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Book review: Luke Wilgenbusch. *Saved as Through Fire: A Thomistic Account of Purgatory, Temporal Punishment, and Satisfaction*. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2024. Pp. 157*

Luke Wilgenbusch¹ opens his publication by pointing to the need to address the issue of the *reatus poenae*, which traditionally refers to the debt of punishment that man owes to divine justice for his sins. The author's intention is to make this concept accessible in a contemporary context. He disagrees with the reduction of purgatory solely to the process of the soul's interior transformation, therefore he set himself the task to establish correlations between the categories of punishment (related to divine justice) and healing (moral transformation) encompassing the overcoming of evil dispositions. Emphasizing the fundamental importance of the *reatus poenae*, Wilgenbusch adds the medicinal or transformative element of purgatory, which, in his opinion, has wrought its way with difficulty to its rightful place in traditional Catholic theology. However, he notes that, unlike non-Catholic doctrines of purgatory, "even when we describe the punishment of purgatory in medicinal and transformative terms, we must be able to identify and account for the indispensable punitive element. Any Catholic theology of purgatory must acknowledge the need for a personal share in satisfaction" (p. 143).

The publication comprises six chapters of fairly equal length (14–31 pages): the first four deal directly with the issue of purgatory, while the ensuing two revolve around the topic-related issues following the principles outlined in the

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¹ Luke Wilgenbusch (STL, Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas) is a priest of the Diocese of Nashville, where he currently serves as director of vocations.

first four chapters (satisfaction and indulgences). The whole is made complete with an introduction, appendix, conclusion, bibliography (rather modest, 5 pages) and index (3 pages).

Personally, I am rather accustomed to having Thomas Aquinas's thoughts analyzed with the reader, when the author quotes him extensively, comments and only then continues the argument. In this case, the reader must believe that Wilgenbusch has drawn the right conclusions from Aquinas's writings which he presents to the reader. However, Wilgenbusch's approach gives us a monograph of modest length (less than 150 pages), in which the author, I need to emphasize, demonstrates an extraordinary ability to present his findings synthetically. Moreover, he often attempts to transpose difficult content into more digestible statements ("To put it simply" is probably the most frequently used phrase).

In the introduction, we are given a clear explanation of the terms used: the *reatus culpae* (debt of guilt), the *reatus poenae* (debt of punishment), evil dispositions (the habitual weakening of the faculties), and self-imposed consequences (remorse, grief, etc.). The *reatus poenae*, as the author explains, "is the primary extrinsic consequence of sin and is usually translated as 'debt of punishment.' This term [...] refers to a man's indebtedness to divine justice after having committed a sin." Therefore "the sinner must suffer an adequate punishment before God for his fault. The debt of punishment is resolved when justice is restored through the undergoing of a sufficient punishment" (p. 3). The word "punishment" also needs to be clarified as it refers to the broadest possible meaning of the term, so that it may include, in Wilgenbusch's intention, anything that the rational creature suffers against his will. In contrast to this externally imposed evil, punishment is called satisfaction when that which is against one's will is voluntarily accepted as a means of restoring justice.

As the subtitle of the monograph indicates, Wilgenbusch offers the reader a Thomistic account of purgatory. The main source will be the *Commentary on the Sentences*, but the author will also draw on more mature works of the scholastic. However, Wilgenbusch is not concerned with synthesizing the thought of Thomas, who left no systematic treatise on purgatory, but with drawing conclusions from Thomas' principles that are important for contemporary interpretation of purgatory, also in an ecumenical context (dialogue with Orthodox doctrine and Protestant beliefs). Aquinas' "conceptual rigor is both stable enough to incorporate subsequent developments. In just this way, he provided the essential tools for the simultaneously punitive and medicinal purgatory that I present in this book" (p. 6).

Purgatory is a place where the souls of the righteous are purified after death of obstacles preventing communion with God. These obstacles include:

remaining venial sins, residual evil dispositions, and any debt of punishment which has not been completed through earthly penance. Wilgenbusch argues that venial sins are forgiven immediately after death when the soul, in the light of the illumination of the particular judgment, performs a perfect act of love and repentance for past sins. Then the soul's postmortem transformation begins. As divine light pours into the soul, it repeats acts of love directed against the interior wounds of past sins, painfully recalls and laments its failings. In this way, the soul is purified, and its attachment to sin is slowly eroded until it is ready to see God's face in heaven.

