

## Aquinas and the Greek Fathers on the Vision of the Divine Essence

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Thomas Aquinas seemed well aware that the teaching of the Greek Fathers regarding the saints' vision of the divine essence runs, at least *prima facie*, contrary to his own position. In *ST* I, q. 12, Aquinas deals at length with the question of whether a created intellect can see the essence of God.<sup>1</sup> His interlocutors, quoted in the objections of the first article, are John Chrysostom and Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>2</sup> Chrysostom is cited first: when the Apostle John writes "No man hath seen God at any time," the Apostle establishes a categorical line of demarcation between the creature and the Creator. Neither prophets nor angels have seen God: "For how can a creature see what is increatable?"<sup>3</sup> Also in the first objection, Dionysius is seen to advance a similar position: "Neither is there sense, nor image, nor opinion, nor reason, nor knowledge of him."<sup>4</sup> The third objection points

1. I have used the Benziger Bros. edition of the *Summa Theologiae* (1947), translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. The Latin text is from *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia: Iussu impensaue, Leonis XIII. P.M. edita* (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1882).

2. Similarly, in *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8, the question of "Whether man's happiness consists in the vision of the divine essence" is posed. Dionysius is quoted in the first objection to the effect that man is united to God as to something altogether unknown (*ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8, obj. 1).

3. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, obj. 1: *qualiter videre poterit quod increabile est?* Cf. Chrysostom, Homily 14 in *Joan*.

4. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, obj. 1. Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, 1.

to Dionysius's teaching that God is not something existing (*existens*) but superexistence (*supra existentia*). As such, there is simply no correlation between the divine essence and the finite intellect: "God is not intelligible; but above all intellect."<sup>5</sup>

The *sed contra* is a terse and unambiguous appeal to Scripture: "We shall see him as he is" (*sicuti est*) (1 Jn 3:2). In the body of the article, Thomas distinguishes between that which is *in itself* knowable and how it might be known to the knower. Because act is knowable and God is *actus purus*, he is, in principle, supremely knowable. Nevertheless, he remains unknown *to us*. The plenitude of his knowability cannot be received by paltry finite intellects, just as the plenitude of the sun, which is in itself supremely visible, cannot be received by the bat by reason of the sun's excess of light.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas continues by responding to the opinion of "some" who, in fidelity to the explicit teaching of the Eastern Fathers, hold that "no created intellect can see the essence of God." Thomas disagrees with this thesis for two reasons. First, he holds that ultimate beatitude consists in the perfection of the intellect, which is nothing less than seeing God. (This is in an argument that will be developed to much greater lengths when discussing happiness in the *prima secundae*.) Second, human beings have a natural desire to know the causes of things, but this desire would remain void (*inane*) if the intellect could not reach the first cause.<sup>7</sup>

There is, undeniably, a profound difference between the Eastern Fathers and Aquinas on the question of the possibility of the vision of the divine essence. Thomas holds that, yes, the intellectual vision of God's essence is the reward of the blessed, whereas many Eastern Fathers maintain that it is impossible for any creature ever to see the divine essence. My contention is that, despite what seems, *prima facie*, diametrically opposed conclusions regarding the possibility of the vision of the divine essence,

5. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 1, obj. 3: "Ergo non est intelligibilis; sed est supra omnem intellectum."

6. Cf. *ST I*, q. 88, a. 3. Thomas Gilby comments, "God is wholly lucid in himself, yet not to us, creatures of the night, who blink at divine truth like owls in sunshine.... The objective truth in creatures is turbid compared with limpid divinity—if only we could see it." Thomas Gilby, "Introduction," in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 3, *Knowing and Naming God*, 1a. 12–13, ed. Herbert McCabe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xx–xxi.

7. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 1. Thomas is equally incisive in the *Summa contra Gentiles*: "It is impossible for a natural desire to be incapable of fulfillment" (*ScG I*, chap. 51.1). I have used Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles III*, vol. 3, pt. I, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).



Thomas and the Greek Fathers share a fundamental theological concern in their approach to the vision of God. Both are intent to safeguard the Creator/creature distinction. They do so in distinct ways.

Thomas follows the Eastern Fathers in maintaining that the vision of God does not admit of comprehensive knowledge. For Thomas, the blessed "attain" to the divine essence but do not "comprehend" God (in the manner that God knows himself). The Greek Fathers, by contrast, deny even that the blessed "attain" to the divine essence. For the Eastern Fathers such as Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom, the blessed participate in the "condescension" of the divine energies but never attain to the divine essence. Despite this important difference, Thomas insists with the Greek Fathers that the divine essence is per se inaccessible to any creature by his natural power. It is only by the wholly gratuitous character of the *lumen gloriae* that the intellectual creature can be elevated to a vision of the divine essence. As such, Thomas's teaching on the *lumen gloriae* serves the same theological purpose that the Eastern Fathers have in maintaining the blessed experience only the "condescension" of the divine energies, and not the divine essence, namely, to preserve the primordial distinction between Creator and creature.

### The Eastern Fathers and Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of the Divine Essence

At least on the face of it, Thomas's argument is starkly opposed to that of Dionysius and Chrysostom. These Eastern Fathers hold that no created intellect can see the essence of God, while Thomas holds that the fulfillment of the rational creature consists in nothing less than the vision of the divine essence. Of course, in the reply to the first objection in question 12, Thomas insists that he has no quarrel with either Chrysostom or Dionysius, for they are speaking of a particular type of knowledge, namely, *comprehension*.<sup>8</sup> Later in question 12, Thomas elaborates on the distinction between the vision of knowledge, which belongs to the beatitude of the saints, and the vision of comprehension, which God has of himself. Here, in his reply to the objections referencing Chrysostom and Dionysius, Thomas maintains that these Eastern Fathers preclude only the vision of comprehension.

8. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, rep. obj. 1: "Both of these authorities speak of the vision of comprehension."

