>59</sup> Calvin’s commentary on 1 Cor 15:24–28 is indicative: at the end of time, he says, “Christ will be subjected to the Father because, when the veil has been removed, we shall see God plainly . . . and the humanity of Christ will no longer be between us to *hold us back* from a nearer vision of God.”<sup>60</sup> At the present moment, the Father governs us through the lordship of Christ, he says, “yet it is for but a time until we enjoy the direct vision of the Godhead.”<sup>61</sup> Other Calvinist authors such as Jonathan Edwards and John Owen have attempted to correct Calvin’s position by insisting on the Christological aspect of eternal life.<sup>62</sup> Other authors have attempted to establish an unwarranted assimilation of Thomas to Calvin.<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps due to an excessive application of the *communicatio idiomatum*, and a conviction that human nature has been corrupted by sin, classical Protestant authors tended to downplay the mediating function of Christ *according to his*

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Jansen, “I Cor. 15. 24–28 and The Future of Jesus Christ,” 555–70.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Jansen, 556, n. 24. According to Jansen, Egbert Emmen, Frederik Willem Adrianus Korff and Arnold A. van Ruler affirm that for Calvin, Christ’s humanity will cease at the end of time. G.C. Berkouwer, William B. Eerdmans, Edward David Willis deny this. Heinrich Quistorp and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 258f. leave the question open, but feel that an eternal Incarnation for Calvin is at least superfluous.

<sup>60</sup> Jean Calvin, *Comm. in I Cor. XV*, 27, cit. by Jansen, “I Cor. 15. 24–28 and The Future of Jesus Christ,” 557.

<sup>61</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutiones christianaæ religionis 1559 libros 1 et 2 continens*, vol. 3 of *Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta* (München: Ch. Kaiser, 1928), 2, 14, 3; cf. *ibidem*, 15, 5.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Simon Francis Gaine, “Thomas Aquinas and John Owen on the Beatific Vision: A Reply to Suzanne McDonald,” *New Blackfriars* 97, no. 1070 (2016): 432–46, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12218>; Gaine, “The Beatific Vision and the Heavenly Mediation of Christ.”

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018). The position is critiqued by Gaine, “The Beatific Vision and the Heavenly Mediation of Christ.”

humanity,<sup>64</sup> and attributed it more properly to the divinity. This could lead at times to a tacit Monophysitism.<sup>65</sup> The humanity of Christ is perceived as *a veil* for the divinity, rather than *a channel of divine recreative gifts*, gifts which a fallen humanity could not appropriate in any case.

The XX-century Calvinist author A. A. van Ruler,<sup>66</sup> in a paradoxical attempt to counter the Christocentrism of Karl Barth, terms the Incarnation an *inter-*

<sup>64</sup> This may be said of Calvin and Osiander. Quoting 1 Tim 2:5 (“there is one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ”), Calvin says that Paul “could have said ‘God,’ or he could at least have omitted the word ‘man’ just as he did the word ‘God’,” (*Institutiones christianaæ*, 2, 12, 1). In Calvin’s *Responsio ad fratres polonos*, we read that “Christ began to perform the office of Mediator not only after the fall of Adam, but insofar as he is the Eternal Son of God . . . because already from the beginning of creation he was truly Mediator because he was always the Head of the Church and held primacy even over the angels and was the first born of all creatures,” cit. by Edward David Willis, *Calvin’s Catholic Christology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), 70. Luther, less clear-minded and consequential, yet more intuitive and profound than Calvin, gave a very human and pious view of the figure of the Mediator. Yet in his 1528 commentary on 1 Tim 2:5, he makes *homo Christus Iesus* equivalent to *Filius Dei*: Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Weimarer Ausgabe], vol. 26 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1964), 26,38; cf. the important study of Yves Congar, “Regards et réflexions sur la christologie de Luther,” in *Chalkedon heute*, vol. 3 of *Das Konzil von Chalkedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Alois Grillmeier and Heinrich Bacht (Würzburg: Echter, 1954), 467. Another indication that Christ was understood as mediator according to his divinity among Protestants may be seen in the controversy instigated by Francesco Stancaro († 1574) who claimed that Calvin’s assertion – to the effect that Christ is mediator as God – was Arian; he was expelled from the Protestant communion as a Nestorian.

<sup>65</sup> On Luther, cf. Congar, “Regards et réflexions sur la christologie de Luther,” 485–86, especially n. 112, which offers further support for this opinion, for example that of Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. 1, bk. 2 (Zürich: Zöllikon, 1945), 27, who also puts Calvin into the same category. Barth indeed rejects both monophysitism and Nestorianism (cf. Henri Bouillard, *Parole de Dieu et existence humaine*, vol. 1 [Paris: Aubier, 1957], 115–20), but he tends to run down the value of the humanity of Christ, as Bouillard also points out; the same opinion is held by Raúl Gabás Pallás, *Escatología protestante en la actualidad*, Victoriensia 20 (Vitoria: Eset, 1965), 76f. and Brunero Gherardini, *La seconda Riforma: Uomini e scuole del protestantesimo moderno*, vol. 2 (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1966), 123ff. Monophysitism is to be found perhaps in Barth’s early works, characterised by Kierkegaard’s “infinite qualitative difference between time and eternity,” but his progressive “conversion to analogy” (cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* [Olten: J. Hegner, 1951], 94ff.) probably also corresponds to a “gradual moving away from monophysitism.” The following text of Rudolf Bultmann is also indicative: “. . . if the Christ who died such a death was the pre-existent Son of God, what could death mean for him? Obviously very little, if he knew that he would rise again in three days!” (Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* [New York: Harper & Row, 2005], 25).

<sup>66</sup> Cf. A. A. van Ruler, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 94; cf. Jansen, “I Cor. 15, 24–28 and The Future of Jesus Christ,” 563.

*mezzo*, “an emergency measure that God postponed as long as possible,”<sup>67</sup> and expressly and repeatedly denies its permanence. This doctrine has a particular view of history,<sup>68</sup> and rests on the soteriological doctrine of *penal substitution*.<sup>69</sup> After all, if Christ’s saving work consists simply of a punishment inflicted on him in our stead, the time would come when this work comes to completion. From then onwards, the Incarnation and all it involves would become superfluous.

Aquinas brings up this very point when studying the “eternal priesthood” of Jesus Christ. He asks whether or not his priesthood will continue once the “debt of punishment” of the elect has been fully expiated, and says: “the saints in heaven have no need of expiation through the priesthood of Christ, but, once their sins are expiated, they require final consummation through Christ himself, *on whom their glory depends*, as Rev 21:23 says: ‘the city was lit by the radiant glory of God, and the Lamb was a lighted torch for it.’”<sup>70</sup>

So all in all we can hold that the Incarnation is eternal *a parte post*, and the elect will live off God in and through the mediation of the humanity of Christ. As the Creed says, “and his kingdom shall have no end.”

#### Issues Involved in the Negation of Permanence of the Incarnation

We have just seen that several authors reject the permanence of the Incarnation, and render insignificant the *Christological side of eternal life*.<sup>71</sup> Reasons for this may include: a somewhat Gnostic or Manichaean soteriology which prejudices

<sup>67</sup> A. A. van Ruler, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament*, 69.

<sup>68</sup> Moltmann (*The Crucified God*, 261) puts it as follows: “But can the consummation be understood as being quite untouched by the history out of which it emerges?”