As Wilgenbusch shows, even the Orthodox and Protestant positions, which are closest to the Catholic view, do not take into account the distinction introduced by Aquinas: temporal punishment in a broad sense "must include both the punishments from the order of reason and the punishments due to divine justice." The former include the residual evil dispositions, but only in the case of a debt owed to divine justice can we speak of temporal punishment in a narrower sense. "To put it simply, the basic claim of Aquinas is that there is a logical, if not often real, distinction between the particular immanent consequences of sin and the punishment before God that the sinner must endure" (p. 25).

The author derives this conviction from the tenet developed by Thomas: an adequate punishment is an essential element of the restoration of justice. In Aquinas's thought, such punishment includes both *poena damni* (temporary delay of the beatific vision) and *poena sensus* (binding to material fire). According to Wilgenbusch, Thomas's system also includes the transformative illumination, so that ultimately purgatory is about punitive healing: "the transformative dimension of purgatory actually provides the interior and subjective ground for a just and fitting punishment – one that accords best with God's surpassing justice, goodness, and wisdom. The most fitting punishment, in other words, is the one that transforms us" (p. 76).² This kind of punishment expresses the beauty and wisdom that characterize God's work: "it is not the justice of a cold and exacting despot but of a loving and tender Father" (p. 102).

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In the first chapter of his monograph ("Obstacles to the Beatific Vision in Purgatory"), Wilgenbusch clarifies, drawing on Thomas's anthropology, three obstacles

² Cf. pp. 67 ("we will see the way that God in his wisdom masterfully interweaves the retributive, transformative, and meritorious dimensions of our purification") and 143 ("Justice in the universal community governed by God must be restored by the imposition of an adequate punishment. The wisdom and goodness of God is shown by the fact that this punishment is also medicinal").

to the beatific vision immediately after death: the *reatus culpae* (guilt of venial sins not yet forgiven); residual (remaining) evil dispositions; the *reatus poenae* (debt of temporal punishment before divine justice). “It is for these three reasons that some holy souls are delayed in their possession of full beatitude” (p. 8).

Sin consists in turning away from God (*aversio a Deo*) towards creatures (*conversio ad creaturam*). When sin is conscious and voluntary, then we are dealing with mortal sin. In such a case, the gift of grace is needed to return to God (the infusion of love and conversion). In the case of venial sin, charity remains in the soul, but *conversio ad creaturam* has taken place; though the end may not be changed, there has been an inordinate use of the means to achieve it. Therefore, for the forgiveness of this kind of sin, internal repentance is sufficient thanks to charity once obtained.

Evil dispositions, although they are consequences of original sin, become more understandable in the context of actual sins. Original justice was lost through original sin, and although the goodness of nature itself was preserved, the natural inclination toward virtue was diminished. With each sin, the inclination toward sinful acts increases. In the worst case, a habit is formed, which is called a vice. It causes disorder in the powers of the soul and diminishes the virtues of the soul. “What began as a wound from original sin becomes a debilitating disease as long as a life of sin is tolerated” (p. 21).

Charity fights against these disorders, but even when God grants grace to the soul, restoring its orientation toward Himself, some conflict remains in the soul, which often causes minor deviations (the nature of venial sins). These inclinations persisting in the soul (after the mortal sin has been forgiven or as a result of venial sin) are not so much habits or vices, rather something “after the manner of dispositions.” They are referred to as “remnants of sin,” stemming from original sin and decreasing or increasing depending on how the soul fights them. “However, if they are not completely overcome in this life, then they must be healed (at least in the spiritual faculties) after death before the soul can truly be fit to enter into its eternal reward” (p. 22).

Returning to the distinction between the loss of original justice (which is a supernatural gift of harmony between reason and the lower elements of human nature) and the diminishing of natural inclinations toward virtue, it is decisive in that, in the present state, the believer will not experience perfect harmony between the body, the lower powers, and reason. In the earthly eon, there always remains a residual internal conflict, in the midst of which, however, there is the possibility of perfecting oneself in virtue. Thus, “if the spiritual powers of the soul are not thus perfected by virtue in this life, their residual evil dispositions will have to be overcome in purgatory” (p. 23).