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But the distinction between these two types of vision seems foreign to Chrysostom, who rules out any knowledge or vision of God *simpliciter*. In the third of a series of homilies titled *On the Incomprehensibility of God*, Chrysostom writes,

Let us call upon him then, as the ineffable God who is beyond our intelligence, invisible (τὸν ἀόρατον), incomprehensible (τὸν ἀκατάληπτον), who transcends the power of mortal words. Let us call on him as the God who is inscrutable to angels, unseen by the Seraphim, inconceivable to the Cherubim, invisible to the principalities, to the powers, and to the virtues, in fact, to all creatures without qualification, because he is known only to the Son and the Spirit (ὑπὸ δὲ Υἱοῦ καὶ Πνεύματος μόνου γνωριζόμενον).<sup>9</sup>

Commenting on the Apostle Paul's description of God dwelling in "unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see" (1 Tm 6:15–16), Chrysostom remarks that the Apostle does not say that God *is* an unapproachable light but *dwells* in unapproachable light: "So that you may learn that if the dwelling is unapproachable, much more so is the God who dwells in it."<sup>10</sup> Chrysostom explains that the word "unapproachable" entails an even greater remove than "incomprehensible":

A thing is said to be incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτον) when those who seek after it fail to comprehend it, even after they have searched and sought to understand it. A thing is unapproachable (ἀπρόσιτον) which, from the start, cannot be investigated nor can anyone come near to it. We call the sea incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτον) because, even when divers lower themselves into its waters and go down to a great depth, they cannot find the bottom. We call that thing unapproachable (ἀπρόσιτον) which, from the start cannot be searched out or investigated.<sup>11</sup>

Chrysostom clearly holds that God is not only incomprehensible, but also unapproachable. Thomas, by contrast, holds that the divine essence is

9. Chrysostom, Homily 3.5, trans. Paul Harkins, *Fathers of the Church* 72 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982): Καλῶμεν τοίνυν αὐτὸν τὸν ἀνέκφραστον, τὸν ἀπερινόητον Θεόν, τὸν ἀόρατον, τὸν ἀκατάληπτον, τὸν νικῶντα γλώττης δυνάμει ἀνθρωπίνης, τὸν ὑπερβαίνοντα θνητῆς διανοίας κατάληψιν, τὸν ἀνεξιχνίαστον ἀγγέλοις, τὸν ἀθέατον τοῖς Σεραφίμ, τὸν ἀκατανόητον τοῖς Χερουβίμ, τὸν ἀόρατον ἀρχαῖς, ἐξουσίαις, δυνάμεσι καὶ ἀπλῶς πάσῃ τῇ κτίσει, ὑπὸ δὲ Υἱοῦ καὶ Πνεύματος μόνου γνωριζόμενον. The Greek text is from the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, accessed October 23, 2018, <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>.

10. Chrysostom, Homily 3.11.

11. Chrysostom, Homily 3.12: Τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἀκατάληπτον λέγεται, ὅταν ἐρευνηθὲν καὶ ζητηθὲν μὴ καταληφθῇ παρὰ τῶν ζητούντων αὐτό· ἀπρόσιτον δὲ ἐστίν, ὃ μὴδὲ ἐρεύνης ἀνέχεται τὴν ἀρχήν, μὴδὲ ἐγγὺς αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι τις δύναται. Οἷον ἀκατάληπτον λέγεται πέλαιος, εἰς ὃ καθιέντες ἑαυτοὺς οἱ κολυμβηταὶ καὶ πρὸς πολὺ καταφερόμενοι βάθος, τὸ πέρας ἀδυνατοῦσιν εὐρεῖν· ἀπρόσιτον δὲ ἐκεῖνο λέγεται, ὃ μὴτε τὴν ἀρχὴν ζητηθῆναι δυνατόν, μὴδὲ ἐρευνηθῆναι.



known to the blessed even if not fully comprehended. Thomas maintains that we can even say God is comprehended by the blessed if by that we mean the blessed *attain* him. In q. 12, a. 7, Thomas explains that if comprehension entails perfect knowledge (knowing something insofar as it can be known), it is certainly impossible to comprehend God, even for the blessed. Yet if we do not take "comprehension" in the strict and proper sense of the term, but in the sense of "attaining" to an end (*atingere*), then we can affirm that the blessed comprehend God. The teleological character of the intellectual vision of God seems to necessitate, for Thomas, some sense of finality and arrival proper to comprehension: "For he who attains to anyone is said to comprehend him when he attains to him" ("Qui enim attingit aliquem, quando iam tenet ipsum, comprehendere eum dicitur").<sup>12</sup>

On the face of it, these two positions seem irreconcilable. Thomas maintains that if we take *comprehendere* in the sense of *atingere*, we can affirm that the blessed comprehend and certainly have knowledge of the divine essence, inasmuch as the intellects of the blessed know the divine essence and are fulfilled by that end. Chrysostom, by contrast, rejects not only comprehension but also approachability. Thomas's affirmation of *atingere* seems the diametrical contrary to Chrysostom's insistence that God is unapproachable (*ἀπρόσιτον*).

The challenge of the apparent opposition between Thomas and the Greek Fathers was not lost on the scholastic commentatorial tradition. To some, it seemed that Thomas's distinction between the vision of comprehension and the vision of knowledge introduced a nicety foreign to the Eastern Doctors. Gabriel Vasquez (1549–1604) thought of Thomas as defending the indefensible. Vasquez holds that Chrysostom (and many other Fathers) clearly (and wrongly) taught that the divine essence is not seen by the blessed. Further, Vasquez believed the attempt to save the Fathers with the distinction between the vision of comprehension and the vision of knowledge cannot be maintained on the plain reading of the patristic witness.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Vasquez's contemporary and fellow Jesuit Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) insisted that Thomas's distinction between

12. ST I, q. 12, a. 7, rep. obj. 1. As a proof text, Thomas quotes Song 3:4: "I held (*tenui*) him and will not let him go." Thomas's use of the Cantic to inform *atingere* suggests that he is not speaking here of a knowledge of scientific demonstration, but of a participatory unitive knowledge conceived in love. "I held (*tenui*) him and will not let him go" bespeaks the consummation of love arriving at or resting in the beloved in such a way that one's desire is fulfilled.

13. Gabriel Vasquez, *Disputatio XXXVII*. Cf. Michael J. Lapierre, *The Noetical Theory of Gabriel Vasquez, Jesuit Philosopher and Theologian (1549–1604): His View of the Objective Concept* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1999).