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Jansen, “I Cor. 15. 24–28 and The Future of Jesus Christ,” 568. A. A. van Ruler (*Theologisch werk*, vol. 1 [Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1969], 173) says: “Did the Incarnation ever serve any purpose save that of substitution?”

<sup>70</sup> “... sancti qui erunt in patria non indigebunt ulterius expiari per sacerdotium Christi, sed, expiati iam, indigebunt consummari per ipsum Christum, a quo gloria eorum dependet: ut dicitur, Apoc. 21,23 quod ‘claritas Dei illuminat illam’ scilicet civitatem sanctorum, ‘et lucerna eius est Agnus’” (*S.Th. III*, q. 22, a. 5, ad 1).

<sup>71</sup> The VII-century Bangor Antiphonary Creed has: “Credo . . . vitam aeternam in gloria Christi” (DH 27); cf. Paul O’Callaghan, “The Bangor Antiphonary Creed: Origins and Theology,” *Annales Theologici* 6, no. 2 (1992): 255–87. Second Vatican Council’s, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964), nos. 48, 49 speaks often of the Christological aspects of eternal life, following numerous scriptural texts, especially Rom 6:23, as well as Matt 25:34, 41; Luke 23:43; John 14:3; Act 7:59; Phil 1:23–24; 4:19; Col 3:3–4; 1 Thess 4:17. Other Vatican II documents repeatedly refer to the Christological nature of God’s gifts: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 2, 5, 102; *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 2, 7, 8; *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 10, 22, 32 etc.

the gratuitousness of salvation; the humanity of Christ seen as a veil, but not as a channel of grace; the relevance of “penal substitution” in salvation and eternal life. But Christian soteriology moves on a different plane. At heart it affirms that salvation is gratuitous and “re-creational,” that it is mediated to us through the humanity and entire human life of Jesus Christ, God’s incarnate Word (and hence through the sacraments), that Christ’s work involves the mediation of divine gifts for us, and not merely a vicarious and temporary penal substitution that makes up to God for our offences until they are definitively expiated. Now included among the divine gifts destined for man – indeed the culmination of such gifts – is that which makes the beatific vision possible. If Christ were not to mediate such a gift, the amplitude of his saving role would be considerably impoverished and the essential Christocentric aspect of Christian life and theology would be minimized.<sup>72</sup>

### The Soteriological Necessity of Christ’s Earthly Beatific Vision of Christ due to his ‘Capital’ Role

Yet another serious objection could be made to the suggestion that from our eternal dependency on the Incarnation can be inferred Christ’s beatific vision *while yet on earth*. Even if it is true that Christ’s humanity eternally mediates and makes present the *lumen gloriae* which founds the beatific vision, why would be it necessary for him to possess it in *this life*? Would it not be sufficient for him to receive beatific vision of the Father, along with the Resurrection, as a reward for his fidelity and love? This is the way Jean Galot argues when he says that Christ indeed could communicate beatific vision to humans through his *glorious humanity*, but that as *viator*, he merited it for himself, and merited its extension in benefit of the elect.<sup>73</sup> The argument is certainly worth considering given the fact that Christ in dying on the Cross, according to Aquinas, may be said to merit his own resurrection (immortality), and that of humanity as well.<sup>74</sup> In other words, if he merited immortality while being mortal and by obediently accepting his very mortality,<sup>75</sup> could he not be said to merit beatific vision, while having faith? That is, if he merits immortality for himself and for

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Paul O'Callaghan, “El cristocentrismo de Joseph Ratzinger,” *Scripta Theologica* 56, no. 3 (2024): 683–702, <https://doi.org/10.15581/006.56.3.683-702>.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Galot, *Who Is Christ?*, 357.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. *S.Th.* III, q. 49, a. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *S.Th.* III, q. 48, a. 1; q. 49, a. 6.

the human race, is there any reason why he should not merit beatific vision for himself and for the elect?

A second objection suggests itself at this juncture. The *lumen gloriae*, which is what makes beatific vision possible, would seem to require the divine creative *concurrus* in order to be “maintained in being.”<sup>76</sup> But since the role of Christ’s humanity in respect of the beatific vision can at best be instrumental – and instrumental causality is often, though not always, transitory – it cannot be held with certainty that Christ eternally mediates the *lumen gloriae*. Let us look at the first objection now, since it goes a long way towards shedding light on the second one.

As we saw earlier on, Aquinas does indeed hold that Christ enjoyed the beatific vision from the outset of his human life; and this doctrine is closely related to his “capital role,” that is of being Head and Savior over all creation. Note that Aquinas’s doctrine in the *Summa Theologiae* on Christ as the head of the Church<sup>77</sup> precedes, and is clearly related to, his teaching on Christ’s earthly beatific vision. When examining the question of Christ’s possible beatific vision in the *Summa*, Aquinas does not really explain *why* the priority of Christ’s beatific vision over that of the elect requires him to enjoy it from the first moment of the Incarnation. He simply says: “men are brought (*reducuntur*) to this end of beatitude by the humanity of Christ . . . And hence . . .”<sup>78</sup> Perhaps this lack of explanation has brought some authors to put Christ’s *earthly* beatific vision down to his role as *head over the angels*.<sup>79</sup> After all, it would be improper for the angels to enjoy the beatific vision were their “Head” not to possess such a gift.<sup>80</sup> However valid this observation may be as a supporting argument, it misses the fundamental point insofar as the pre-eminence of Christ’s beatific vision is not a merely temporal one. This is explained in detail in a text already quoted from the *Compendium Theologiae*, and elsewhere in the *Summa*. Let us go back to the texts in question.

#### Texts of St Thomas Insisting upon Christ’s Vision on Earth

In the *Compendium Theologiae*, Christ is presented as the author of man’s salvation and so should possess beatific knowledge “. . . but a principle must be

<sup>76</sup> Cf. O’Callaghan, *God’s Gift of the Universe*, 214–20.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. *S.Th.* III, q. 7, a. 9; q. 8, a. 1.

<sup>78</sup> *S.Th.* III, q. 9, a. 2, c: “Ad hunc autem finem beatitudinis homines reducuntur per Christi humanitatem. . . . Et ideo oportuit quod cognitio ipsa in Dei visione consistens excellētissime Christo homini conveniret, quia semper causa oportet esse potiorem causato.”

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Galtier, *De incarnatione ac redēptione*, 255f.; Gaine, “The Beatific Vision and the Heavenly Mediation of Christ,” 126.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. *S.Th.* III, q. 8, a. 4.

*immovable*, and must also be *pre-eminent in power*. Hence the vision of God ought to be *more excellent in Christ than in others*, and indeed ought to be found in him as an *unmovable principle*.<sup>81</sup>

The *Summa* contains the same doctrine in more precise theological terms as it examines why Christ should be regarded as head over the Church. It says that order, perfection and power

belong to Christ spiritually. First (*order*) on account of his nearness to God, his grace is the highest and first, *though not in time*, since all have received grace on account of his grace (cf. Rom 8:29). Secondly, he had *perfection* as regards the fullness of all graces (cf. Jn 1:14 . . .). And thirdly, he has the *power* of bestowing grace on all members of the Church, according to John 1:16: "From his fullness we have all received."<sup>82</sup>

Several observations should be made about this text. *First*, the priority of Christ's grace is not principally a temporal one (*etsi non tempore*). *Second*, graces of all kinds are included – also those, it would seem, related to the beatific vision – if Christ is to be regarded truly as the Head of the Church. In the *third* place, the doctrine on Christ's capital role runs in close dependency to his saving work.<sup>83</sup>

*Fourth*, and perhaps most importantly, the pre-eminence of Christ's grace is one according to which "he has power of bestowing grace on all" (*virtutem habuit influendi gratiam*). Or, as he says elsewhere: "the soul of Christ so received grace that *it is poured out from him onto others*" (*ex ea quodammodo transfundetur in alios*); "grace was bestowed upon him as upon a universal principle . . . of grace" (totum principium vitae nostrae et operationis est Christus).<sup>84</sup> This point is significant insofar as it makes it clear that Christ not only enjoys the fullness of grace as superior to the rest, but he enjoys it precisely insofar as *he is destined to give it to others*. The explanation of St Thomas is simply another way of saying that Christ is the *only saving Mediator*.

