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Integrating the Various Human Dimensions into the Vision of God in Heaven

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Abstract

The beatific vision of God in heaven is at the heart of the Christian faith. Thomas Aquinas affirms that the principal faculty of the human person is the intellect, and that the vision of God will consist primarily in an intellectual operation. The emphasis that Aquinas places on the operation of the intellect could lead one to think that it is an overly intellectualistic conception of what our happiness in heaven will be. On the other hand, contemporary authors such as Hans Boersma point out that in the Thomistic doctrine of the beatific vision the corporeal dimension of the human person is of little relevance. The purpose of this article is to explain how the different dimensions of the human person - intellect, will and corporeality- are integrated in the vision of God in heaven according to Thomistic doctrine.

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Hans Boersma, author of an important book dedicated to the study of the beatific vision throughout the history of Christianity, affirms that the Thomistic doctrine of the vision of God in heaven suffers from a certain Christological deficit.¹ According to Boersma, a Christological mediation is entirely irrelevant in Aquinas, both when referring to the means and the object of the beatific vision. As he explains: “my problems with Aquinas’s views on the beatific vision run deeper. They have to do with the fact that he does not treat Christ as the object of the beatific vision, in the sense that we will see God eternally as manifested in and through Christ. The most worrying part of Aquinas’s christological deficit is his focus on the divine essence as

¹ See H. Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 159. See also H. Boersma, ‘Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision: A Christological Deficit’, in: *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology*, 2-2 (2018), 129-147.

opposed to Jesus Christ as the object of our eternal worship and vision".² Boersma's position has been rejected by various authors, most notably by Simon Francis Gaine and Michael Root.³ In all these cases, however, the anthropological implications of Boersma's proposal have not been thoroughly explored.

The Thomistic doctrine emphasizes that the soul continues to exist after death in a personal and conscious way, which allows it to fully enjoy the vision of God in heaven from the first moment of its separation from the body. On the other hand, it also emphasizes the importance of the resurrection of the body because of the incomplete state in which the soul finds itself when separated from it. Both statements, according to Hans Boersma, seem to be in tension with each other, if we add to this the fact that Aquinas also affirms that the body is an obstacle to our vision of God, which will be overcome once the soul is separated from it. The obvious question, then, is how does corporeality contribute to our happiness in heaven.⁴ According to Boersma, "one solution to this problem, though perhaps a bold one, is to say that the resurrection will intensify our happiness because the vision of God will be in part physical — that is to say, perhaps we should take seriously the notion that we will see God with physical eyes. In Western theology, this solution has often been rejected in favor of a strictly spiritual vision of the divine essence— ever since Augustine's famous letter to Bishop Fortunatian (*Ep.* 148), written in 413 or 414".⁵ Phillip Blond, when referring to the *Summa Theologiae*, also criticizes that in Aquinas, unlike Albert the Great and Bonaventure, "an abstracted and disembodied account of the beatific vision is offered".⁶ According to him, "if we are to avoid a Gnostic outcome we must read the message of the incarnation as the return of the soul to a glorified body and a recovered world. But this would only be true if the beatific vision as described delivered us to such a state".⁷ In other words, in Boersma's and Blond's opinion, Aquinas' doctrine of the vision of God in heaven, while presenting a certain Christological deficit, also presents a certain anthropological deficit, characterized by the rejection of matter, in a kind of Gnostic intellectualism.

² Boersma, *Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision*, 136.

³ See S. F. Gaine, 'The Beatific Vision and the Heavenly Mediation of Christ', in *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 2-2 (2018), 116-128; S. F. Gaine, 'Thomas Aquinas, the Beatific Vision and the Role of Christ: A Reply to Hans Boersma', in *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology*, 2/2 (2018), 148-167; M. Root, 'The Christological Character of the Beatific Vision: Hans Boersma's Seeing God', in *The Thomist*, 84-1 (2020), 127-151; V. L. Strand, 'Seeing Christ, Seeing the Trinity: Beyond Boersma's Trinitarian Deficit', in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 26/4 (2024), 409-428; C. Vial, 'Una respuesta a la interpretación de Hans Boersma sobre la visión beatífica en la doctrina tomista. Un diálogo cristológico (y pneumatológico)', in *Teología y Vida* 65/2 (2024), 133-159.