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comprehension and knowledge should be maintained, lest a great number of the Fathers be understood to have taught wrongly on this fundamental question.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth exploring the context within which the Eastern Fathers after the Eunomian controversy insist that the divine essence is not seen by any creature. Several Eastern Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries are responding to the rationalism of Eunomius (355–93), who hailed from the region of Cappadocia and was briefly bishop of Cyzicus. Eunomius and his disciples identified with the radical wing of the Arian party. They insisted on a distinction of substance between the Father and the Son. The Father, they argued, is ingenerate, the one named “He who is” (Ex 3:14), and is the “sole true God” (Jn 17:3). The Son, by contrast, is the product of the will of the incorporeal Father. The Eunomians maintained that the generation or creation (which to them were identical terms) of the Son indicates a second, inferior divine substance.<sup>15</sup> With their customary, logical rigor, they would take their Nicene opponents through a process of dialectical interrogation. Are Father and Son distinct? If two are named, how are they distinguished? Is not one generate and the other ingenerate? If the essence of the Father is that he is “unbegotten,” is not the contrary essence of the Son to be “begotten”?<sup>16</sup>

The response of the Cappadocian Fathers was first to castigate the overweening hubris of Eunomian rationalism; they challenged the Eunomian assumption that dialectics could disclose the mystery of the eternal generation of the Son. Second, the Cappadocians insisted that the divine essence is utterly incomprehensible. Human knowledge cannot even fully account for the substance of an ant; how could the Eunomians possibly claim to scale the heights of knowledge so as to understand the immortal, invisible, and eternal substance?<sup>17</sup> Gregory of Nyssa contends,

This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, “No one has ever seen

14. Francisco Suárez, *De Deo*, 1.2, chap. 7, no. 15–19 (Mainz, 1607). Cf. Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Bedfordshire: Faith Press, 1973), 12–20.

15. Eunomius, *Apology* 12, in Richard Paul Vaggione, ed., *Eunomius: The Extant Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 49. Cf. Richard Paul Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

16. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 1.19.

17. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 10.1.



God" [Jn. 1:18], thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable (πάσῃ νοητῇ φύσει τῆς θείας οὐσίας τὴν γνώσιν ἀνέφικτον).<sup>18</sup>

Gregory's elder brother and fellow bishop, St. Basil, explains that we come to know God's greatness, power, goodness, providence, and justice, "but not His very essence (οὐκ αὐτὴν τὴν οὐσίαν) ... his operations (ἐνέργειαι) come down to us, but His essence (οὐσία) remains beyond our reach."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, John Chrysostom insists that we only know God's "condescension" (συγκατάβασις) and that the divine essence is incomprehensible to human nature.<sup>20</sup> Speaking of the vision of the angels in the divine presence, Chrysostom maintains,

Yet they did not see the pure light itself nor the pure essence (οὐσίαν) itself. What they saw was a condescension (συγκατάβασις) accommodated to their nature. What is this condescension? God condescends whenever he is not seen as he is, but in the way one incapable of beholding him is able to look upon him.<sup>21</sup>

John of Damascus and Pseudo-Dionysius carefully follow the Cappadocian Fathers, insisting that the divine essence per se is incomprehensible. God's essence is never seen, but intellectual creatures ought to purify themselves so as to receive the divine condescensions in this life and, to a greater degree, in the next. The distinction between the divine "condescension" (συγκατάβασις) and the divine essence (οὐσία) would be developed by later Eastern theologians into the distinction between the divine energies and the divine essence—a theology codified in Gregory Palamas.

The textbook version of this history depicts the Eastern and Western traditions as incompatible. Vladimir Lossky's description is illustrative of this narrative:

We find ourselves confronted by two formulae neatly opposed, the first of which resolutely denies all possibility of knowing the essence of God, while the second explicitly insists on the fact that it is the actual essence of God which must be the object of beatific vision.<sup>22</sup>

18. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 2.163, in Abraham Malherbe, trans., *Classics of Western Spirituality: St. Gregory of Nyssa. The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 95.

19. Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 234, in Philip Schaff and Wace Henry, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: A Select Library of the Christian Church. Second Series*, vol. 8, *Basil: Letters and Select Works* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 274.

20. Cf. Chrysostom, Homily 3.13.

21. Chrysostom, Homily 3.15: Καίτοι γε οὐκ ὑπὸ ἀκρατον ἑώρων τὸ φῶς, οὐδ' αὐτὴν ἀκραιφνή τὴν οὐσίαν, ἀλλὰ συγκατάβασις ἦν τὰ ὁρώμενα. Τί δέ ἐστι συγκατάβασις; Ὅταν μὴ ὡς ἐστὶν ὁ Θεὸς φαίνεται, ἀλλ' ὡς ὁ δυνάμενος αὐτὸν θεωρεῖν οἷός τε ἐστίν.

22. Lossky, *Vision of God*, 10–11.

In this rendering, the Eastern tradition—following the Cappadocians, John Chrysostom, John of Damascus, and eventually Gregory Palamas—maintains that the divine essence cannot be seen by the blessed. In contrast, the Western tradition, building on Augustine and stated with precision by Thomas, insists that a vision of the divine essence is the reward of the blessed. In Constantinople, a series of councils (1341, 1351, and 1368) taught that the divine essence is inaccessible and known neither to saints nor to angels. In contrast, so it is argued, a different position held sway in the Roman See: the controversy surrounding Pope John XXII's opinion that the beatific vision would occur only after the general resurrection resulted in a condemnation by John's successor, Benedict XII. In the Papal Bull, *Benedictus Deus* (1336), Benedict XII definitively decreed that the saints

have seen and see the divine essence with an intuitive vision and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature by way of object of vision; rather the divine essence immediately manifests itself to them, plainly, clearly and openly, and in this vision they enjoy the divine essence.<sup>23</sup>

According to this narrative, then, theological developments leading to the High Middle Ages result in two irreconcilable positions, each pitted against one another.