<sup>81</sup> *Comp. theol.* I, 216 (ed. Marietti, no. 435).

<sup>82</sup> "Haec tria [ordo, perfectio, potestas] competit Christo spiritualiter, *Primo* enim, secundum propinquitatem ad Deum gratia eius altior et prior est, etsi non tempore: quia omnes alii acceperunt gratiam per respectum ad gratiam ipsius, secundum illud Rom 8,29, . . . *Secundo* vero, perfectionem habet quantum ad plenitudinem omnium gratiarum, secundum illud Io 1,14 . . . . *Tertio*, virtutem habuit influendi gratiam in omnia Ecclesiae, secundum illud Io 1,16. . . . Et sic patet quod convenienter dicitur Christus caput Ecclesiae" (*S.Th.* III, q. 8, a. 1, c). The same position is expressed in *S.Th.* III, q. 7, a. 9.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. especially *S.Th.* III, q. 48, a. 1.

<sup>84</sup> *S.Th.* III, q. 48, a. 1 c.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Ad Phil.*, 1:21 (Thomas Aquinas, "Super Epistolam ad Philipenses lectura," in *Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, ed. Raffaele Cai, vol. 2 [Torino: Marietti, 1953], no. 32).

The “principle of perfection” as understood by St Thomas is clearly distinct from the way it is understood by other authors.<sup>86</sup> For previous Scholastics, Christ’s fullness of grace was affirmed in deference to the ontological proximity of his humanity to the divinity. For Aquinas, such a proximity makes the fullness of all graces appropriate, indeed, but the *ultimate purpose* of the supernatural perfection of his humanity is not merely decorative or fitting, but involves the salvation of humans, and not merely his personal, perpetual and adorable identity as God’s Incarnate Word.

Despite appearances to the contrary and common terminology used, Thomistic doctrine marks a definite and novel departure from earlier Scholastics. And this is so precisely inasmuch as he includes – perhaps for the first time, practically speaking, within the Scholastic period<sup>87</sup> – the doctrine of the instrumental efficacy of the humanity and human actions of Christ:<sup>88</sup> *virtutem habuit influendi gratiam*. In affirming this doctrine, Aquinas drank deeply from Christian tradition in considering the humanity of Christ as an *organon* (in the terminology of Athanasius<sup>89</sup>), or *instrumentum animatum* (in that of John Damascene<sup>90</sup>) of the divine saving power.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Lim, “The Principle of Perfection.”

<sup>87</sup> Cf. José Antonio Riestra, “Teologia cattolica della redenzione nella storia,” in *Salvezza e annunzio*, vol. 1 of *Salvezza cristiana e culture odierne* (Turin: Elle Di Ci, 1985), 295–319, 299f. with bibliography.

<sup>88</sup> On the instrumental causality of Christ’s humanity, cf. Humbert Bouëssé, “La causalité efficiente instrumentale et la causalité méritoire de la Sainte Humanité du Christ,” *Revue Théologique* 44, no. 2 (1938): 256–98; D. Van Meegeren, *De causalitate instrumentalis humanitatis Christi iuxta divi Thomae doctrinam expositio exegetica* (Venlo: Pontificium Institutum Angelicum, 1939); Theophil Tschipke, *Die Menschheit Christi als Heilsorgan der Gottheit: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Lehre des heiligen Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1940); William D. Lynn, *Christ’s Redemptive Merit: The Nature of Its Causality According to St. Thomas* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1962); Paul G. Crowley, “Instrumentum Divinitatis in Thomas Aquinas: Recovering the Divinity of Christ,” *Theological Studies* 52, no. 3 (1991): 451–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399105200303>; Elio Monteleone, *L’umanità di Cristo «strumento della divinità»: Attualità ed evoluzione del pensiero di Tommaso d’Aquino* (Acireale: Pontificia Studiorum Universitas a Sancto Thoma Aquinatus in Urbe, 1999); White, *The Incarnate Lord*.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Athanasius, *Orat. III contra Arianos*, no. 31, accessed July 15, 2025, [https://earlychurchtexts.com/main/athanasius/oratio\\_contra\\_arianos\\_III\\_29\\_34\\_01\\_local\\_morph.shtml](https://earlychurchtexts.com/main/athanasius/oratio_contra_arianos_III_29_34_01_local_morph.shtml); the same may be found in Cyril of Alexandria, *Ep. ad monach.*, no. 23 (Cyril of Alexandria, *Letter 1: To the Monks of Egypt*, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.fourthcentury.com/cyril-of-alexandria-letter-1-to-the-monks-of-egypt-cpg-5301-8621/>). On this issue, cf. vol. 3 of the Marietti edition of Aquinas’ *Contra Gentiles* (ed. Marietti, nos. 331, 435–37).

<sup>90</sup> Cf. John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa III*, 15; 19 (PG 94,1060A and 1080B).

<sup>91</sup> Cf. for example Thomas Aquinas, *Ad Rom.*, 4, l. 3 (“Super Epistolam ad Romanos lectura,” in *Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, ed. Raffaele Cai, vol. 1 [Torino: Marietti, 1953],

And yet Christ's humanity is not "merely" instrumental or external in the communication of grace, for the grace he "administered" was *truly belonging* to him: it was *his* grace. His humanity does not constitute a passive or external instance to the passage of grace, like a tube through which water passed. For Aquinas the fullness of grace is proper to Christ<sup>92</sup> in such a way that even the very grace we receive in some way remains truly his.<sup>93</sup> If this were not the case, he could not be said to be Head of the Church and Mediator of salvation *personally*. Through him, we become children of God, *filii Dei*, yet always *filii in Filio*.<sup>94</sup>

The point just made is a critical one. In real terms it means that if Christ be considered as our Savior – that he brings divine life to us – then he must both *possess* and *partake in the administration* of all the gifts which go to make up that divine life in believers. He is not only the exemplar of grace; he is also the "agent" (the *actor salutis*). Above we considered whether or not Christ's instrumentality might not in fact be a permanent one, and thus his beatific vision eternal. However, from what we have seen, his instrumentality is not transitory – he is not the mere channel, but also, as it were, the living *reservoir* of divine gifts – and hence may be considered eternal.