⁴ See Boersma, *Seeing God*, 420-421.

⁵ Boersma, *Seeing God*, 422.

⁶ See P. Blond, 'The Beatific Vision of St Thomas Aquinas', in: A. Pabst, C. Shneider (eds.), *Encounter between eastern Orthodoxy and radical Orthodoxy: transfiguring the world through the Word* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2009), 185-212, 187.

⁷ Blond, 'The Beatific Vision of St Thomas Aquinas', 202.

Thomas Aquinas affirms that the most important faculty of the human person is the intellect, and that the vision of God in heaven will consist mainly in an intellectual operation. The emphasis that Aquinas places on the operation of the intellect, in contrast to Bonaventure, who places it on the will, could lead one to think that it is an overly intellectualistic conception of what our happiness in heaven will be, a conception in which there is little room for love and freedom which would seem to play a secondary role. Although Aquinas affirms that the vision of God in heaven will substantially consist in an intellectual operation, however, he does not mean to minimize the importance of the will and the body. The purpose of this article is to explain how in the Thomistic doctrine are integrated the different dimensions of the human person. It will be focused on two fundamental questions: what is the role of the will in relation to the intellect in the beatific vision and how are both faculties integrated with the bodily dimension of our knowledge, specifically with the possibility of seeing God with the physical eyes. The first section will refer to the beatific vision as an intellectual operation, the second to the role of the will and charity in the vision of God, and the third to the corporeal dimension of our knowledge in heaven.

1. The Vision of God in Heaven as an Intellectual Operation

A few hours before his death, at the Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus affirms that eternal life is identified with the knowledge of God: “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn. 17, 3). In his commentary on this text, Aquinas focuses on the operation of the intellect as the main content of the vision of God in heaven, although he also refers to the fundamental role played by the will and charity. He states the following.⁸

Among living activities, the highest is the activity of the intellect, which is to understand. Therefore, the activity of the intellect is living activity in the highest degree. Now as the sense in act is identified with the sense-object in act, so also the intellect in act is identified with the thing understood in act. Since then, intellectual understanding is living activity, and to understand is to live, it follows that to understand an eternal reality is to live with an eternal life. But God is an eternal reality, and so to understand and see God is eternal life. Accordingly, our Lord says that eternal life lies in vision, in seeing; that is, it

⁸ *In Io.* c. 17 l. 1 (n. 2186): “Inter opera autem vitae altius est opus intelligentiae, quod est intelligere; et ideo operatio intellectus maxime est vita. Sicut autem idem est sensus actu et sensibile in actu, ita intelligens in actu et res intellecta in actu. Cum ergo intelligentia sit vita et intelligere sit vivere, sequitur quod intelligere rem aeternam sit vivere vita aeterna, Deus est autem res aeterna, intelligere ergo et videre Deum est vita aeterna. Et ideo Dominus dicit, quod in visione consistit vita aeterna, scilicet principaliter secundum totam suam substantiam. Amor autem est movens ad hanc, et quoddam eius complementum: nam ex delectatione quae est in fruitione divina, quam facit caritas, est complementum et decor beatitudinis: sed eius substantia in visione consistit; I Io. III, v. 2: *videbimus eum sicuti est*”.

consists in this basically and in its whole substance. But it is love which moves one to this vision and is in a certain way its fulfilment: for the completion and crown of beatitude is the delight experienced in the enjoyment of God, and this is caused by charity. Still, the substance of beatitude consists in vision, seeing: *we will see him as he is* (1 Jn. 3, 2).