### Aquinas on the Vision of the Divine Essence

Perhaps, however, these formulae are not as irreconcilable as it seems at first glance. A second look at the teaching of St. Thomas on the vision of the divine essence is instructive. In answer to the question of "Whether any created intellect by its natural powers can see the Divine essence,"<sup>24</sup> Aquinas is explicit that no creature can in any way see the divine essence by its own natural powers.<sup>25</sup> In the body of the article, Thomas contends

23. "Vident et videbunt divinam essentiam visione intuitiva et etiam facili, nulla mediant creatura in ratione obiecti visi se habente, sed divina essentia immediate se nude clare et aperte eis ostendente; quodque sic videntes eadem divina essentia perfruuntur." See Benedictus XII, "Benedictus Deus," January 29, 1336, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedictus-xii/la/documents/constitutio-benedictus-deus-29-ian-1336.html>.

24. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4.

25. Thomas is categorical: "It is impossible for any created intellect to see the essence of God by its own natural power." *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4. Cf. *De Ver.*, q. 8, a. 3, co: "Nature does not transcend its limits. Now, the divine essence surpasses any created nature. Consequently, the divine essence cannot be seen by any natural cognition." Robert W. Mulligan, trans., *De Veritate* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952).



that neither sense knowledge, nor intellectual abstraction, nor even angelic knowledge can ascend to a knowledge of the divine substance. To know *esse subsistens* is natural to the divine intellect alone. In this respect, at least, Thomas's position tracks that of the Eastern Fathers: the divine essence per se is, according to Thomas as well, incomprehensible and inaccessible to the natural created intellect.

Nevertheless, as Thomas sees it, the clear teaching of Scripture is that beatitude consists in the direct, face-to-face vision of God, *sicuti est* (1 Jn 3:2). Further, Thomas holds (1) that the perfection of the intellect consists in seeing God and (2) that natural desire to know the causes of things only finds its end in God:

For as the ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of his intellect; if we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either never attain to beatitude or its beatitude would consist in something else beside God, which is opposed to faith.... Further the same opinion is also against reason. For there resides in every man natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees.... Hence it must be absolutely granted that the blessed see the essence of God.<sup>26</sup>

The nature of the vision of the divine essence is not just an interesting theological appurtenance for Thomas. His entire anthropology and theory of human action hinge on this question. Only if human happiness is a possibility does Thomas's extensive treatment of moral theology—the extrication of vice and the growth in virtue through the assistance of law and grace—make any sense. And yet human happiness cannot rest in any created good; human felicity is realized only in the intellectual vision of God.

In question 12, Thomas leads the reader into what seems an irresolvable paradox: the happiness of the intellectual creature lies in the direct vision of the divine essence, but such a vision is beyond the capacity of the intellectual creature. Thomas writes, "Therefore the created intellect cannot see the essence of God, unless God by his grace unites Himself to the created intellect, as an object made intelligible to it."<sup>27</sup> Here, Thomas introduces the *lumen gloriae* as the mode by which God elevates the created intellect, uniting it to himself. The light of glory enables a participation by

26. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 1. Elsewhere Thomas maintains, "For perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause" (*ST I-II*, q. 3, a. 8).

27. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4: "Non igitur potest intellectus creatus Deum per essentiam videre, nisi in quantum Deus per suam gratiam se intellectui creato coniungit, ut intelligibile ab ipso."

grace in God's own light, since it elevates and strengthens the intellect to a direct and immediate vision of the divine essence. In Thomas's language, the *lumen gloriae* is "perfectio quaedam intellectus confortans ipsum ad videndum Deum."<sup>28</sup> The doctrine of the *lumen gloriae* both resolves the paradox raised in question 12 regarding the seeming impossibility of human fulfillment and answers the principal objection of the Greek Fathers that no finite creature can see the infinite Creator. Thomas can affirm with the Eastern Doctors that it is impossible for a creature by nature to see the divine essence while also affirming that the *lumen gloriae* so elevates the rational creature that the fulfillment of human nature is possible. Admittedly, a fundamental difference remains in that the Greek Fathers reject the possibility that grace can so elevate the intellectual creature to render him capable of a vision of the divine essence.

### Aquinas and the *Lumen Gloriae*

The boundless abyss between the divine essence and the created intellect, so starkly articulated by the Eastern Fathers, is affirmed in Thomas's teaching. And yet, for Thomas, the grace of the *lumen gloriae* allows the creature to participate in the vision of the divine essence in a manner that neither divinizes the creature in such a way as to render it coterminous with God nor reduces the divine essence to a species comprehended by created intellect.

Thomas describes the *lumen gloriae* as a "similitude of God on the part of the visual faculty" that strengthens the intellect to see God.<sup>29</sup> Whereas corporeal sight involves a likeness of the thing seen made present to the seer, the vision of glory does not involve any likeness. God is not an external object whose similitude is impressed on the mind. No created form can be the similitude that represents the divine essence. Rather, the beatific vision entails that the one seeing is immediately and intimately united to the divine essence in and by the *lumen gloriae*. In fact, the divine

28. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 5, ad 2.

29. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 2. The light of glory by which the blessed see the divine essence is an "abiding form" (*forma immanens*) or habit (*ST II-II*, q. 175, a. 3, rep. obj. 2). This is distinct from the temporal vision of either the Apostle Paul, who was caught up to the third heaven, or Moses, who saw God face-to-face. Thomas explains that they were "beatified not as to the habit, but only to the act of the blessed" (*ST II-II*, q. 175, a. 3, rep. obj. 3). In contrast to the blessed, Paul and Moses experienced the light of glory as a "transitory passion" (*passio transeuns*) (*ST II-II*, q. 175, a. 3, rep. obj. 2).



essence becomes the intelligible form of the created intellect.<sup>30</sup> The mode of this vision enabled by the *lumen gloriae* is unlike all other finite vision: "If the divine essence is seen, it must be done as [God's] intellect sees the divine essence itself through itself, and in such a vision the divine essence must be both what is seen and that whereby it is seen."<sup>31</sup> Thus God is not only the object of beatific vision but also the medium of the vision, so that the blessed do not see God *in* or *through* a likeness, but immediately and directly. The creature is not thereby absorbed into God; rather, the *lumen gloriae* raises the creature to a greater likeness of God. Thomas Gilby clearly summarizes Thomas teaching on the *lumen gloriae*:

