

## THE VISION OF GOD: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON THE BEATIFIC VISION AND RESURRECTED BODIES

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**ABSTRACT.** The beatific vision is central to St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of the soul's enlightenment. In its vision of the essence of God, the soul/intellect achieves its *telos*, its highest goal. But the resurrection of the body is a central dogma of the Christian faith, so the main question of this essay concerns the manner in which the resurrected body of the blessed benefits from the soul's apprehension of the beatific vision. For St. Thomas, the physical eyes do not see the beatific vision, since they can only see magnitude and proportion, and God is beyond both. The soul is the body's substantial form, and a person is not fully a person without the union of soul and body. As the body's substantial form, the soul/intellect has the beatific vision as its substantial form. The result of the enlightened intellect with the resurrected body will be that the physical eyes will be able to see more readily the glory of God in creation and in redeemed humanity, and more supremely in the incarnate Christ himself.

**KEYWORDS:** Beatific vision, soul/intellect, soul-body union, personhood, bodily resurrection, resurrected bodies, eschatology, teleology

The Nicene Creed, in its sixth article, affirms the 'resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come' as a necessary belief for one to be considered within the orthodox Christian fold. The resurrection of the dead is not simply a spiritual reality, but very much a physical phenomenon where real, material bodies will rise from the graves, not as 'zombies', which are decayed mythical entities, being all appetite and no intellect, but rather fully healed and restored limbs, flesh, and blood, united to a soul that contemplates the vision of God. How will this newly-revived body benefit from this reunion?

This very question is at the heart of St. Thomas' grand theological vision, since it speaks to his eschatological and teleological focus. What is the 'end-game' of life and creation? What is the purpose of it all? And most important for this study, what is the ultimate end and purpose of the resur-

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rected body? The soul and the body are united at the resurrection, enjoying a reunion that for Aquinas fulfills man's ultimate teleological purpose: to be a complete human being, body and soul united, in a perfect communion with God. For St. Thomas, the physical eyes do not directly see the Beatific Vision, only the 'intellect'. So the question remains: how does the physical side of our composite identity as human persons benefit from such a soulish vision? If the soul's enjoyment of the Beatific Vision is complete, what does union with the body add to the experience, if anything? The Thomistic account of the union of soul and body, and how the beatific vision affects this union, should be understood as an indirect, but very important, effect, where the soul, as the body's substantial form, imparts greater understanding and vision of divine glory in nature, humanity, and in Christ himself.

We begin with Boethius' definition of a person: 'An individual substance of a rational nature'. This definition is given primarily in Boethius' *Liber de Persona et Duabus Naturis*, ch. 3. Let's take Socrates. As an individual, he is a distinct substance that can be contrasted with 'humanity', which is the nature with which all individual substances such as Socrates, William Shakespeare, Prince Charles, and Pope Francis share. St. Thomas explains this fundamental Boethian definition (Eberl 2004: 333-365).

Being of a rational nature, that is, having an intellective mind, distinguishes human beings from other material substances: The form and species of a natural thing are known through their proper operations. Now the proper operation of a human being, insofar as he is a human being, is to understand and use reason. Hence the principle of this operation, namely the intellect, must be that by which a human being is categorized by species. In general, a person is a being that exists on its own with a specific nature, shared with other beings of its kind, to be rational (Aquinas 1958: Book 3).

A human being is not simply a person, however. In addition to being rational, a human being is a sensitive, living, and corporeal substance. Human beings have a material nature: It belongs *per se* to a human being that there be found in him a rational soul and a body composed of the four elements. So without these parts a human being cannot be understood, and they must be placed in the definition of a human being; so they are parts of the species and form (Boethius 1973: q. 5, a. 3).

For Aquinas, then, as for Aristotle, body and soul are composite, and constitute the human person. The soul is the substantial form of the body, and therefore lives on after its separation from the body. But if the union of body and soul constitutes the person properly so called, then how does that body experience the Beatific Vision? How does the body benefit? The problem is made all the more urgent when Aquinas argues that at the general resurrection, the physical eyes will not contemplate or see the Beatific Vi-

sion. How does he reach this conclusion? And if true, in what way does the physical body benefit from the purified soul's direct contemplation?