Another consequence requiring being remedied after the present life is the *reatus poenae*, or the debt of punishment. Thomas is of the opinion that “after guilt is effaced through contrition, the debt of punishment [the *reatus poenae*] is not entirely taken away.” This debt is the sinner’s obligation to God’s justice, which “requires that sin be ordered by due punishment, a person who dies after contrition and absolution for sin but before making due satisfaction must be punished after this life” (p. 24, quoted from *Commentary on the Sentences*).

However, to contemporary readers, such a statement, if true, is of significant importance for the doctrine of purgatory. When punishment is not sufficiently borne during the earthly life, it must be completed after death. Thus, there are three objects of purgatorial purification: in addition to the unforgiven guilt for venial sins and evil dispositions persisting in the soul, there is also a debt of punishment to be satisfied or expiated.

In the second chapter (“Objections to the Three Objects of Purgatorial Purification”), Wilgenbusch deals with objections to the three objects of purification in purgatory. The author first shows the difference between the Catholic position on the one hand and the Orthodox and Protestant positions on the other. However, he did not overlook the discrepancies in the reflections of the Catholic theologians. The conclusion is that it is the concepts of punishment and the *reatus poenae* that are both central to a proper understanding of purgatory and the bone of contention. Based on the overview of Orthodox and Protestant positions, Wilgenbusch clarifies these issues, which he then develops within the Thomistic approach.

While Duns Scotus equated the *reatus culpae* and the *reatus poenae*, thus considering the grace of forgiveness unnecessary, Aquinas saw the forgiveness of venial sins through an act of fervent love for God, impossible without the presence of habitual charity. This act involves a return to God contrary to the way in which one departed from him in venial sin. In other words, Thomas, distinguishing repentance from satisfaction, points to the irreconcilability of guilt and debt of punishment.

The problem is that the *reatus poenae* is the greatest challenge for the contemporary reader and therefore calls for justification. “It is not evident in the same way for us as it was for Aquinas why a sin already forgiven is deserving of punishment” (p. 34), and even worse: punishment is associated by “Nietzsche’s descendants” with the arbitrary imposition of will and cruelty, that is, with yet another evil.

The Orthodox approach emphasizes the need for personal healing and inner conversion, without reference to divine justice and punishment. The Orthodox churches therefore deny the usefulness of the category of the *reatus poenae* for

the doctrine of purgatory. As for the positions taken by Protestants, they considered that the concepts of satisfaction and punishment are not compatible with Protestant soteriology, which excludes human cooperative participation in Christ's reparation for sins. Christ's Passover would result not only in the remission of sins, but also in the remission of the debt to divine justice (eternal death). "Protestant arguments in favor of purgatory are not based on the demands of divine justice and do not include a notion of satisfaction" (p. 43). As in Orthodoxy, the emphasis is placed on the need for healing of the soul, and therefore only the second object of purification (evil dispositions) is accepted, while the third (debt of punishment) is rejected.

According to Wilgenbusch, "the satisfaction of the *reatus poenae* remains the only sufficiently good reason why God does not immediately heal the soul's dispositional imperfections" (p. 46). Wilgenbusch agrees that purgatorial punishment should be seen in connection with the process of internal transformation (medicinal punishment), but believes that "they cannot be reduced to one another." He reiterates his conviction that "the catholic position must account for the fundamental irreducibility of the punishment owed to divine justice and of subjective interior transformation, even as it maintains the harmony of the two" (p. 47).

Ultimately, the difference between Catholics and Protestants approaches always boils down to the idea of the *reatus poenae* and reparation. Neither the Orthodox nor the Protestant position "can grasp the place of punishment *within* a relationship of friendship with God" (p. 48). In turn, "Aquinas's system is able to account more faithfully for the transformative power of a divinely imposed punishment within our relationship with God" (pp. 48–49). In his view, "forgiveness is the foundation and beginning of a process that simultaneously heals us internally of all the inherent consequences of sin and also makes due reparation and satisfaction in a way that accords with the objective demands of divine justice" (p. 49). Thus, he facilitates an understanding of the true nature of purgatory.