### On the Singular Humanity of Christ

The principle established that in order to be truly regarded as our Saviour, Christ must at once *possess* the beatific vision, and *share* as a "conjoined instrument of the divinity" in its administration to the elect. But of course the question could be asked: why did Christ not receive the grace of the beatific vision – and other

no. 380); *I Ad Thess.*, 4, l. 2 ("Super primam Epistolam ad Thessalonenses lectura," in *Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, ed. Raffaele Cai, vol. 2 [Torino: Marietti, 1953], no. 95); *S.Th.* III, q. 13, a. 2–3; q. 19, a. 1; q. 43, a. 2; q. 48, a. 6; *Comp. theol.* I, 231; 239. Aquinas regularly refers to the doctrine of Athanasius (*C.G.* IV, 41; Thomas Aquinas, *Liber de veritate catholicae fidei contra errores infidelium, qui dicitur Summa contra Gentiles*, ed. Petrus Marc, Ceslaus Pera, and Petrus Caramello, vol. 3 [Torino: Marietti, 1961], no. 3797), and to that of Damascene (*S.Th.* III, q. 2, a. 6, 2a; *De Veritate*, q. 17, a. 3, accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html>).

<sup>92</sup> Cf. *S.Th.* III, q. 7, a. 10. In this article he explains that Christ possesses the fullness of all graces, "et quantum ad essentiam, et quantum ad virtutem: . . . in maxima excellentia qua potest haberi et in maxima extensione ad omnes gratiae effectus."

<sup>93</sup> "Eadem est secundum essentiam gratia personalis, qua anima Christi est justificata, et gratia eius, secundum quam est caput Ecclesiae justificans alios" (*S.Th.* III, q. 8, a. 5).

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Émile Mersch, "Filii in Filio. I. Écriture, tradition," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 64, no. 5 (1937): 551–82; Émile Mersch, "Filii in Filio. II. Théologie," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 64, no. 6 (1937): 681–702; Émile Mersch, "Filii in Filio. III. Le surnaturel," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 65, no. 7 (1938): 809–30.

graces destined for mankind – at the moment of his glorification, as a reward perhaps, for his fidelity and heroic obedience on Calvary, as the fruit of his merit.<sup>95</sup> In other words: is there any need to insist on Christ being made Head over the human race (by right at least) at the *Incarnation*, and not rather at the *Resurrection*? In fact, the New Testament indicates that Jesus became “Lord” as he rose from the dead (Rom 1:4; 1 Pet 1:3). Aquinas seems to be aware of this possibility, but he insists that the beatific vision ought to be in Christ as an *immoveable principle*, that is from the moment of the inception of the Incarnation. If this were not the case, as the *Compendium Theologiae* seems to assert, Christ could not truly be considered the *auctor salutis* in the fullest possible sense, as we saw above:

The difference between what is moveable and what is immovable comes to this: *moveable things*, so far as they are moveable, do not possess their proper perfection from the beginning, but acquire it in the course of time; but *immovable things*, as such, always possess their perfection from the first moment of their existence. Accordingly Christ, the author of human salvation, should rightly have possessed the full vision of God *from the very beginning of his Incarnation*; propriety would not allow him to have attained it in the course of time *as other saints do*.<sup>96</sup>

The contrast just alluded to – between the way Christ in his humanity acquires the beatific vision, and the way *the saints* have it – is an interesting one. If Christ were to receive the beatific vision as a reward for his faithfulness and love, like the saints – as Galot suggests he should – then the mediating role of his humanity in obtaining the beatific vision would lose relevance. Louis Bouyer notes that Origen likewise suggested a doctrine of the fullness of grace given to the humanity of Christ and destined for the human race, but points out that for the latter, there is little real difference between Christ’s humanity and ours, and as a result, ordinary human beings would be as capable – other things being equal – of ‘administering’ divine grace as Christ would.<sup>97</sup> Leaving aside for the moment the problem issues of Origen’s Christology, suffice it to say that this possibility – the administration of grace through Christ or through the saints, indistinctly – accords precisely with the reduced importance

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Lynn, *Christ’s Redemptive Merit*.

<sup>96</sup> *Comp. theol.* I, 216 (ed. Marietti, no. 435).

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Louis Bouyer, *The Eternal Son: A Theology of the Word of God and Christology* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1978), 328. Bouyer is mistaken in seeing the same defect in Thomas’s doctrine, as we shall see (Bouyer, 390).

Origen attributes in fact to the Incarnation.<sup>98</sup> Also to be noted is that Evagrius Ponticus, who was influenced by Origen, ended up with a more or less open Nestorianism (before Nestorius). In the words of Alois Grillmeier, for Evagrius, “the one who becomes flesh is not so much the Logos as the pre-existent soul in which the Logos dwells.”<sup>99</sup> The same Evagrius, as we saw above, suggested the Incarnation would come to a close at the end of time.

Summarizing the above paragraph, there seems to be a close connection – historically and theologically – between *a certain Nestorianism and the ultimate ending of the Incarnation*, on the one hand, and the theory that there is *no appreciable qualitative difference in the mediation of divine grace between Christ's humanity and that of any of the saints*, on the other. To say that Christ receives the beatific vision as a reward for his fidelity – like the rest of the saints – simply takes away from the seriousness and singularity of his mediation, and *hence of the Incarnation*.<sup>100</sup> The difference between Christ's humanity and that of the saints is that the former is not just perfectly human, but possesses an altogether special and singular humanity, for it is the *humanity of the Word*. There is no *a priori* reason why humans would not possess a certain “fullness” of grace; the Blessed Virgin certainly did. Yet when all is said and done, the humanity of the saints can never become a “conjoined, animated instrument of the divinity,” as Christ's was, that is, from the moment of the Incarnation.

Having examined some of Thomas's arguments in favor of Christ's beatific vision on earth, there remains to be examined a series of significant issues.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Daniélou, *Origène*, 258ff., and especially Origen, *De Principiis*, II, 6 (Origen, “De Principiis,” in *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, vol. 4 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe [New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1905], 239–382).

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 294.

<sup>100</sup> C. Richard's study of Christian soteriology, *Il est notre Pâque*, defends the thesis that Christ had faith and not vision on earth, and that his passion and death played a merely exemplary and didactic role. He suggests that God actually “saves” Christ in raising him from the dead, and in so doing constitutes him as head of humanity, and thus also saves mankind. The principal drawback of this study is that if Christ is “saved” by God, why does God not save us directly as well? Why not simply attribute to Christ an exemplary role across the board? The explanation leans towards a tacit Nestorianism, in so far as the hypostatic union with the Word, the Incarnation, seems superfluous. Cf. my critique of this work: Paul O'Callaghan, “Claude Richard, *Il est notre Pâque*, Paris, Cerf, 1980, 423 pp., 14 x 23.,” *Scripta Theologica* 17, no. 1 (1985): 359–63, <https://doi.org/10.15581/006.17.20958>.

## Situating Some of the Difficulties that Christ's Earthly Beatific Vision Involves

### "Authentic humanity" in Tension Towards Eschatological Fullness

Can it be said that Christ's humanity is *authentic* if he enjoys the beatific vision while on earth? If he beheld the divine essence from the moment of his conception, can it be said that he was "like us in all things but sin" (Heb 4:15)? If he did not have faith, can we claim that he truly took on the human condition, becoming "incarnate" in the fullest sense of the word? Of course the basic question posed here is not really a Christological but rather an anthropological one: what does it mean to be "authentically" human? And more to the point: when will that take place . . . here on earth during our earthly sojourn, or in heaven after final resurrection? Are humans "more authentically human" having reached their ultimate end, or here on earth in the midst of doubts and suffering and growth? Ignatius of Antioch on his way to imminent martyrdom appealed to his fellow-Christians in Rome not to come in his assistance: "Please, my brothers, do not deprive me of this life, do not wish me to die . . . Allow me to contemplate the light, and *then I shall be a man fully*. Allow me to imitate the passion of my God."<sup>101</sup> In other words, Ignatius understood his anthropological fullness or authenticity eschatologically.