We begin with the nature of the soul. Aquinas, quoting Augustine, argues that the intellectual powers are to be found in the soul: 'Man's excellence consists in the fact that God made him to His own image by giving him an intellectual soul, which raises him above the beasts of the field. Therefore, things without intellect are not made to God's image' (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1911: Q. 93, Art. 2; Cf. St. Augustine, *De Genesis*, 1900: VI:12) This would include the physical body, for physicality is something that man shares with the irrational animals, and when the soul is separated from the body, the latter has no intellect. To be in the image and likeness of God, the creature must fulfill three criteria: one, existence, then second, life, and finally, knowledge (Aquinas 1911: Suppl. IIIae. Q. 92, Art. 2). The fact that the rational aspect of the soul completes man as an image-bearer of God does not mean that the image of God is confined only in man's reasoning. Man, *qua* man, always remains a composite being. This is part of his essence. Or rather, the soul is the very essence of the body as its substantial form. In his *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, St. Thomas explains this relationship between body and soul, and the very definition of the soul itself:

First, then, that (Aristotle) that the definition given... is 'general', i.e. it applies to any soul. It posits the soul as a substance which is a form; and that means that it presents to us the idea of the essence of something. For there is a difference between a form that is substance and one that is not, and the latter sort are not strictly of the essence or *whatness* of a thing; whiteness is not of the essence of a white body; whereas substantial form is essential and quidditative. To call a soul a substantial form, therefore, is to imply that it is of the essence and *whatness* of the body it animates. Hence he says 'this', i.e. this quidditative substance, is the essence of this body, i.e., of the body that is what it is precisely through having this particular form. For this form is essential to the thing, and is denoted by the definition of what the thing is (Aquinas 1994: 236).

Even as the soul is the animating principle of the body, and the body cannot exist without the soul, the soul is nevertheless incomplete without the body. The reason for this is because the soul encompasses more than just the rational aspect. As the body's animating principle, it also gives it sensation. So as the body needs the soul in order for it to live, the soul also needs the body in order to experience sensations and feelings. Both are incomplete without the other. The soul is dependent on the body for its sensations, and the body is dependent on the soul for its life. Put another way, the soul is 'the body's actuality', and therefore cannot be separated from its body and be a complete thing.

The human person being a composite of body and soul makes it necessary that the final end of all things must include a physical resurrection of the body. For St. Thomas, this is essential to man's happiness, his eternal well-being. In Question 75, Article 1, he takes up this central Aristotelian theme, i.e. that all men desire happiness, and analyses the various doctrines that tried to account for what constitutes the soul's true beatitude. For Porphyry, the soul's happiness is constituted mainly in an afterlife free of the body. It is not that the body is evil, but a much lesser good, and therefore it is to be siphoned off at death after it has performed its function. The soul's happiness, then, is constituted in an eternal bodiless existence (Aquinas 1911: Q. 75, Art. 1). Thus, a resurrection of the body, in this view, would, far from contributing to the soul's happiness, tie it back to the necessities of the body, contributing to its continued misery. For the Manichees, the soul's happiness is precisely constituted in the fact that it need to be free from a material bod, since all material substances are the work of an evil principle.

If body and soul form one composite substance, then what does the body gain by the soul's contemplation of the Beatific Vision after the general resurrection? Bearing in mind Aristotle's teaching on the composite nature of soul and body, we can explore this question with this foundation.

First, St. Thomas addresses the question of what the ultimate goal of the purified intellect (for the purposes of this study, I use 'soul' and 'intellect' interchangeably) is: the vision of the essence of God (It is well known that this part of the *Summa* was composed *post-mortem*, probably by St. Thomas' friend and collaborator Fra Rainaldo da Piperno, this study will nonetheless attribute this section to St. Thomas himself, since the contents were culled together from his glosses in Peter Lombard's *Sentences*). In Question 92, he answers the objection, based on a reading of the Areopagite, that the intellect cannot be united to the divine essence as its ultimate beatitude, on the grounds that a) the angelic hosts, pure intelligences themselves, do not see it, and b) that 'knowledge is of existing things, which are finite', and God, who is infinite, is above the category of existence, and c) the surpassing glory of God, which is infinite, precludes any vision, ever so slight, of the divine essence (Aquinas 1911: Suppl. IIIae, Q92, Art. 1).