The text deals with several issues that need to be analysed. First, it affirms that the substance of eternal life consists in seeing God. The verb "to see" refers, strictly speaking, to the act proper to the sense of sight. Only by analogy does it extend its meaning to intellectual knowledge. Another case of analogical use of the verb would be, for example, in expressions such as the following: "I see that you have understood". With this phrase, we do not mean to say that we see the other person's act of understanding with our physical eyes, but rather that we are stating a fact that we have somehow directly grasped with our intelligence. Intellectual vision therefore excludes discursive or indirect knowledge. Perhaps the verb that best expresses this kind of knowledge is "to intuit", because the vision of God in heaven is the highest degree of contemplation of God that we can attain. Indeed, if contemplation can be defined as the intuition of a truth, then beatific vision consists in the direct intuition of divine truth as it is in itself, without the mediation of any creature, but by direct contact with it. Vision, inasmuch as it is a kind of knowledge which implies the direct influence of the object perceived, is incompatible with faith as knowledge of an absent object.⁹

To continue the analysis of the Johannine commentary, we need to point out some premises that Aquinas establishes about the vision of God in heaven, based on his theory of knowledge. Aquinas affirms that we cannot see the divine essence with our bodily eyes, nor with any sense or sensory faculty, because none of them can go beyond what is their proper object. For example, the ear cannot smell. God, inasmuch as He is pure spirit, completely transcends the physical order, which can only be perceived by our senses.¹⁰ Neither can we know the divine essence through a created concept, because it is not possible to know the essence of something through a likeness that does not conform to the nature of what is known. For instance, Aquinas says that we cannot know the essence of a human being through the concept of horse. Even less can we know the essence of God, whose distance is infinitely greater. If this were so, it would follow that the happiness of the human person would be fulfilled in something created, not in God Himself.¹¹

On the other hand, Aquinas affirms in various places that human happiness consists in the intellectual knowledge of the nature of God. In the *Summa Theologiae*, for example, he expresses himself in terms similar to the biblical commentary: "The supreme happiness of man consists in the most sublime of his operations, which is the

⁹ See A. Royo Marín, *Teología de la salvación* (Editorial Católica: Madrid, 1956), 481.

¹⁰ See *In Io.*, c. 1 l. 11 (n. 213) and *STh I*, q. 12 a. 3.

¹¹ See *In I Cor.*, c. 13 l. 4 (n. 803).

intellectual, if the created understanding can never see the divine essence, or he will never attain happiness, or this is found in something that is not God. This is contrary to faith".¹² So, it is necessary to try to understand how the intellectual vision of the Triune God can take place in heaven.

We must keep in mind that when we refer to God, something happens in his knowledge that does not happen in other intelligent beings. In the case of God, when He knows himself, the knower, the known and the means of knowledge are one and the same thing, because God's being is identified with His operations. Therefore, the divine essence is not only intelligible in action but also understood by itself in action. In our case, on the other hand, it is necessary to elaborate the intelligible species *by* which we know (agent intellect) and *in* which we express our knowledge (possible intellect), in order to perceive the essences of things in a universal and abstract way. Although Aquinas says in the Johannine commentary that "the intellect in action is identified with the thing understood in action",¹³ it is important to remember that, strictly speaking, this happens in a perfect way only in God when He knows Himself.¹⁴

We cannot see the divine essence through a created *species*. Therefore, Aquinas explains, "if the essence of God is to be seen at all, it must be that the intellect sees it in the divine essence itself, so that in that vision the divine essence is both the object and the medium of vision (*quod videtur et quo videtur*)".¹⁵ This is possible because, as it was already explained, in God the act of knowing, the means by which He knows and what is known coincide so that in the beatific vision it is God Himself in His divine essence who unites with the human intellect, exercising the function of the *species intelligibilis*, thus showing Himself in an immediate and direct way to our intellect.¹⁶

The *Summa contra Gentiles* underlines the fact that the light of glory "unites the created intellect to God not in being, but only in understanding"¹⁷ because, as Royo Marín explains, God does not inform the created understanding in a subjective way. If this were so, the otherness between God and the human person would be lost. The divine essence informs our understanding only in an objective way.¹⁸ It means that in heaven we will really know the divine essence without mixing with it, and this

¹² *STh* I, q. 12 a. 1 co.: "Cum enim ultima hominis beatitudo in altissima eius operatione consistat, quae est operatio intellectus, si nunquam essentiam Dei videre potest intellectus creatus, vel nunquam beatitudinem obtinebit, vel in alio eius beatitudo consistet quam in Deo. Quod est alienum a fide".