While on earth Christians are pilgrims, but they would not be pilgrims were they not on a journey to the fatherland. Likewise the Church, the "people of God" is distinct from the nations of the earth because it is a pilgrim people<sup>102</sup>; the true Church, Aquinas said, is the Church *in patria*, the Church in heaven.<sup>103</sup> Vatican II insists on the eschatological tension within the life of the Church and of Christians.<sup>104</sup>

However, if Christ were to adopt our way of being and identify with us "in all things but sin," including faith, human "personality," being like "one of us," it might suggest that he is not our Savior, for he would no longer be the one who *leads us to the patria*, to his Father. He would stand in need of salvation

<sup>101</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Rom.* 6:2–3 (Ignatius, "Epistle to the Romans," in *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe [New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1905], 73–78).

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 9; 48–51.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Ad Eph.* 3:10 ("Super Epistolam ad Ephesios lectura," in *Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, ed. Raffaele Cai, vol. 2 [Torino: Marietti, 1953], no. 161).

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 50, 51.

like everybody else. This would be contrary to the Gospels and Pauline epistles, according to which Christ is “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). In effect, Christ is the one who *draws us* to our ultimate (eschatological) authenticity, precisely in so far as he is fully inserted into the definitive, eschatological state. If Christ’s humanity were entirely like ours *in its present (pilgrim) state*, he would be the prototype of “the blind leading the blind” (Matt 15:14). In his encounter with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. Luke 24:13–35), the risen Jesus is presented as a pilgrim like themselves, yet he is the one who leads the way for them back to faith and hope.

### “Faith” of Christ, and Faith in Christ

Even though the Johannine texts which speak of Jesus doing “what he *sees* the Father doing” (John 5:19)<sup>105</sup> need not strictly be interpreted as indications of direct vision of the Godhead,<sup>106</sup> nonetheless the Gospel texts do not allow us to say that Christ had faith as such; this is recognized by exegetes who deny his earthly beatific vision for other reasons.<sup>107</sup> Rather are Christians required to have faith *in him*,<sup>108</sup> and through the Spirit, in the Father. Yet nowadays, the

<sup>105</sup> Cf. also John 3:11; 32; 7:29; 8:38; 55; 17:5.

<sup>106</sup> In his commentary on John’s gospel, Aquinas does not generally apply these texts to Christ’s beatific vision on earth, but rather to his communion within the Trinity: cf. *In Ioannem*, 3, (Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura super Ioannem*, ed. Raffaele Cai [Torino: Marietti, 1952], no. 462); 7 (no. 1062); 8 (nos. 1216, 1284); some of these texts refer to what he calls the *perfecta cognitio comprehensionis*, which could only be applied to the Word. One exception is to be found in John 8:55 which is used as the *sed contra* in *S.Th.* III, q. 9, a. 2, that deals with his earthly beatific vision.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Guillet, *La foi de Jésus Christ*, 17–20; Gerald O’Collins, *Interpreting Jesus*, Introducing Catholic Theology 2 (London: G. Chapman, 1985), 191; O’Collins and Kendall, “The Faith of Jesus.”

<sup>108</sup> Paul (Gal 3:26; 5:6; Col 1:4; 2:5; Eph 1:15; 1 Tim 1:14; 3:13; 2 Tim 1:13; 3:15) speaks of *pistis en Christo*: faith “in” Jesus Christ. Another series of texts (Rom 3:22; 26; Gal 2:16; 20; 3:22; Eph 3:12; Phil 3:9) employs the term *pistis Christou* (genitive) which is often translated as ‘faith of Christ’, not in the genitive objective meaning (‘the faith *that is due to Christ*’), but in the subjective sense (“Christ’s personal faith”). Cf. Donald W. B. Robinson, “Faith of Jesus Christ—A New Testament Debate,” *Reformed Theological Review* 29, no. 3 (1970): 71–81; George Howard, “The ‘Faith of Christ’,” *The Expository Times* 85, no. 7 (1974): 212–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001452467408500710>; Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle, eds., *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies: The Pistis Christou Debate* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009). From a theological standpoint, cf. José Antonio Riestra, “Cristo e la fede nella cristologia recente in Antropologia a Cristologia ieri e oggi,” *Aquinas* 30, no. 2 (1987): 271–87; Giacomo Canobbio, ed., *La fede di Gesù*, Scienze religiose 2 (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2000); David

claim that Christ had faith as the rest of wayfarers is not uncommon. What is at stake here of course is the precise meaning of the word “faith.”

In the biblical context, “faith” is undoubtedly a complex and multi-faceted concept.<sup>109</sup> Two fundamental aspects may be mentioned: on the one hand, faith is experienced as *a commitment of the will*, that involves confidence, trust, obedience, abandonment of oneself to God (this is usually called the *fides qua*); on the other, it is an *assent of the intellect* to the truths revealed by God through Christ and the prophets (the *fides quae*). The two elements are virtually impossible even to conceptualize apart from one another, for faith is the result of revelation, and the God who reveals is One. Yet there is a tendency, unavoidable in *vetero-testamentary* times,<sup>110</sup> and also to be found in the classical Protestant tradition, to identify faith exclusively with the first aspect (personal commitment, confidence), or with “the certainty of one’s own salvation” typical of Luther.<sup>111</sup> In other words, *faith*, which has as its object “that which God

L. Stubbs, “The Shape of Soteriology and the *pistis Christou* Debate,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 2 (2008): 137–57. A careful study by Arland J. Hultgren, “The *Pistis Christou* Formulation in Paul,” *Novum Testamentum* 22, no. 3 (1980): 248–63, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853680X00143>, concludes that, whereas in general terms Paul “transcends all rules about subjective and objective,” in this case he is making use of the objective genitive, along with a genitive of quality, which is to be found in the NT due to Semitic influence and is *adjectival* in function (i.e. “Christological” faith): so “faith in Christ” = “faith due to Christ,” faith which responds to Christ as proclaimed in the Gospel. “Faith of Christ is faith in Christ,” Hultgren says, “but this faith is both identified with and made possible by God’s justifying act in Christ . . . Hence for the purposes of translation, ‘faith in Christ’ is the most appropriate expression” (Hultgren, 263). Besides, the doctrinal parallel with other texts of the New Testament when confronted with the two series of Pauline texts demands the “faith in Christ” reading. Cf. also Léopold Malevez, “Le Christ et la foi,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 88, no. 10 (1966): 1009–43, who points out that the Gospels and John speak quite unequivocally of “faith in Christ.”

<sup>109</sup> Cf. On faith in the Bible, cf. Iohannes Alfaro, “Fides in Terminologia Biblica,” *Gregorianum* 42, no. 3 (1961): 463–505; Malevez, “Le Christ et la foi,” 1012–16; Riestra, “Cristo e la fede,” 276–79; O’Callaghan, *Children of God in the World*, 307–19.

<sup>110</sup> Alfaro, “Fides in Terminologia Biblica,” 504f. says: “But while Old Testament faith emphasises trust in divine promises as its primary element, and knowledge of God’s intervention appears less explicitly than trust, New Testament faith highlights the aspect of knowledge and makes the element of trust in God less apparent . . . The main reason for this difference lies in the fact that divides the Old Testament from the New Testament: the fact of Christ.” The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber in his work *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), speaks of the distinction *fides quae* and *fides qua*, saying that whereas in Judaism they are opposed, in Christianity they are not.