There are many other objections, but they all boil down to the finiteness of the intellect, and the infinite nature of the divine essence. The finite cannot comprehend the infinite. He answers these objections by first appealing to the authority of Scripture: 'When he returns, we shall see him as he is'. It is further understood that it is in the nature of the intellect to know its highest good, its most profound felicity. To know, for Aquinas, is not to comprehend fully, since the divine essence is incomprehensible. But the intellect can know in the sense of seeing what it can of the divine essence,

and finding its fulfilment there. St. Thomas makes the connection between the soul as the body's substantial form, and the divine essence as the ultimate goal of the intellect's knowing. Knowledge of the divine essence, in other words, is the substantial form of the intellect, just as the soul is the substantial form of the body.

It is here that we can now more fully explore the relationship between the glorified resurrected body and the illumined intellect. St. Thomas takes this up in Article 2 of the same Question 92, clarifying what the intellect's reuniting with the body allows it to do and what it does cannot. It would seem obvious that, since the object of the sense of seeing is to see, and the object of the intellect is to know, that the physical eyes would benefit from the intellect's direct apprehension of the divine essence by seeing it directly, without any intermediary. St. Thomas refutes this, however, on several grounds. There must be some important distinctions so that the act of knowing and the act of seeing are properly understood in their own right. There is both the direct and indirect object of the senses. For the direct object of sense,

... a thing can act directly either on sense as such or on a particular sense as such. That which acts directly in this second way on a sense is called a proper sensible, for instance color in relation to the sight, and sound in relation to the hearing. But as sense as such makes use of a bodily organ, nothing can be received therein except corporeally, since whatever is received into a thing is therein after the mode of the recipient. Hence all sensibles act on the sense as such, according to their magnitude: and consequently magnitude and all its consequences, such as movement, rest, number, and the like, are called common sensibles, and yet they are direct objects of sense (Aquinas 1911: Suppl. IIIae, Q 92, Art. 2).

To receive something in the senses is to receive it through a bodily organ, and therefore the impression must be a physical one, as the sensible objects are received through the senses, and therefore are physical by their nature.

The second mode, the indirect object of sense, which does not act directly on senses, but 'is annexed to those things that act on sense directly: for instance Socrates...a friend and the like which are the direct object of the intellect's knowledge in the universal, and in the particular are the object of the cogitative power in man, and of the estimative power in other animals' (Aquinas 1911: Suppl. IIIae, Q92, Art. 2). It is not apprehended directly, but all at once and without any discourse or doubt. I may know Socrates through books, but I have no first-hand sense of Socrates the man. My senses do not have a direct apprehension of Socrates, so my knowledge of him is always mediated.

For St. Thomas, our knowledge of God can never be mediated through the senses, either in this life or in the day of the bodily resurrection, because sense organs can only have a direct knowledge and experience of physical objects that makes impressions on the senses. The only way that the physical, re-embodied state can perceive the beatific vision is indirectly, as the intellect's direct apprehension of the essence of God is evident to the fleshly eyes as they see the glory of God in man and creatures directly. In other words, while the physical eyes will not see God's essence, they will see the glory of God much more clearly shining through redeemed humanity and the rest of creation:

Since then sight and sense will be specifically the same in the glorified body, as in a non-glorified body, it will be impossible for it to see the Divine essence as an object of direct vision; yet it will see it as an object of indirect vision, because on the one hand the bodily sight will see so great a glory of God in bodies, especially in the glorified bodies and most of all in the body of Christ, and, on the other hand, the intellect will see God so clearly, that God will be perceived in things seen with the eye of the body, even as life is perceived in speech. For although our intellect will not then see God from seeing His creatures, yet it will see God in His creatures seen corporeally. This manner of seeing God corporeally is indicated by Augustine (*De Civ. Dei* xxii), as is clear if we take note of his words, for he says: 'It is very credible that we shall so see the mundane bodies of the new heaven and the new earth, as to see most clearly God everywhere present, governing all corporeal things, not as we now see the invisible things of God as understood by those that are made, but as when we see men... we do not believe but see that they live' (Aquinas 1911: *Suppl. IIIae*, Q92, Art. 2).