In the third chapter ("Punishment and the *Reatus Poenae*"), Wilgenbusch undertakes to show the compatibility of his argument with Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Church. In Scripture, he looks for passages that would show God's punishment taking place after the forgiveness of sins (cf. e.g., Num 14:12, 19–23; 2 Sam 12:13–14; Heb 12:5b–6; Rev 3:19; Luke 19:1–10). He finds in them confirmation that the restoration of God's loving friendship (forgiveness, remission of sins) is not incompatible with the long-term punishment and satisfaction that follows and which differs from the immediate consequence of sin. At the same time, he does not fail to notice that this is

usually accompanied by internal healing or transformation of the sinner (as in the case of David, for instance). Nonetheless, the author argues that although a clear picture emerges from this collection of Scriptures, neither individual passages nor their collections are indisputable confirmation of the Thomistic view of the doctrine of purgatory.

As far as the Magisterium is concerned, Wilgenbusch first refers to the decree of the Council of Florence, which mentions reparation and punishment in relation to the debt owed to God's justice. He then identifies an analogy between reparation after death and penance after confession of sins in the sacrament of confession. Further, he draws on the Council of Trent, which, in contrast to the Protestant position, insists on the obligation to God that remains after forgiveness. From the contemporary teaching of the Church, Wilgenbusch only quotes Paul VI's Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* and par. 1473 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.³ (The other two statements, by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, are for some reason found elsewhere in the monograph⁴). He summarizes the overly brief (just over one page) presentation of the *Magisterium Ecclesiae* with the words: "Our investigation of the Church's teaching then supports what we encountered in the Scriptures and points toward the distinction between *quilt*, evil dispositions, and the *reatus poenae* as suggested by Aquinas." (p. 57).

Thomas placed man within the framework of three orders of justice: reason, social, and divine. He believed that those who sin do something contrary to reason, human law, and divine law. Man, as subject to three different orders of justice, is subject to three different orders of punishment – it can come from himself (remorse), from people, and from God. According to Thomas Aquinas, punishment can be carried out in three ways; what is contrary to someone's will can be directed against: the actual will, the habitual will, and the true nature of the will itself. The last point is the most important for considerations about purgatory: the evildoer receives something that is in accordance with his actual will, while simultaneously contrary to what his will desires by its very nature.

Thomas allows us to perceive both the harmony between the types of punishment and the irreducibility of one to the other, e.g., the consequences of sin and temporal punishment. Wilgenbusch believes that for a proper understanding of purgatory, it is essential to both connect and distinguish between

³ Unfortunately, the author relocates an interesting comparison of his own proposal to other articles of the *Catechism* – cf. p. 73, n. 1.

⁴ Cf. pp. 74 and 103, respectively. The author emphasizes, in a not entirely convincing manner, what he considers to be striking similarities between his proposal and a passage from Benedict XVI's encyclical *Spe Salvi*, 2007, no. 47.

punishment of the order of reason and divine punishment in the strict sense of the word (p. 66). This punishment resulting from divine justice is identical to the *reatus poenae*, and cannot be equated with the immanent consequences of sin – this is because the order of divine justice cannot be equated with the natural order of reason. However, if there is harmony between them (natural law is man's participation in eternal law!), “we should not think of God's justice as somehow arbitrary or extrinsic to the created order” (p. 67).

According to Wilgenbusch, “purgatory must be understood as a punitive process with a retributive value. The only sufficient reason that a soul possessed of charity at the moment of death does not immediately enter into the joy of eternal beatitude is because it still has some debt before divine justice” (p. 73). This may result either from unforgiven venial sins or from sins that have been forgiven but not perfectly satisfied. Contrary to what Orthodox Christians and Protestants believe, even accepting the transformative dimension of purification, “purgatory can only be understood be reference to the unique demands of divine justice for proper satisfaction” (p. 72).

Thomas' principles prove useful, as Wilgenbusch argues in chapter four (“The Two Theories of Purgatory”), for incorporating the concept of medicinal punishment in purgatory into the doctrine of purgatory, that is, for integrating the approach emphasizing the debt of punishment with the transformative dimension of purgatory. The author perceives purgatorial purification as a process in which divine enlightenment in the soul can be providential, directed by God to evoke deep regret for past sins (punishment), and leading to the ultimate repair of the will through repeated acts of love (healing). “In other words, only the punitive dimension of the experience fulfils the demand of divine justice, and it is the sorrow and repentance caused by the divine illumination that form that indispensable punitive element. The act of love which accompanies that vision has a distinct finality: the rectification of the habits. The two must be seen distinctly even in their coordination” (p. 97).