<sup>111</sup> Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, “Luther and the Unity of the Churches: An Interview with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 11 (1984): 218. On the notion of faith in Luther, cf. my studies: Paul O’Callaghan, *Fides Christi: The Justification*

worked and which the church witnesses,” in the words of Joseph Ratzinger,<sup>112</sup> becomes confidence that God will save me, the subjective certainty of personal salvation. The fruit of revelation, the *fides qua*, is confused with the source, God who reveals in Christ. Paul Hacker “saw the actual turning-point of the Reformation in the change in the basic structure of the act of faith.”<sup>113</sup> Faith for Luther would no longer essentially be the communal, shared belief of the entire Church, as it is for Catholics.<sup>114</sup>

In fact, such an individualistic “faith” (or confidence or *fiducia*) is poorly based. This is so *firstly* because if hope and confidence in God are not based on the intellectual assent of faith which provides us with the objective thematic truths revealed by God, they become simply unreasonable, if not irrational. For there is only *one faith* that we all believe in; as Paul says, there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” And, as a result, there is only “one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:5f.). And *secondly*, perhaps more fundamentally, faith (as pure *fiducia*) tends to be lived out individualistically, independently of Christ and the Church, since the two poles involved in faith (object and subject) are taken to be *God* and *the human person*, no longer *Christ* and *the Church*, his body. That is, the interior logic of a purely subjective notion of “faith” ultimately eliminates the need for both Christ and the Church. It is “my” faith, that subsists between God and me. Whereas it is more correct to say that our personal confidence in, and abandonment to God, our Christian commitment, is rooted in revelation which comes through Christ and the Church. To put the same thing differently, the *subject* of Christian faith is not primarily the *self*, but the *Church* whose head is *Christ*. It is only within the Church and from Christ that man can commit himself unreservedly to the Father, where faith happens. If not, the chasm is too great: faith becomes “hopeless.”<sup>115</sup>

Now, if Christ is said to “believe,” if he believes as we do, without vision, we must ask: what is “his” faith based upon? Hardly on the Church, his Body, or on himself, its Head. The conclusion is simple. If Christ had faith, he could

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<sup>112</sup> *Debate* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 27–31; Paul O'Callaghan, *God and Mediation: A Retrospective Appraisal of Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 59–77.

<sup>113</sup> Ratzinger, “Luther and the Unity of the Churches,” 218.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Paul Hacker, *Das Ich im Glauben bei Martin Luther* (Graz: Styria, 1966), cited by Ratzinger, “Luther and the Unity of the Churches,” 212.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, 219.

<sup>115</sup> Benedict XVI in his 2007 encyclical *Spe Salvi*, nos. 7–9, speaks of the objective or substantial side of faith (and hope) in the context of Lutheran theology.

only have it as the rest of “Christians” do; fundamentally he would have a “confiding” faith that God would “save” him (raise him from the dead). And most importantly, our faith would be *of the same kind* as his (the personal certainty of salvation), and his human life would be exemplary (in faith as in all the other virtues) though not salvational. His singular humanity, indeed the Incarnation itself, would become superfluous, just one more among many; the Church would become irrelevant, invisible, or perhaps simply associative, insofar as its members do not share a common faith. Each one would be obliged to “monadically” grope about for his or her “own” faith, their personal, untransferable, confiding certainty of salvation, at best perhaps coming to an institutional agreement with other believers who think as they do, thus founding a believing community.

Could it be said in any sense that Christ had “faith”? Romano Penna makes the interesting observation to the effect that Christ inherited and lived according to the faith of the Old Testament, as commitment and as content.<sup>116</sup> If faith is understood purely as commitment, obedience and confidence in the Father, it may be said that Jesus had faith. Many authors perceive this difference between Christ’s faith and ours, although they offer differing versions of his “vision” of the Father.<sup>117</sup> The letter to the Hebrews speaks of him learning obedience (5:8), of being made perfect through suffering (2:10), of his fidelity (3:2). But if his faith does not go beyond ours, if it is based on a testimony not his own, then he can hardly be said “to lead us in (our) faith and bring it to perfection” (Heb 12:2).<sup>118</sup> If his faith was of a kind with ours, then he could not be its *author* and *consummator*, but at best its *exemplar*.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Romano Penna, “La fede di Gesù e le Scritture di Israele,” *Rassegna di teologia* 48 (2007): 5–17.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. Balthasar, “Fides Christi,” 45–79; Rahner, “Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ”; Malevez, “Le Christ et la foi,” 1018–39; O’Collins, *Interpreting Jesus*, 190–93.

<sup>118</sup> Heb 12:2: “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”: *aphorōntes eis ton tēs pisteōs archēgōn kai teleiōtēn Iēsoun*. Some translations include “our” faith, for example the New English Bible and the Jerusalem Bible, but this is not found in Greek, Vulgate nor neo-Vulgate texts. Teodorico da Castel San Pietro (*L’epistola agli Ebrei* [Torino: Marietti, 1952], 208) writes: “The precise meaning of *archēgōn* [pioneer] in our text depends in part on the relationship between Jesus and faith. If Jesus is conceived here as the one who exercised the same faith that we profess . . . then it is more natural to understand *archēgōn* as guide and leader: Jesus would have preceded us in the practice of faith, undergoing the same trials to which this virtue is exposed in us.” But still, “the author’s meaning seems fundamental to this passage: he brought us faith, which has its *raison d’être* in him.” Note that the only other usage of *archēgōn* in Hebrews (2:10) follows the second of these meanings, and is the very text Aquinas uses to speak of the beatific vision of Christ on

Perhaps the need for a *collective and intellectual* understanding of faith (as *fides quae*) was given excessive prominence in other times, yet without it, the much desired awareness of the need for the *personal commitment* side of faith (*fides qua*) would be severely prejudiced in practice. Attempts to install the latter in the place of the former by emphasizing the “faith of Jesus” is a short term solution, and would seriously prejudice the need for an Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, who reveals the Father and gives rise to our faith, and to his extension in time, the visible Church, his Body.

### The Realism of Christ's Human Actions

Yet problems still remain regarding Christ's vision. Would such a knowledge of God not obliterate or trivialize his integral human commitment, obedience and abandonment to the Father? Would it not make a facade out of his human activity the Gospels speak so “realistically” of: his thirty years of ordinary life, his gradual acquisition of knowledge, his temptations in the desert, his “normal” reactions (hunger, thirst, anger, joy, sadness, etc.), his loving and being loved, his need to pray; then his suffering, anguish and even feeling abandoned by his Father at Gethsemane and on the Cross, and above all, in his *true exercise of his freedom*? Is all this an elaborate theatre set up purely *for our sakes*, with a view to providing *us* with a good example? In this study, which considers Christ's earthly beatific vision from the *soteriological* standpoint, this issue must be addressed.

Perhaps what might happen to Christians might equally happen to Christ: that faith as the common (ecclesial) possession of revealed truths (the *fides quae*, or collective-intellectual side of faith) never quite manages to blossom into a personal, fruitful and confiding commitment to God and to his plan of salvation (*fides qua*). If Christ had vision, everything he knows and does would seem effortless, exempt from suffering, and would never really penetrate each layer and facet of his humanity; it would be difficult here to avoid monophysitism. Still, the following observations could be made.