¹³ *In Io.*, c. 17, l. 1 (n. 2186): "Sicut autem idem est sensus actu et sensibile in actu, ita intelligens in actu et res intellecta in actu".

¹⁴ In this sense is also *In I Cor.*, c. 13 l. 4 (n. 804).

¹⁵ *ScG* III, c. 51: "Unde oportet, si Dei essentia videatur, quod per ipsammet essentiam divinam intellectus ipsam videat: ut sit in tali visione divina essentia et quod videtur, et quo videtur".

¹⁶ About the *lumen gloriae*, see J.-P. Torrell, 'La vision de Dieu 'per essentiam' selon saint Thomas d'Aquin', in: *Recherches Thomasiennes* (Vrin: Paris, 2000), 178-181 and M. M. Waddell, 'Aquinas on the Light of Glory', in: *Tópicos* 40 (2011), 105-132.

¹⁷ *ScG* III, c. 54: "Non enim hoc lumen intellectum creatum Deo coniungit secundum esse, sed secundum intelligere solum".

¹⁸ See Royo Marín, *Teología de la salvación*, 494.

knowledge will be transforming, divinizing, as Aquinas explains in the Pauline commentary.¹⁹

For since all knowledge involves the knower's being assimilated to the thing known, it is necessary that those who see be in some way transformed into God. If they see perfectly, they are perfectly transformed, as the blessed in heaven by the union of enjoyment: *when he appears we shall be like him* (1 John 3:2); but if we see imperfectly, then we are transformed imperfectly, as here by faith: *now we see in a mirror dimly* (1 Cor. 13:12).

Aquinas describes human reason as a participation in the divine light, a participation intensified by the light of grace and the light of glory. The possibility of seeing God in heaven implies performing an act that exceeds the natural capacity for knowledge that the human person possesses. Therefore, if the human person does in fact see God in heaven, this new divinizing act in turn requires the corresponding capacity to be realized.²⁰ This is how we understand the statement that the light of glory strengthens the intellect beyond its natural capacity. The participated likeness with God that we receive through the light of glory is not a likeness of the image of the divine essence but of the same divine essence.²¹

2. The Role of Will and Charity in the Vision of God

It has been explained how, in the Thomistic doctrine, when we speak of the vision of God in heaven, we are thinking of an intuitive knowledge of the Triune God that is primarily related to the operation of the intellect. This apparent imbalance in Thomistic teaching is not really such for at least two reasons. The first has already been mentioned: the intentional presence of the Trinity allows us to maintain the ontological alterity that exists between God and the human person as two distinct subjects who are nevertheless united in a very intimate way. According to the Thomistic theory of knowledge, it is not the substance of the thing known that perfects the knower, but rather the *similitudo* of the thing known that exists in the knower.²² It is important to remember, however, that in the case of the vision of God in heaven, it is not the *species intelligibilis* of the thing present in the knower, but the divine essence itself that fulfils this function by making possible a direct knowledge of each of the

¹⁹ *In II Cor.*, c. 3 l. 3 (n. 114): "Cum enim omnis cognitio sit per assimilationem cognoscentis ad cognitum, oportet quod qui vident, aliquo modo transformentur in Deum. Et siquidem perfecte vident, perfecte transformantur, sicut beati in patria per fruitionis unionem, I Io. III, 2: *cum autem apparuerit*, et cetera. Si vero imperfecte, imperfecte, sicut hic per fidem, I Cor. XIII, 12: *videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate*".

²⁰ See *STh I*, q. 12 a. 5 co.