The union of the intellect enlightened by its vision with the resurrected body will enable the physical eyes to see much more readily the glory of God than it does presently. The glory of God illuminating through redeemed humanity and the transformed cosmos will be as evident as one could see a sunset. The glory of God will also be evident in Christ for the redeemed person, so while the eyes will not see the beatific vision, it will benefit from the intellect's vision in the way that that glory will be more readily sensed through the person's senses.

An objection comes readily, that it would seem that the soul's need for the body might be negated by the above statement that the soul needs the body. If the soul is happy in its apprehension of the beatific vision, then what can its reunion to the body add to such beatitude? While it is true that the soul will have extreme happiness and fulfillment in its direct knowledge and experience of the beatific vision, on another level it feels itself incomplete without its union with the body. Until it is reunited with its body as its true substantial form, it will always feel the want of it, even in its state of beatitude. This means there is something that its vision of the divine essence

that it wants to impart to the physical body, a power that can benefit it. So while the eyes do not directly see the divine essence, the illumined intellect will benefit the physical eyes in that they will see and apprehend the glory of God more readily and with greater clarity through created effects. There will be no doubt of God's existence, since the intellect will have been illumined by its direct vision of the divine essence, and the eyes of the resurrected body will see its manifestations everywhere. The intellect's goal will have been achieved, and its desire for the body will have been fulfilled as it imparts that singular benefit to it. The body's beatitude depends on its reunion with the enlightened intellect, and the intellect's sense of wholeness depends on its reunion with the body.

Central to the Christian eschatological vision is the profound and radical distinction between divinity and humanity. If, as Etienne Gilson notes, that line of distinction is ever crossed or transcended, the Christian mystic loses his God (see Gilson 1990). It is in that distinction, however, that a relationship is made possible, one that does not seek to sublimate one into the other. For St. Thomas Aquinas, the intellect seeing the divine essence means that it can glimpse it and attain enlightenment without being destroyed in the process, or without it being taken up into that same essence. But the resurrection of the body is also very key in this regard, since the intellect's desire is also to be reunited to its body. The resurrection of the body thus becomes central to the human person's union with God, given that that same person is defined by the union of soul and body. If Hans Boersma is correct, then the problem with St. Thomas' eschatology is that the body remains extraneous to the union of the intellect with the beatific vision (see Boersma 2017: 187-212).

But as it turns out, St. Thomas' account of the resurrection of the body does make the body at least a very important participant in the soul's vision of the essence of God, especially since such an illumined soul benefits the resurrected body in the manner already stated, i.e. allowing its physical eyes and senses to see and apprehend the glory of God and its manifestations in the new heavens and the new earth (Cortez 2018).

It is in its wholeness that body and soul benefit from the beatific vision: the soul through its direct apprehension, and the body indirectly by seeing and experiencing its effects. It is here that the redeemed and transformed intellect becomes the substantial form of the redeemed and transformed body, allowing the physical eyes and senses to see reality more clearly than it had ever done before.

We arrive, then, at the central core of St. Thomas' teleological vision of redeemed humanity: a transformed body united to an illumined soul. The human person finds his fulfillment in the reunion of body and soul. As the beatific vision is the substantial form of the soul/intellect, so this illumined

soul now is the substantial form of the redeemed body. The physical eyes, whose object is to see, corresponds to the intellect, whose object is to know. Knowing affects seeing, and so the intellect's direct knowledge of the divine essence allows the physical eyes to see all in its proper order, and to see the divine beauty and glory in all things. Indeed, the glorified person will readily see and understand the glory and divinity of Christ himself, through whom he will see all else.

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