No representation can match the very being of God. Hence all signs are past and done with if we know him face to face even as we are known; then no likeness objectively mirrors him and divinity itself supplies the epistemological role of a *species*: of the *species impressa*, for God's essence clasps the mind closely, *copuletur ei*, and is there the intelligible form, *ipsa essentia divina fit forma intelligibilis intellectus*; and of the *species expressa*, for the mind does not conceive a word of its own, for the divine essence is so united to the mind as to be what is actually seen, through its very self making the mind actually seeing, *ut intellectus in actu per seipsam faciens intellectum in actu*. And so we know, not the last ebb of things in the evening light of our own mental words, but their full tide in the dawn light of the Word of God.<sup>32</sup>

For Thomas, the essential characteristic of the *lumen gloriae* is a disposition given to the intellectual creature enabling him by grace to participate in God's own knowledge of himself. This knowledge is direct, immediate, and intimate in a manner fundamentally distinct from all finite ways of knowing.

### Aquinas's Epistemology: A Disposition to Divine Glory

Thomas's understanding of the beatific vision is a species of his broader theory of cognition. As such, it is fruitful to briefly sketch Thomas's epistemology. Thomas often repeats that knowledge consists of the thing known present in the knower according to the mode of the knower.<sup>33</sup> A

30. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 2. Cf. *De Ver.*, q. 8, a. 3, co.

31. *ScG III*, q. 51, a. 2: "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."

32. Gilby, "Introduction," xxvi-xxvii.

33. Cf. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4.

known reality becomes *present* to the knower in three different ways, however:

A thing is known in three ways: first, by the presence of its essence in the knower (*per praesentiam suae essentiae in cognoscente*), as light can be seen in the eye; and so we have said that an angel knows himself—secondly, by the presence of its similitude (*per praesentiam suae similitudinis*) in the power which knows it, as a stone is seen by the eye from its image being in the eye—thirdly, when the image of the object known is not drawn directly from the object itself, but from something else (*a re alia*) in which it is made to appear, as when we behold a man in a mirror.<sup>34</sup>

The first way of knowing—the immediate presence of the essence of the thing known in the knower—is the knowledge proper to beatitude. Thomas goes on to explain that in this life creatures cannot know God in this way.<sup>35</sup> Rather, it is the third way of knowing—a vision of the reflection of the known thing and not the essence of the object itself—by which we come to know God *in via*. Thomas references Romans 1:20 to explain the reflected vision one has of the divine vestiges in this life. Between these two extremities of immediate knowledge of an essence and knowledge of the reflection of an essence, Thomas posits a second knowledge in-between these two. This is the type of knowledge that angels have of God. This knowledge is like the knowledge of abstraction in which the mind adverts to the immaterial form to come to a knowledge of the reality perceived before it: “For since God’s image is impressed on the very

34. *ST I*, q. 56, a. 3. Thomas presents the same epistemological delineation in *De Ver.*, q. 8, a. 3, co., and in *De Ver.*, q. 8, a. 3, ad 17, where he writes, “A thing is seen in three different ways. First, it is seen through its essence (*per essentiam*), in the way in which a visible essence itself is joined to sight when the eye sees light. Second, it is seen through a species (*per speciem*), as takes place when the likeness of a thing is impressed on my sense of sight when I see a stone. Third, it is seen ‘through a mirror’ (*per speculum*); and this takes place when the thing’s likeness, through which it is known, is not caused in the sight by the thing itself directly but by that in which the likeness of the thing is represented, just as sensible species are caused in a mirror.” These three gradations of sight correspond respectively to the mode of knowing proper to God, angel, and man.

35. Any knowledge obtained *in via* is, according to Thomas, obtained by way of an impress on the intellect of the likeness of that which is known: “The known is a perfection of the knower, not by its substance (*secundum illam rem quae cognoscitur*) (for the thing is outside the knower), but rather by the likeness by which it is known; for a perfection exists in the perfected—and the likeness of the stone, not the stone, exists in the soul” (*De Ver.*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1). Cf. *ScG I*, chap. 54; *ScG I*, chap. 57; *ScG IV*, chap. 11; *ST I*, q. 12, a. 7, ad 3; *ST I*, q. 14, a. 1, ad 3; *ST I*, q. 14, a. 12, co.; *ST I*, q. 84, a. 2, co.; *De Ver.*, q. 2, a. 5, ad 15; and *Sentencia libri De anima*, Book 1, lect. 4, para. 43.



nature of the angel in his essence, the angel knows God in as much as he is the image of God.<sup>36</sup>

The intellectual vision of the divine essence proper to beatitude conforms to the first type of knowledge, by which the divine essence is itself present in the knower. Of course, this knowledge far exceeds the nature of creaturely knowing. For any nature to be raised above its natural capabilities, it needs to be disposed thereto by that which is above its nature.<sup>37</sup> Thomas gives the example of air, which, if it is to receive the higher form of fire, must be prepared by some disposition of fire to receive such a form.<sup>38</sup> He continues,

But when any created intellect sees the essence of God, the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect. Hence it is necessary that some supernatural disposition should be added (*dispositio supernaturalis ei superaddatur*) to the intellect in order that it may be raised up to such a great and sublime height. Now since the natural power of the created intellect does not avail to enable it to see the essence of God, as was shown in the preceding article, it is necessary that the power of understanding should be added by divine grace. Now this increase of the intellectual powers is called the illumination of the intellect, as we also call the intelligible object itself by the name of light of illumination. And this is the light spoken of in the Apocalypse (Rv 21:23): "The glory of God hath enlightened it"—viz. the society of the blessed who see God. By this light the blessed are made "deiform"—i.e. like to God, according to the saying: "When He shall appear we shall be like to Him, and [Vulg.: 'because'] we shall see Him as He is" (1 Jn 2:2).<sup>39</sup>

The intellectual creature cannot, by his own power, be raised to the vision of the divine essence.<sup>40</sup> The real distinction between Creator and creature

36. *ST I*, q. 56, a. 3.