²¹ The *lumen gloriae* is the light under which, not in which we see God. See *STh I*, q. 12 a. 5 ad 1-2.

²² *De Ver.* q. 2 a. 3 ad 1: "intellectum non est perfectio intelligentis secundum illam rem quae cognoscitur, res enim illa est extra intelligentem, sed secundum rei similitudinem qua cognoscitur quia perfectio est in perfecto, lapis autem non est in anima sed similitudo lapidis".

Persons of the Trinity. It is precisely because this union takes place at the level of the intellect that the divine essence can perform this function, thus making possible an unprecedented closeness between the believer and God²³.

The second reason why Aquinas emphasizes the intellectual operation is that, just as the intellect is the faculty by which we conform ourselves to the nature of the thing known, the will, on the other hand, moves us toward the thing itself as a good that makes us happy and allows us to enjoy that good once it is obtained. This means that ultimate happiness is the object of the will, but not its actual act. This is because love is the fundamental act of the will, and as such, it implies desire (when the beloved object is absent) or joy (when the beloved object is present). If the act of love itself were the content of human happiness, we would be happy whether we had what we desire or not, when in fact, in the case of the vision of God, it is only through the intellect that we reach the content of the spiritual good we desire. The will, instead, goes to it and enjoys it once it is obtained.²⁴ This is how Aquinas explains it in the *Summa Theologiae*.²⁵

Two things are needed for happiness: one, which is the essence of happiness: the other, that is, as it were, its proper accident, i.e., the delight connected with it. I say, then, that as to the very essence of happiness, it is impossible for it to consist in an act of the will. For it is evident from what has been said that happiness is the attainment of the last end. But the attainment of the end does not consist in the very act of the will. For the will is directed to the end, both absent, when it desires it; and present, when it is delighted by resting therein. Now it is evident that the desire itself of the end is not the attainment of the end but is a movement towards the end: while delight comes to the will from the end being present; and not conversely, is a thing made present, by the fact that the will delights in it. Therefore, that the end be present to him who desires it, must be due to something else than an act of the will.

Aquinas illustrates his explanation with a very powerful example: if the covetous person could acquire the money he desires only by an act of the will, he would have it from the first moment he desired it. But this is not so. Only when the covetous

²³ See S. Sanz, *Breve manuale di protologia ed escatologia* (Fede & Cultura: Verona, 2021), 283-284.

²⁴ See M. S. Sherwin, *By knowledge & by love: charity and knowledge in the moral theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 108.

²⁵ *STh* I-II, q. 3 a. 4 co.: "Respondeo dicendum quod ad beatitudinem, sicut supra dictum est, duo requiruntur, unum quod est essentia beatitudinis; aliud quod est quasi per se accidens eius, scilicet delectatio ei adiuncta. Dico ergo quod, quantum ad id quod est essentialiter ipsa beatitudo, impossibile est quod consistat in actu voluntatis. Manifestum est enim ex praemissis quod beatitudo est consecutio finis ultimi. Consecutio autem finis non consistit in ipso actu voluntatis. Voluntas enim fertur in finem et absentem, cum ipsum desiderat; et praesentem, cum in ipso requiescens delectatur. Manifestum est autem quod ipsum desiderium finis non est consecutio finis, sed est motus ad finem. Delectatio autem advenit voluntati ex hoc quod finis est praesens, non autem e converso ex hoc aliquid fit praesens, quia voluntas delectatur in ipso. Oportet igitur aliquid aliud esse quam actum voluntatis, per quod fit ipse finis praesens volenti".