Wilgenbusch presents the reader with two different schools of theological reflection on purgatory. The difference between them is boiled down to the question of whether the moral transformation of the soul takes place at a specific moment after death, so that it is not accompanied by punishment, or whether it takes place gradually, through the experience of punishment. Wilgenbusch opts for the Thomistic position, but admits: “I do not believe that Aquinas himself gives us a definitive position on this question in his writings” (p. 75). Despite this fact Wilgenbusch maintains that “it can be argued that the transformative dimension of purgatory actually provides the interior and subjective ground for a just and fitting punishment – one that accords best with God's surpassing

justice, goodness, and wisdom. The most fitting punishment, in other words, is the one that transforms us" (p. 76).

In Thomas's writings, one can find an argument for rejecting moral transformation immediately after death – it stems from the difference between *visio beatifica* and spiritual insight at the moment of personal judgment. The unified vision therefore becomes continuous transformation in purgatory: "the mode of transformation begun in the particular judgment continues with the punishments of purgatory and reaches completion on the soul's entrance into beatitude" (p. 86).

In order to understand how punitive transformation takes place, Wilgenbusch recommends looking at the nature of purgatorial punishments. Two aspects of sin – *aversio a Deo* and *conversio ad creaturam* – correspond to two types of punishment: *poena damni* and *poena sensus*. *Poena damni*, or pain of loss, consists in deprivation (or rather delay) of the beatific vision. This loss, as incompatible with the habitual and natural will of the soul, has a truly punitive character. *Poena sensus* (pain of sense), is a punishment corresponding to *conversio ad creaturam*, and therefore an element inherent to all sins, whether venial or mortal. According to a long tradition, this type of punishment is inflicted by means of actual, material fire (the similarity of purgatory to hell in terms of retributive value) (cf. Matt 25:41; 1 Cor 3:11–15). God uses the object of man's sinful desire as an instrument of punishment, and the creature that turned man away from God is now used to restore man to the proper order of justice. Fire represents the created goods to which man turned when he sinned.

The combination of punishment in the order of divine justice and transformative punishment offers a harmonious comprehension of the two orders of justice and facilitates understanding of the "quantity" of punishment needed to restore justice in purgatory. Thomas Aquinas believed that God always punishes less than faults deserve (no man suffers true punishment for his sins), and he also claimed that the length of time in purgatory corresponds to the rootedness of sin. "In light of the harmony between the punishments of reason and divine justice suggested by the vision of transformative punishment, it is possible to imagine that, by God's sapiential dispensation the 'amount' of punishment needed to satisfy divine justice in purgatory is coordinated with the time required to painfully root out the evil dispositions" (pp. 94–95).

As Wilgenbusch acknowledges, several passages from Aquinas pose a potential challenge to the vision presented, but Wilgenbusch believes that they either express Thomas's early position or may provide helpful explanations against the intention of the proposed approach. The author writes: "Nevertheless, I believe the presentation I have given here is a plausible account of how Aquinas himself might have considered the issue in light of his definitive positions." (p. 101).

The principles developed in the previous four chapters also prove helpful for the last two chapters. In them, Wilgenbusch deals with what a person can do to alleviate or eliminate the need for purgatory (for themselves or others). The author addresses here the issues of satisfaction (Chapter 5: "Personal Satisfaction in This Life") and indulgences (Chapter 6: "The Exchange of Satisfaction and the Theology of Indulgences").

According to Wilgenbusch, understanding the central role of temporal punishment in purgatory allows us to understand the nature and form of personal satisfaction in the present life. The foundation of such satisfaction is the satisfaction accomplished by Christ, to which personal satisfaction is subordinate (real but subordinate nature of personal satisfaction). The author starts from a sacramental perspective and then moves on to extra-sacramental forms of satisfaction. He accentuates the centrality of charity, which shapes the satisfactory work and gives them additional value beyond the punitive or retributive. "The harmony between the perfective and retributive elements of human purification in purgatory is all the more present in the satisfactory works performed by the living" (p. 106).