No believer on earth has personal experience of the beatific vision as such, and as such it is impossible to come up with hard and fast conclusions in respect of the behavior of a *viator* were he or she to enjoy it as a *comprehensor*. In any case, let us examine certain aspects of the knowledge the vision would afford

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earth in *S.Th.* I-II, q. 5, a. 7, ad 2 and *S.Th.* III, q. 9, a. 2, c. Cf. also Ceslas Spicq, *L'Epître aux Hébreux*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gabalda, 1953), 386; Riestra, “Cristo e la fede,” 275f.

Christ, under the following two headings: *firstly*, his knowledge of creation in the light of the beatific vision; and *secondly*, his immediate perception of the Father's will. This division is reflected in the theology of vision in Paul and Thomas Aquinas.<sup>119</sup>

**Christ's Human Actions in the Context of the Knowledge Vision  
Affords Him of Created Reality**

If Christ beheld the divine essence while on earth, this would involve not only a direct widening of the *content* of his knowledge,<sup>120</sup> but more importantly a change in *the way he knows things*. He would know creatures "in God," as they are in themselves, exactly as God made them, according to their origin and future destiny, according to their full essence, peculiarity and singularity. In the words of Aquinas, he would know "all the divine works and the exemplars of all things that are, will be or have been."<sup>121</sup> Perhaps in this connection we can get some idea as we read the New Testament of Jesus's aesthetic sense, and especially the knowledge he had of the human heart. Paul shows a keen awareness of this in speaking of the "*faith* in the Son of God who loved *me* and sacrificed himself for *my sake*" (Gal 2:20).<sup>122</sup> Christ of course did not suffer and die for "humanity," generally speaking, but for *each and every human*. And if he saw "in God" the salvation of many, so also did he see "in God" the lives and struggles and sinful deeds of many: he saw God being obeyed and glorified, one might say; he saw his Father being rejected and offended.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>119</sup> 1 Cor 13:12: "The knowledge that I have now is imperfect; but then I shall know *as fully as I am known*"; *Comp. theol.* I, 216: to "see God in his essence, *and other things in God*, just as God himself, by knowing himself, knows all other things" (ed. Marietti, no. 435).

<sup>120</sup> The question of Christ's beatific vision is not the same as the question of his possible "omniscience." The former does not bring about the latter: the beholder of the beatific vision sees God in his essence, and knows other things – but only those related to his task, situation, needs, mission etc. – "in God," In any case, Aquinas opines that Christ possessed a relative omniscience – through beatific and infused knowledge (*S.Th.* III, q. 10, a. 2; q. 11, a. 1) – insofar as he was Saviour of all (cf. John 12:32).

<sup>121</sup> *Comp. theol.* I, c. 216 (ed. Marietti, no. 435).

<sup>122</sup> On the question of the knowledge Christ needed in the order of his saving task, cf. the 1985 report of International Theological Commission, *The Consciousness of Christ Concerning Himself and His Mission*, and John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), no. 13.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. Manfred Hauke, "La visione beatifica di Cristo durante la passione: La dottrina di san Tommaso d'Aquino e la teologia contemporanea," *Annales theologici* 21, no. 2 (2007): 381–98. Hauke explains that Christ's vision of the Father during his Passion made it possible for him to "see" the sins and sufferings of humanity.

In principle, the vision Christ enjoyed was beatific, in that the ultimate source of his joy was his Father who was well pleased with him (Matt 12:18). However, insofar as his real body and soul are capable of suffering, that very vision may be said to be for him an occasion, even the indirect source, of suffering, of pain, anticipated if not real: suffering of course which to its last drop is meaningful, redemptive and brings about our reconciliation with the Father. Vision of the Father makes immediate and palpable to his consciousness his “solidarity” with the Father and the mission entrusted to him; likewise, it reveals to him his solidarity with a sinful humanity; a double solidarity that seems to tear at the core of his being. That Christ’s vision would be immediate and beatific while not “informing” or involving the entirety of his psycho-somatic life is not easy to fathom.<sup>124</sup>

Need the beatific vision turn Christ’s human life into a charade? Not necessarily. To say that the beatific vision eliminates or excludes true human activity in Christ is not much different from saying that in heaven, after final resurrection, all authentic human activity ceases, and humans become absorbed into the quietude of God, disconnected, except through beatific vision, from the rest of humanity.<sup>125</sup> But this cannot be sustained, for it would take away from the seriousness and tangible realism of the resurrection. With the return of Christ in glory, the *parousia*, the whole of human life comes back into existence, purified, vivified, forever.<sup>126</sup>

#### Christ’s Exercise of Human Freedom in the Context of his Knowledge – Through Vision – Of the Father’s Mandate and of His Saving Mission

Yet the issue here is not that of the risen Jesus, however real be his humanity, and however tangible his human actions in the eschatological state. The issue

<sup>124</sup> Aquinas only makes a half-hearted attempt at solving the dilemma of how Christ could enjoy vision and suffer at the same time (*S.Th.* III, q. 46, a. 8), perhaps recognising the mysteriousness – not the impossibility – of the coincidence. Yet the experiences of the mystics – Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis of Sales – demonstrate that severe suffering or even mental anguish is compatible with – and often related to – an extraordinary spiritual delectation. For examples of this, cf. Most, *The Consciousness of Christ*, 151–53; White, *The Incarnate Lord*, 236–70.

<sup>125</sup> Karl Adam (*The Christ of Faith*, 305) reasons somewhat *aprioistically* that the beatific vision in Christ “would have poured such an abundant measure of bliss upon the emotional life of Jesus that his soul would have lost all sensitivity to human suffering . . .”

<sup>126</sup> Cf. Paul O’Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope: An Introduction to Eschatology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 109–12; Gerard Cremin, *Anthropological Implications of the Doctrine of Final Resurrection in XX Century Theology* (Rome: Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, 2019).

is the nature of the vision he enjoyed during his earthly sojourn, as a *viator*. Perhaps the most serious and consequential issue to be dealt with is the exercise of his human freedom on earth, his obedience.<sup>127</sup> Vision does not eliminate the realism of human life. Neither does it turn humans into clones or robots, yet in principle it would seem to impair *the concrete exercise of human freedom* in Christ. And this is serious.<sup>128</sup>

If Christ could not exercise his will because it was fixed in God, as is the case of the blessed in heaven, it would seem impossible for him to win over, to merit salvation for us. His humanity would perform a purely passive role in redemption, a penal substitution perhaps. His obedience would be of little value in respect of salvation: that “sacrifice of the humble and broken heart” (cf. Ps 51:17), long-awaited by the Jews and announced by the prophets, would never come to be. His saving work would be merely “descendent”; any apparently “ascendent” aspect – sacrifice, expiation, atonement etc. – would be mere gesture for our sakes.

As we already saw, Karl Adam<sup>129</sup> and Karl Rahner both argue against the earthly beatific vision in Christ on these grounds.<sup>130</sup> The latter admits in Christ “an original unobjectified consciousness of divine sonship which is present by the mere fact that there is a hypostatic union.”<sup>131</sup> There is no immediate intuitive thematic vision here, he claims, since otherwise one could hardly maintain his “death agony and feeling of being forsaken by God.”<sup>132</sup> These conclusions relate to Rahner’s anthropological vision – the athematic presence and perception of God in every spiritual experience<sup>133</sup> – yet the premises are reasonable. “There is certainly a nescience which renders a finite person’s exercise of freedom possible . . . This nescience is, therefore, more perfect for the exercise of freedom than knowledge which would suspend the exercise.”<sup>134</sup> And elsewhere: “the objective perception of every individual object right down to the last detail would be

<sup>127</sup> On the obedience of Christ, cf. White, *The Incarnate Lord*, 277–307.