37. *ScG III*, chap. 52, 2: "A lower nature cannot acquire that which is proper to a higher nature except through the action of the higher nature to which the property belongs."

38. In the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Thomas evinces similar examples: water cannot be hot except through the action of fire (*III*, chap. 52, 2), and water does not tend upward unless moved by something else (*III*, chap. 52, 6). The latent potency in water awaits the dispositive form of fire to move the water toward heat. This movement or potency cannot be realized apart from the active agency of the higher nature—in this case fire, which communicates its own substance. Thomas holds, "The form proper to any being does not come to be in another being unless the first being is the agent of this event, for an agent makes something like itself by communicating its form to another thing" (*ScG III*, chap. 52, 3).

39. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 5.

40. In *De Ver.*, q. 8, a. 3, ad 12, Thomas distinguishes between irrational creatures, which by their own nature achieve their own natural end, from rational creatures whose end is beatitude but who can attain this end only by assistance. To attain beatitude through one's own power is exclusive to God.

entails a radical vision of the divine and angelic intellect be raised to the vision of the nonrational creature describes the disposition "potency suitable to the divine essence to an intellectual ends individual, but intellect marked by the power of the mind can know a

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42. *ST I*, q. 12, a.

43. *ST I*, q. 12, a.

44. Cf. *ST II-II* cognitive power of intelligible objects except intelligible species; coordinates sensible from phantasms, the

entails a radical incommensurability on the part of the creature with a vision of the divine essence. Nevertheless, Thomas suggests that human and angelic intellects have a certain disposition, propensity, or aptness *to be raised* to the vision of God in a manner that neither physical vision nor nonrational creatures could possibly be disposed. In *De Veritate*, Thomas describes the disposition of the intellect as a capacity for perfection and a "potency suitable" (*propria potentia*) to receiving the intelligible form of the divine essence.<sup>41</sup> Corporeal sight, a rock, or a dog is in no way ordered to an intellectual vision of the divine essence. Corporeal sight only apprehends individual matter, and so sensory knowledge only obtains to singulars,<sup>42</sup> but intellectual vision is not constrained in this way. The intellect is marked by the power for abstraction. What the eyes see as a singular the mind can know as the expression of a universal:

The sense of sight, as being altogether material, cannot be raised up to immateriality. But our intellect, or the angelic intellect inasmuch as it is elevated above matter in its own nature, can be raised up above its own nature to a higher level by grace.<sup>43</sup>

For Thomas, it is this capacity for intellectual abstraction that entails a potency open to being strengthened and elevated by the disposition of supernatural grace (i.e., the *lumen gloriae*) to know the divine essence.<sup>44</sup>

#### Nature and Grace in Relation to the *Lumen Gloriae*

Thomas's conception of the intellectual vision of the divine essence is contingent upon his broader framing of nature and grace. The elevation

41. *De Ver.*, q. 8, a. 3, co: "In order that God be seen through His essence, the divine essence must be united with the intellect in some way as an intelligible form. However, what is to be perfected can be united with a form only after a disposition is present which makes the subject to be perfected capable of receiving such a form, because a definite act takes place only in a potency suitable for it. For example, a body is united with a soul as with its form only after it has been organized and disposed. Similarly, there must be some disposition produced in the intellect by which it is made perfectible by this form, the divine essence. This disposition is brought about by an intellectual light."

42. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4, rep. obj. 3.

43. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4, rep. obj. 3.

44. Cf. *ST II-II*, q. 175, a. 4: "The Divine essence cannot be seen by man through any cognitive power other than the intellect. Now the human intellect does not turn to intelligible objects except by means of the phantasms which it takes from the senses through the intelligible species; and it is in considering these phantasms that the intellect judges of and coordinates sensible objects. Hence in any operation that requires abstraction of the intellect from phantasms, there must be also withdrawal of the intellect from the senses."



by grace of the created intellect is not impossible per se; rather, its created nature exists in such a way that by the assistance of grace it can be so elevated.<sup>45</sup> In fact, Thomas insists categorically, *homo est capax visionis divinae essentiae*.<sup>46</sup> Thomas's teaching on the beatific vision underscores the continuity of nature and grace:

The divine substance is not beyond the capacity of the created intellect in such a way that it is altogether foreign to it (*omnino extraneum*), as sound is from the object of vision, or as immaterial substance is from sense power; in fact, the divine substance is the first intelligible object and the principle of all intellectual cognition. But it is beyond the capacity of the created intellect, in the sense that it exceeds its power.<sup>47</sup>

The examples used in the passage are revelatory of how Thomas understands the elevation of intellectual vision within his broader teaching on grace—most tersely expressed as *gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*.<sup>48</sup> Unlike sound, which has no correlation to vision, the elevation of the intellect by the *lumen gloriae* to a sight of the divine essence is continuous with its nature. With a slight variation on his succinct maxim that grace perfects nature, Thomas writes of beatitude, "Glory perfects nature, it does not destroy it."<sup>49</sup>

The commensurate relation between nature and grace in Thomas's account of beatitude safeguards the genuinely human character of the saints' vision of God. Thomas emphasizes that the created intellect does not cease to be human should it be elevated by grace to a vision of the divine essence.<sup>50</sup> That this is a concern to him is evident from the objections

45. Cf. *ScG* III, chap. 52, 7: "Man's happiness, which is called life everlasting, consists in this divine vision, and we are said to attain it by God's grace alone, because such a vision exceeds all the capacity of a creature and it is not possible to reach it without divine assistance."

46. *ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 1, co.

47. *ScG* III, chap. 54, 8: "Divina enim substantia non sic est extra facultatem creati intellectus quasi aliquid omnino extraneum ab ipso, sicut est sonus a visu, vel substantia immaterialis a sensu, nam divina substantia est primum intelligibile, et totius intellectualis cognitionis principium: sed est extra facultatem intellectus creati sicut excedens virtutem eius."

48. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

49. *In IV Sent.*, d. 49, q. 2, a. 3, ad 8: *gloria perficit naturam, et non destruit*. See also *De Ver.*, q. 8, a. 5, ad 3, and *De Ver.*, q. 9, a. 3, ad 2.