Christ's satisfaction enters human life for the first time in the sacrament of baptism, which is the fundamental means of remission of temporal and eternal punishment. As for sins committed after baptism, man must participate in the work of satisfaction. This cooperation between man and God is indicated by the sacrament of penance. Its matter consists of the penitent's actions, and the grace of the sacrament enables and supports the penitent's own actions so that they remain directed toward the proper goal. The believer cooperates in his own healing when, relying on the grace of Christ, he overcomes the evil of sin. The constitutive elements of the sacrament of penance, which include contrition for sins, confession, and reparation, are coordinated in such a way as to effectively combat three types of evil: guilt, evil dispositions, and the *reatus poenae*.

The penance imposed by the confessor should take into account not only the remedying of the interior wounds of sin, but also the debt to divine justice. The retributive dimension of punishment is combined with the healing dimension, but does not lose its inherent logic. Divine justice does not demand an "equality of quantity" (which only Christ could offer), but is content with an "equality of proportion," which Thomas Aquinas explained by the nature of friendship. According to the measure of the equality of proportion, "God demands from the soul that which is possible and reasonable according to his state in his life, his condition, and the relative gravity of his sins, considering at the same time the intensity of his friendship with him" (p. 118). The fact that only the restoration of friendship with God through the forgiveness of sins

opens up the possibility of personal reparation implicitly confirms the main thesis of the book, that one can speak of a personal debt of punishment only after the forgiveness of sin.

According to Wilgenbusch, the sacramental form of satisfaction can be a paradigmatic model for extra-sacramental forms of satisfaction. The beginning of repairing the damage caused by sin is a reorientation of the will towards God; repentance is always a condition for satisfaction. It is love of God and neighbor, not forgiveness of punishment for debt, that remains the main goal and driving force of all works of satisfaction. These, in turn, lead to an increase in the believer's love. As Wilgenbusch writes, “[t]hose who are intent on making satisfaction for the right reasons often reach the most profound heights of holiness” (p. 117).

Unity with Christ deepens, as Wilgenbusch asserts in the last chapter, when believers offer satisfaction for others, as Christ did. Later in the chapter, the author discusses the Church's practice of indulgences, which is based on the ability to make satisfaction for one another. He even believes that “our own efforts pale in comparison to the satisfaction available to man by means of indulgences” (p. 119).

Punitive justice does not apply only to individuals, but above all to the social order (in the case of sin – the universal moral order). Therefore, others may voluntarily share the burden carried by the sinner out of love—making reparation for their neighbor (cf. Gal 6:2 – the author does not refer to this, which is a pity, because Aquinas actually confirms this use⁵). This is possible because of love as a supernatural bond uniting the saints in community. As Wilgenbusch emphasizes, “[i]f one man offers his satisfaction for another, the remission of temporal punishment truly passes to the other” (p. 121).

An indulgence is neither forgiveness nor exemption from temporal punishment, but a genuine payment. It does not replace satisfaction, but is an alternative means of achieving it—the debt is paid from the treasury of the satisfaction of Christ and the saints. The works that the Church recommends to the faithful are not particularly difficult, as they arise from the generosity of the Church and give priority to the growth of love among the faithful (e.g., adoration of the Blessed Sacrament for at least half an hour, devout recitation of the Rosary in a church or chapel, and reading the Holy Scriptures for at least half an hour). In this way satisfaction also merits an increase of grace. Wilgenbusch recalls,

⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super ad Galatas*, cap. VI, lect. 1, no. 347, accessed November 3, 2025, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Gal.C6.L1>.

following Aquinas, that the merit of eternal reward is infinitely better than dismissal of temporal punishment.

In addition, the Church requires confession, Holy Communion, and prayer for the intention of the Sovereign Pontiff. Wilgenbusch considers the necessity of being free from all attachment to sin (including venial sin) in order to obtain a plenary indulgence to be a result of the very nature of a plenary indulgence. It is in the authority of the Church to establish the criteria for granting indulgences, including the “amount” of remission to grant for each work, the conditions for granting the indulgence, and the acts to be performed to receive the indulgence. Since attachment to sin is contrary to true repentance for sins, one cannot receive forgiveness for a sin when the will still clings to it. “To be truly free to receive the benefit of a plenary indulgence, one must be willing to repent of each and every sin out of a complete love of God” (p. 131).