<sup>128</sup> On the notion of human freedom in the context of theological anthropology, cf. O’Callaghan, *Children of God in the World*, 340–74; 442–71.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Adam, *The Christ of Faith*, 305.

<sup>130</sup> On others who do likewise, cf. Johannes Stöhr, “Reflexiones teológicas en torno a la libertad de Cristo en su pasión y muerte,” in *Cristo, Hijo de Dios y redentor del hombre: III Simposio Internacional de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra*, ed. Lucas F. Mateo-Seco, Colección teológica 31 (Pamplona: Eunsa, 1982), 82ff, especially nn. 40ff.

<sup>131</sup> Rahner, “Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ,” 208.

<sup>132</sup> Rahner, 203, 207.

<sup>133</sup> For a critique of Rahner’s position, cf. Galli, “Perché Karl Rahner nega la visione beatifica in Cristo.”

<sup>134</sup> Rahner, “Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ,” 202.

the end of freedom.”<sup>135</sup> Rahner is not saying here that free will is obliterated by vision; but simply that it cannot be exercised fully in the presence of vision. It is the freedom of the *comprehensor*, fixed in God, immovable, and not of the *viator*, who has to forge a pilgrim way step by step.

Earlier on, we saw that Christ’s beatific vision on earth might prejudice his authentic humanity; this led us to enquire into the meaning of “authentic humanity.” The same enquiry must be made here on a more specific issue: what is required for the exercise of free will? What does the authentic (meritorious) exercise of free will involve? Could Christ exercise his freedom on earth while enjoying the beatific vision? The issue is a delicate and important one, and can only be examined briefly.<sup>136</sup>

Can it be said that Christ obeyed freely<sup>137</sup> if *in fact* he simply could not disobey the Father, not only metaphysically (due to the hypostatic union), but also physically (due to the beatific vision)? If we are to hold that Christ received a mandate from his Father to die for the sins of humankind,<sup>138</sup> the double union – of his being (hypostatic union), and consciousness (vision) – would seem to make it impossible for him to disobey, he would have no *real possibility* of rejecting the divine will.

Yet Jesus did perceive the *hypothetical possibility* of disobeying, as is manifested during his temptations in the desert and the Agony in the Garden. The “temptation” as it were, of disobeying, was present to his consciousness under the attractive guise of avoiding the tremendous torture he was about to assume, achieving the salvation of humanity in a less costly way. But how can this be held if through the beatific vision his human consciousness experienced “the objective perception of every individual object, right down to the last detail,”<sup>139</sup> the knowledge, through “God’s eyes,” of everything involved in the Passion? If Christ enjoyed the beatific vision, he could perceive the *good* of obeying his

<sup>135</sup> Rahner, 214.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. Stöhr, “Reflexiones teológicas,” especially 828ff.; Alfonso Carlos Chacón, “La libertad meritoria de Cristo y nuestra libertad,” in *Cristo, Hijo de Dios y redentor del hombre: III Simposio Internacional de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra*, ed. Lucas F. Mateo-Seco, Colección teológica 31 (Pamplona: Eunsa, 1982), 875–92. On freedom and beatific vision for the saved in heaven, cf. O’Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope*, 170–74. On Christ’s suffering, cf. Paul O’Callaghan, “Estudio soteriológico de los sermones cuaresmales de Alonso de Veracruz,” in *Evangelización y Teología en América (Siglo XVI): XI Simposio Internacional de Teología*, ed. José Ignacio Saranyana (Pamplona: Sepunsa, 1990), 1221–35.

<sup>137</sup> Freedom and obedience are not opposed as such: cf. Stöhr, “Reflexiones teológicas,” 811–19.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. John 5:19; 8:28ff.; 12:49ff.; Rom 5:19; Phil 2:8; Heb 5:8; 10:7.

<sup>139</sup> Rahner, “Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ,” 214.

Father, and consequently of winning the earthly and eternal happiness of innumerable persons, yet he simultaneously perceived the *suffering* this would involve.

However, and this is the key question, is suffering and pain one of the elements that is perceived – and hence resolved, understood, and integrated – by seeing things through “God’s eyes”? The problem with this understanding is that we experience suffering and pain as destructive, negative and often the result of sin; they do not enter the “picture” afforded by the beatific vision. If Christ could experience suffering and pain as just another element of the knowledge the beatific vision gives, then his entire passion and death would be harmonically perceived in God as something good.<sup>140</sup> In that case indeed, Christ would not exercise his freedom – nor suffer any pain – just as the blessed in heaven, for whom sin is impossible since the partial good they might otherwise choose can never be perceived as superior to the divine Good by nature, from whom, besides, all partial goods derive.

But no, Christ’s beatific vision cannot “resolve” or liquidate his suffering, because *suffering is non-divine*. God does not know suffering – only in Christ can it be said that “God suffers” – for suffering as such produces an existential *Sorge*, which in a sense anticipates the final annihilation of death. It is a non-intellectual apprehension of possibly succumbing to passivity, to the total extinction of personal freedom. In this sense, suffering is distinct from simple strong sensation, which may equally well produce pleasure and a complacent consciousness of permanence or independence. But Yahweh is “God of the living and not of the dead” (Matt 22:32), he is Life itself; death and mortality are opposed to his nature; hence suffering – the promise and anticipation of death – finds no place in him.

Consequently, everything could be fitted into Christ’s consciousness through the beatific vision; everything that is except his experience of suffering. So he could indeed exercise his freedom insofar as *in fact* he had to make a point of accepting suffering intimately perceived, of embracing death staring him in the face, in order to do his Father’s will and redeem humanity. Paradoxically, suffering and sacrifice made him free. He had to exercise his will to overcome the deeply seated fear of being swallowed up by death, in spite of “knowing” this would not happen. Only in this way, we are told in the letter to the Hebrews, would he be able to “take away all the power of the devil, who had power over death, and set free all those who had been held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death” (Heb 2:14–15).

<sup>140</sup> On the question of Christ’s perception of suffering and death in a variety of authors, Stöhr, “Reflexiones teológicas,” 836f.

Therefore the exercise of his freedom was not impaired either by the beatific vision in one direction, or by the numbness of will the suffering might have induced in the other; he made a real choice, he paid the full price: "He gives himself up to death with the full freedom of Love," in the words of Josemaría Escrivá.<sup>141</sup> The very coincidence of vision and suffering made his decision even more conscious, lucid, pure and meritorious. This principle – this way of meriting, of exercising his free will – is also applicable to the rest of his earthly life, insofar as, like everybody else, he had to overcome natural reluctance – what Aquinas terms the *voluntas ut natura* – develop habits, get accustomed to new situations, although of course he exercises his free will most powerfully and decisively at his passion and death. In this sense Christ's knowledge by vision is not incompatible with his acquired and experiential knowledge which could grow.

In sum, even though he enjoys the beatific vision, the very fact of being able to suffer made Christ capable of exercising his freedom in a meritorious way. Vision does not exclude such exercise of freedom; indeed in some respects it makes it more valuable.

The fact is that the objections to Christ's beatific vision on earth are considerable, though not insurmountable or totally conclusive. Conversely, its denial would put a wide range of fundamental Christian doctrines under strain, particularly the gratuitousness of salvation, the eternal significance of the Incarnation, and Christ's merit, that is the profound significance God has wished to attach to the exercise of human freedom.

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<sup>141</sup> Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *The Way of the Cross* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1983), tenth station.

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