50. Gilby, "Introduction," xxiii, expresses the commensurate relation between nature and grace in Thomas's teaching on the vision of God:

There is no abrupt chasm between nature and grace, and when [Thomas] sees in natural desire a stretching out to God himself he is not indulging a wish-fulfillment fantasy, which is quite out of keeping with his cast of mind. All he is saying is that the vision is possible, not that it is likely, and that the yearning itself is a prophecy of what can be, not a promise of what

with which he engages in question 12, article 4, concerning whether a rational creature's natural powers are sufficient to see the divine essence. The third objection contends that just as corporeal sense cannot be elevated to grasp an incorporeal substance, so too the created intellect cannot be elevated to see the divine essence.<sup>51</sup> In short, the objection proposes that the created intellect is fundamentally unsuited for the vision of God. In his response, Thomas disputes the parallelism. While it is true that corporeal sense cannot be elevated to grasp an incorporeal substance without ceasing to be corporeal sense, the relation between the intellect and the divine essence is not construed in this manner:

The sense of sight, as being altogether material, cannot be raised up to immateriality. But our intellect, or the angelic intellect, inasmuch as it is elevated above matter in its own nature, can be raised up above its own nature to a higher level by grace. The proof is, that sight cannot in any way know abstractedly what it knows concretely; for in no way can it perceive a nature except as this one particular nature; whereas our intellect is able to consider abstractedly what it knows concretely. Since therefore the created intellect is naturally capable of apprehending the concrete form, and the concrete being abstractedly, by way of a kind of resolution of parts; it can by grace be raised up to know separate subsisting substance, and separate subsisting existence.<sup>52</sup>

The intellect's ability to *abstract* to a universal from the particular presented to it by the senses suggests that the nature of the created intellect has a propensity, directionality, or aptness for elevation to a vision of the divine essence. Although it belongs only to God to know the divine essence by nature, the created intellect is capable of being raised by grace to participate in the knowledge God has of his own essence.<sup>53</sup> In Thomas's account,

will be. For it is not daydreaming or a sophisticated projection, but an inborn and inescapable craving, and this, he holds, cannot be pointless, *inane*, not because his was an optimistic temperament, apt to translate fiction into fact, but because quite dispassionately he reckoned that potentiality and 'intentions' could not be accounted for without corresponding actualities and ends. Nothing would stir in time were there no complete possession of life in eternity

In the same vein, Michael Waddell notes, "Thomas does not say that knowledge of what exceeds our mode of being is altogether beyond us; he only says that knowledge of what exceeds the mode of the knower's being is *above the nature* of the knower.... To be sure, this participation rises above the level of what is natural to humans, but this does not mean that it rises above what is 'human' altogether." "Aquinas on the Light of Glory," *Tópicos* 40 (2011): 118–19.

51. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4, obj. 3.

52. *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4, ad 3.

53. In this respect, Thomas's language regarding the character of the *lumen gloriae* is



however, the accent falls on the fact that this capacity is wholly contingent upon divine grace to be realized.<sup>54</sup> Nor does the intellectual creature cease to be human by such participation. Michael Waddell expresses this principle: "The light of glory perfects the power that is seminally present in the created intellect's natural capacity to look upon abstracted forms and separated being, and enables the created intellect to participate in an act that is essential to the divine intellect."<sup>55</sup> As such, Thomas's teaching on the *lumen gloriae* posits a profound degree of continuity between natural acts of knowing (by way of abstraction) and glorified knowledge that correlates to his broader teaching on the continuity of nature and grace.<sup>56</sup>

We see in this treatment both an affirmation of the continuity of grace fitted to created nature and the newness and change of this elevation. On the one hand, it is because the human person already participates in the divine likeness that he is capable of receiving "a more sublime form."<sup>57</sup> Thomas gives the following example: "Light can only become the act of a body if the body participates somewhat in the diaphanous."<sup>58</sup> Just as only a diaphanous object is capable of illumination (without destroying its nature), so too only a creature in the divine likeness is capable of beatification. In this case, elevation by grace is fitting and perfective of its nature. Thomas writes,

It is impossible for this [divine] essence to become the intelligible form of a created intellect unless by virtue of the fact that the created intellect participates in the divine likeness. Therefore, this participation in the divine likeness is necessary so that the substance of God may be seen.<sup>59</sup>

instructive. He uses verbs like "increase," "added," "raised," "elevated," "strengthened," "super added," and "perfecting." All suggest an essential congruity between the nature of the intellectual creature and the grace of beatific vision.

54. Steven A. Long articulates the nuance of Thomas's position on this score: "The powers of intellect and will thus constitute a natural translucence to God within the creature, without yet constituting the least trace of actual motion toward beatific vision as such on the part of the creature. For the least such motion will require a supernatural principle to operate within the human person so as to begin to uplift the human faculties from their natural objects and assume them within the divine itinerary of salvation, ordering them to the inner being of God." "Obediential Potency, Human Knowledge, and the Natural Desire for God," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1997): 50.

55. Waddell, "Aquinas on the Light of Glory," 123.

56. Cf. Waddell, "Aquinas on the Light of Glory," 120: "It is as though Thomas finds the seeds of glorified knowing lying dormant in natural acts of knowing."

57. *ScG* III, chap. 53, 3.

58. *ScG* III, chap. 53, 2.

59. *ScG* III, chap. 53, 2.