person has the money in his hand does he enjoy the good he has obtained. It is the same with the vision of God. Since it is a spiritual good, we attain it when it is made present to us by the act of the intellect, and it is then that the will rejoices and rests in the end attained. This means that the eternal life consists in knowing God, because in this way we possess the substance of the end that we desire with the will. At the same time, eternal happiness also requires the love and joy of God as the consummation of the happiness obtained. Therefore, one cannot speak of eternal life without these three acts: vision, love, and joy, because the divine essence is not only Truth but also Goodness.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas asks himself whether the will is a higher power than the intellect. In his answer, he follows Aristotle in affirming that the intellect is the highest power of the soul when considered in itself, because “the object of the intellect is more simple and more absolute than the object of the will; since the object of the intellect is the very idea of appetible good, and that of the will is the appetible good, the idea of which is in the intellect”.²⁶ On the other hand, if it is considered in a relative way, sometimes the will is more eminent than the intellect: “But relatively and by comparison with something else, we find that the will is sometimes higher than the intellect, from the fact that the object of the will occurs in something higher than that in which occurs the object of the intellect”.²⁷ In other words, when what is known surpasses the human person, it is better to love it than to know it; conversely, when what is known is beneath the human person, it is preferable to know it than to love it. This is why, although, as a faculty in itself, the intellect is superior to the will, if it is considered from the point of view of the relationship of the whole person with God, it can be said that love is more important than knowledge. According to Aquinas, “to love God is something greater than to know Him, especially in this state of life”.²⁸

Charity plays a fundamental role in our vision of God in heaven. In fact, as Aquinas explains, the greater or lesser participation in the light of glory will depend on the degree of charity a person attains on earth. The explanation is simple: where there is more charity, God is desired with greater strength and intensity, and desire makes the lover more apt to be united to the beloved the greater his or her desire is. God responds to human desire by loving more the one who loves Him more, thus giving him a greater capacity to deepen in Him in eternal life.²⁹ As Carlo Leget explains, “by the conformity of the human will with God's will - which charity

²⁶ *STh* I, q. 82 a. 3 co.: “Obiectum enim intellectus est simplicius et magis absolutum quam obiectum voluntatis, nam obiectum intellectus est ipsa ratio boni appetibilis; bonum autem appetibile, cuius ratio est in intellectu, est obiectum voluntatis”.

²⁷ *STh* I, q. 82 a. 3 co.: “Secundum quid autem, et per comparisonem ad alterum, voluntas invenitur interdum altior intellectu; ex eo scilicet quod obiectum voluntatis in altiori re invenitur quam obiectum intellectus”.

²⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 27 a. 4 ad 2: “dilectio Dei est maius aliquid quam eius cognitio, maxime secundum statum viae”.

²⁹ See *STh* I, q. 12 a. 6 co.

basically is (...) - the intellect is rendered fitting for receiving the object desired".³⁰ The relationship with each of the divine Persons that begins on earth with grace and charity under the light of faith reaches its fullness in the vision of God. In this dynamic, the will plays a fundamental role because it brings about the union of the human person with God himself, as Aquinas points out in his Commentary on John: "it is love which moves one to this vision and is in a certain way its fulfilment: for the completion and crown of beatitude is the delight experienced in the enjoyment of God, and this is caused by charity".³¹

Having analysed the role of the intellect and the will in the beatific vision, we will now discuss the corporeal dimension as fundamental for the eternal happiness of the human being in heaven.

3. The Corporeal Dimension of our Knowledge in Heaven

Thomistic doctrine teaches that the soul persists after death and experiences the vision of God in heaven immediately after separation from the body. It also stresses the importance of the resurrection of the body due to the incomplete state of the soul when separated. As it has been said, according to Hans Boersma, these two ideas seem to conflict, especially since Aquinas suggests that the body hinders the soul's vision of God on earth, a limitation that is overcome after death.

To respond to Boersma's objection, it is important to distinguish the context in which Aquinas is speaking when he refers to the body. In some cases, he refers to it in its ontological dimension, in others in its historical dimension. In the latter case, he affirms that after original sin the body is an obstacle to the contemplation of God, insofar as it has been weakened by sin, a weakness that will be definitively overcome in heaven.³² This is the meaning, for example, of the statement he makes in the Johannine Commentary: "as long as the human intellect is in the body it cannot see God, because it is weighed down by the body so that it cannot attain the summit of contemplation. So it is that the more a soul is free of passions and is purged from affections for earthly things, the higher it rises in the contemplation of truth and tastes how sweet the Lord is".³³

³⁰ C. Leget, *Living with God. Thomas Aquinas on the Relation Between Life on Earth and "Life" after Death* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 222.