The bond of love also unites us with those who have already died, which is why it is possible to offer indulgences for the dead. In the case of the indulgence for the living, it is granted by the Church by way of absolution, that is, *per modum absolutionis*. However, this type of absolution does not refer to the forgiveness of sins, but to the remission of the penalty of punishment. In the event of “redirecting” an indulgence to the deceased, it is offered by way of suffrage, that is, *per modum suffragii*. The effect of this indulgence is not guaranteed in the same way as it is for the living; the measure of the benefit granted is at God’s discretion.

Wilgenbusch devotes the end of the last chapter to the apostolic pardon. Apostolic pardon granted by a priest at the moment of death is a plenary indulgence. Wilgenbusch even claims that “[T]here is no better means at man’s disposal for the remission of temporal punishment than the generous gift of an apostolic pardon” (p. 139). When there is no priest, the Church offers this kind of indulgence to those who are properly disposed, provided that they were in the habit of saying some prayers during their lifetime.

The author raises an interesting question in the appendix entitled “Can the Souls in Purgatory Pray for Us.” Thomas’ negative answer to this question is considered to be the binding doctrine of the Church. Contrary to this, Wilgenbusch argues that from a Thomistic point of view, souls, although they do not usually pray for the living, may sometimes be asked to do so as part of punitive healing.

The process of purification, guided by God’s providence, may require that God should give souls those ideas that are related to the ways in which they need purification. Through such enlightenment, God wants to evoke acts of love that include repentance for past wrongs. However, Wilgenbusch argues that it

is not impossible that God may sometimes ask souls in purgatory to intercede for a specific person as part of this process, revealing some knowledge about that person's condition. This may involve praying for those who, for instance, may struggle with the same sins that the soul had to tackle in life, or for those who were hurt by the soul during its earthly life. "It is not hard, then, to further imagine that in his great mercy God would grant some grace to those still on earth in response to their prayers" (p. 148).

This topic requires in my opinion further discussion. The possibility that souls in purgatory can pray for the living may find its confirmation in Thomas' teaching on the two degrees of love of God. The first degree means that the soul is more focused on one's own good (relationship with God), while the second, that the soul seeks the glory of God in serving others.⁶ In this light, it is reasonable to ask whether souls in purgatory should be focused solely on their purification?

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I should like to accentuate the solid work done by Wilgenbusch and definitely recommend reading this impressive publication. The few critical remarks to follow by no means detract from the high value of *Saved as Through Fire*.

What I missed was the apology for purgatory that Thomas Aquinas proposed in his work *De rationibus fidei*.⁷ Incidentally, in this *opuscula*, completely omitted by Wilgenbusch, Aquinas brings the purifying nature of punishment to the fore, and only then does he mention the penance not done during one's lifetime.⁸ Wilgenbusch, the other way round, first encourages the conclusion that the primary purpose of purgatory is the *reatus poenae* to further attempt the assimilation of this punishment with its healing dimension.

Another downside of the book is Wilgenbusch's relatively scarce use of Thomas's biblical commentaries (cf., for instance, insufficient discussion of the explanation of 1 Cor 3:11–15 on p. 89, especially in the light of the fact that the title of Wilgenbusch's monograph is a quote from verse 15). It would be appropriate to consult Thomas' biblical commentaries on the passages of Scripture referred to by the author. As rightly proven by biblical Thomism, Aquinas'

⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super ad Philipenses*, cap. 1, lect. 3, no. 36, accessed November 3, 2025, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Philip.C1.L3.n36>.

⁷ Cf. Sławomir Zatwardnicki, "Tomasza z Akwinu apologia doktryny czyścza," *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 17, no. 3 (2024): 317–49, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/BPTh.2024.017>.

⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De rationibus fidei*, cap. 9, accessed November 3, 2025, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~DeRatio>.

biblical commentaries shed light without which a full understanding of the legacy of the *Doctor Communis* would not be entirely feasible.

Wilgenbusch voices the hope that the proposed synthetic approach has ecumenical potential, because the transformative dimension has been of primary concern to the Orthodox and Protestant explanations of purgatory. In my opinion, one could speak equally well, and perhaps even more in line with the intention of the Angelic Doctor himself, of the apologetic dimension of his monograph.

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