³¹ *In Io.*, c. 17 l. 1 (n. 2186): "Amor autem est movens ad hanc, et quoddam eius complementum: nam ex delectatione quae est in fruitione divina, quam facit caritas".

³² In this regard, Alan P. Darley states: "Aquinas addresses this difficulty specifically in *De Veritate* q. 13. Article 3 and replies that the hindrance of bodily senses is only a problem in regard to their fallen, corruptible state and not in their future glorified state which is wholly under the control of the redeemed spirit", A. P. Darley, 'The Epistemological Hope: Aquinas Versus other Receptions of Pseudo-Dionysius on the Beatific Vision', in: *The Heythrop Journal* 59-4 (2018), 674.

³³ *In Io.*, c. 1 l. 11 (n. 213): "quia intellectus humanus quamdiu corpori est coniunctus, Deum videre non potest, quia aggravatur a corruptibili corpore, ne possit ad summum contemplationis pertingere. Et inde est quod anima quanto magis est a passionibus libera, et purgata ab affectibus terrenorum, tanto amplius in contemplationem veritatis ascendit, et gustat quam suavis est Dominus".

This does not mean that Adam and Eve, before original sin, enjoyed the vision of the essence of God. If that had been the case, they would not have sinned. The reason our first parents did not enjoy the vision of God was not that their bodies constituted an obstacle to it, but rather that glory is a gratuitous gift that God grants to creatures at a later moment. In this sense, even though angels are incorporeal, they did not enjoy the vision of the essence of God until after their free choice for Him. In the same article in which Aquinas denies that Adam and Eve enjoyed the vision of God, he explains that our first parents nevertheless knew God in a more perfect way than we do. From creation itself, they had a superior knowledge of Him because, in them, the lower faculties — which in our case tend to dissipate in the material world and distract from the consideration of the intelligible — were perfectly subordinated to the higher faculties.³⁴

The solution offered by Boersma to overcome the apparent difficulty he perceives in Aquinas in valuing corporeality does not seem to be adequate. According to him, the resurrection will enhance our happiness because we will perceive God with our physical eyes. Boersma's proposal does not take into consideration the intrinsic nature of the visual organ. Therefore, his solution does not seem to respect human corporeality, which would have to be completely transformed, losing its specific identity, in order to achieve an end that is not its own. Boersma's proposal stands in opposition to the Thomistic principle that grace and glory perfect nature, a principle that in the *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas affirms explicitly in reference to the glorified body: “the glory of the body does not destroy nature but perfects it”.³⁵

As Aquinas explains in the Pauline commentary, “God as God does not have a face, and therefore the expression *face to face* is metaphorical”.³⁶ This does not mean that for Aquinas the physical eyes of the glorified body in heaven are irrelevant. In the *Commentary on the Sentences*, he affirms that with them the saints will be able to contemplate Christ, the other saints and the new creation.³⁷ He also expresses himself in this sense in the *Commentary on Job*: “to indicate that the body will be a participant in that vision in its own proper way, he adds, *and my eyes will behold him*, not because the eyes of the body would see the divine essence, but because the eyes of the body will see God made man. They will also see the glory of God shining resplendent in created things”.³⁸

³⁴ See *STh I*, q. 94 a. 1 co.

³⁵ *In IV Sent.*, d. 44 q. 2 a. 4 ad 3: “Corporis gloria naturam non tollit, sed perficit”. See also *STh I*, q. 62 a. 7.

³⁶ *In I Cor.*, c. 13 l. 4 (n. 802): “Circa secundum vero sciendum est, quod Deus, secundum quod Deus, non habet faciem, et ideo hoc, quod dicit, *facie ad faciem*, metaphoricè dicitur”.

³⁷ See *In IV Sent.*, d. 48 q. 2 a. 1.

³⁸ *In Iob.*, c. 19 l. 2 (n. 295): “Et ut ostendat quod illius visionis etiam suo modo erit particeps corpus, subiungit *et oculi mei conspecturi sunt*, non quia oculi corporis divinam essentiam sunt visuri sed quia oculi corporis videbunt Deum hominem factum; videbunt etiam gloriam Dei in creatura refulgentem, secundum Augustinum in fine *de Civitate Dei*”.

In Thomistic thought, there is no opposition between the natural knowledge proper to an embodied mind and the vision of the divine essence; rather, nature is ordered to glory, and in this sense, the natural knowledge of the saints refers to the vision of the essence of the Triune God. It means that it is possible to know God simultaneously through the beatific vision and through natural knowledge, just as it is possible to arrive at the same conclusion in reasoning from two different but compatible arguments. Both modes of knowledge are important. Boersma seems to render the natural workings of the minds of the saints superfluous. As Simon Francis Gaine states, “whatever pertains to the beatific perfection of a nature presupposes the continuing reality of that nature for its very existence. Hence nature and thus the capacity for natural knowing must be at least *preserved* and possibly even *enhanced* by the perfection of the beatific vision, rather than suppressed”.³⁹

Although the soul separated from the body is capable of exercising its natural capacity for knowledge in a manner similar to the angels, through species infused into the intellect, it nevertheless carries out this operation in an imperfect and confused manner.⁴⁰ However, with the resurrection of the body, it will again be possible to know via the bodily senses, with the difference that they will now be the senses of a glorified body. That is, these will be senses perfected to know the new creation in which the saint will dwell and to discover in it a more perfect likeness to its Creator.⁴¹ Precisely because there is an order between natural knowledge and the beatific vision, since the former refers to the latter and is perfected by it, it is possible to affirm that they can be exercised simultaneously.⁴² This means that the saint, in seeing the essence of the Triune God, will contemplate creation without this being a distraction or obstacle to the divine presence. On the contrary, it will be a source of profound joy. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that only with the resurrection of the body will human knowledge reach its maximum potential.⁴³

³⁹ S. F. Gaine, *Did the Saviour see the Father? Christ, Salvation, and the Vision of God* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 147.

⁴⁰ *STh* I, q. 89 a. 1.

⁴¹ *Comp. Theol.* 1, 170.

⁴² Gaine, *Did the Saviour*, 147-149.

⁴³ As Guardini points out: “One of the modern dogmas is that the Middle Ages neglected the body. Not only is this idea wrong, but it also proves willful blindness. Anyone not biased by prejudice must perceive the richness of life that is manifested in the faces and figures of medieval art. It signifies that here a new feeling for the body has arisen which gives it a quality beyond that reached in the art of antiquity, and which testifies to a new freedom of the heart. Its origin is in the Christian experience, in the life lived in relation to God and in fellowship with Christ. The body took no damage from the association, as dull conformity maintains, but gained from it fresh energy, depth, and harmony, the effects of which are still noticeable even where the Christian conviction has long been abandoned”, R. Guardini, *Eternal Life: What You Need to Know about Death, Judgment, and Life Everlasting* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1998).

4. Conclusion

When Aquinas speaks of the vision of God in heaven as the ultimate goal, he is not thinking of a static vision that makes the believer happy because he or she can now "look" at the Trinity as if it were something to be understood. He is thinking of a much richer and deeper reality, which consists in the fact that God himself fills him or her with his own life, sharing his Trinitarian intimacy with the light of glory, which brings with it a love that is impossible to describe here on earth and that joyfully permeates all the dimensions of the human being united to Christ. The Thomistic doctrine of the beatific vision of God not only does not suffer from a certain Gnostic intellectualism, but on the contrary is even more conscious of the intrinsic value of all the human capacities than other proposals seem to be. The human person, as a corporeal-spiritual unity, will enjoy at the same time the Triune God in heaven, the other saints and the transfigured creation with the beatific vision and the natural knowledge proper to an embodied mind.

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