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The participation of the blessed in the vision of God is predicated on their created *nature* in the divine likeness that is capable of such elevation.<sup>60</sup>

At the same time, Thomas is clear that the elevation by the *lumen gloriae* is not simply an *intensification* of the created intellect's nature; rather, a *new* form is bestowed. By way of explanation, Thomas notes that a power may be elevated in two ways. First, this may happen simply through the intensification of that power. Thus hot water can be made even hotter, and, despite the intensification of heat, it remains the same species. But a power may also be elevated by the imposition of a new form. Thus the power of a diaphanous object (such as a stained-glass window) is elevated by the reception of a new form of light. Upon the reception of light, the diaphanous object actually *becomes* light in a way that it was not before. Of course, there must be a certain capacity (proper to diaphanous objects) to receive this new form. Similarly, the intellectual creature has by nature a certain capacity or potency to receive the new form of the *lumen gloriae*.<sup>61</sup> The nuance of this exposition avoids positing the new form of the *lumen gloriae* as either totally foreign to the created nature or as a simple intensification of its innate natural powers. Thomas's teaching on the grace of the *lumen gloriae* avoids both extrinsicism and naturalism. When the divine essence becomes the intelligible species of the created intellect, this involves a genuine change (*mutatio*) for that intellect, but it remains that created intellect.<sup>62</sup>

The Thomistic theory of obediential potency provides a conceptual framing that affirms both the authentically human character of the vision of the divine essence and the fact that such a vision obtains only through the elevation of grace. Obediential potency thus refers to the potency proper to a creature whose effects can be realized only by the active agency of divine power.<sup>63</sup> Again, this active divine agency does not do

60. Thomas uses the language of potency and act to articulate the transformed disposition to receive the form of the divine essence. Cf. *ScG* III, chap. 53, 3: "Nothing is receptive of a more sublime form unless it be elevated by means of a disposition to the capacity for this form, for a proper act is produced in a proper potency. Now, the divine essence is a higher form than any created intellect."

61. Cf. Waddell, "Aquinas on the Light of Glory," 122.

62. *ScG* III, chap. 53, 4: "Quae quidem mutatio aliter esse non potest nisi per hoc quod intellectus creatus aliquam dispositionem de novo acquirit." Thomas holds, "This change (*mutatio*) can only come about by means of the created intellect acquiring some new disposition" (*ScG* III, chap. 53, 4).

63. The best entry into the topic is Long, "Obediential Potency," 51–52. Long explains the Thomistic thesis as follows:



violence to the nature of the creature but is, on the contrary, the necessary condition that allows the creature to realize his end. As such, there is, for St. Thomas, a difference in *kind* between the elevation of the created intellect by the *lumen gloriae* to a vision of the divine essence and the fact that (for example) "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Mt 3:9). The grace of divine filiation entails that the intellectual creature raised to a vision of God remains human, indeed now fully human. The (hypothetical) divine filiation of stones would render them no longer stones. Intellectual creatures are constituted by an obediential potency ordering them to elevation to the vision of God in a way that stones are not. The application of the theory of obediential potency to Thomas's teaching on the saints' vision of the divine essence offers the necessary conceptual distinctions to affirm both the gratuity of beatitude and the fact that such a vision is congruent with the desire of the human heart.

### Conclusion

Few theological differences between Eastern and Western Christianity are posed in as stark and neatly opposed manner as the question regarding

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Obediential potency is simply the potency of a creature towards acts achieved only with the assistance of divine causality. As a stained-glass window can irradiate colored light only with the assistance of light, so the human soul can directly contemplate God only with the assistance of God. Subrational beings lack any obediential potency for beatific knowledge of God because they lack intellectual nature. All this makes it abundantly clear that one is not dealing merely with the extrinsic susceptibility of creatures to divine miracle, that is, with natures being supernaturally transmuted. Rather, what is involved is the constellation of a created nature's passive potencies in relation to the active agency of God. In this way acts of a creature can proceed from a supernatural principle without ceasing to be true acts of the creature.

For Thomas, obediential potency must be distinguished from a divine miracle. In *De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 11, co, Thomas describes the vision of God experienced by Moses and Paul *in via* as "miraculous," whereas the vision of God in glory is not a miracle but an expression of obediential potency. Thomas explains that just as Peter walking on the water is a miracle of the body, so too Paul, seeing the divine essence in this life, is a miracle of the mind. The nature of a miracle is "to produce effects, the dispositions for which they do not have within themselves" (*De Ver.*, q. 10, a. 11, co). Obediential potency, by contrast, expresses effects (contingent upon the action of grace) that are congruous with innate dispositions. Thus, in this life, no obediential potency obtains for either walking on water or seeing God, whereas the purified and glorified soul does stand in obediential potency to receive the vision of the divine essence.

the possibility of the vision of the divine essence. For the East, following the teaching of the Eastern Doctors, the vision of the divine essence is accessible to no creature. In their rejection of the rationalism of Eunomius, the Cappadocian Fathers, John Chrysostom, and John of Damascus insist that God is radically ineffable and incomprehensible—not only incomprehensible, but also unapproachable (*ἀπρόσιτον*). The Eastern tradition came to insist that only the divine operations or energies (*ἐνέργειαι*) can be known; the divine essence (*οὐσία*) is known to God alone. The Western tradition, so it is often thought, charted a different theological path, finding its consummation in Thomas Aquinas. The intellectualism of St. Thomas and his reliance on Aristotelian teleology allegedly led to a different theological conclusion holding sway in the West. St. Thomas would affirm that intellectual creatures can by grace see (*atingere*) the divine essence. The very nature of the rational creature is such that it cannot find fulfillment apart from the vision of the divine essence.

I have suggested that a careful analysis of Thomas's teaching on the *lumen gloriae* challenges this neat antithesis. Thomas is certainly aware of a tension between his own position and that of the Eastern Fathers and a substratal difference remains between them with respect to the possibility of the intellectual creature's vision of the divine essence. Nevertheless, the same concern that animates the Eastern Fathers in their insistence that the divine essence is inaccessible to all creatures is equally the *ratio* undergirding Thomas's treatment of the *lumen gloriae*, namely, to preserve the transcendence of God and the real distinction between Creator and creature. Thomas maintains that if God is to be seen, the creature must be raised to participate in the manner by which God sees himself. This is an utterly gratuitous gift, completely beyond the nature of creaturely capability. By the disposition of the *lumen gloriae*, the blessed see God immediately and not through any similitude or by the impress of any likeness, in a way that is impossible to comprehend in this life. While the vision of the divine essence is unlike any finite mode of knowing, the intellectual creature's ability to abstract suggests a certain disposition (or obediential potency) to be elevated by grace to the vision of God. As such, the intellectual vision of God is, in St. Thomas's account, something *new*, but not radically *foreign* to the rational creature. While the vision of God lies beyond any creaturely capability, it remains fitting to the created intellect and fulfilling of the desires of the human heart. Thomas's teaching on the grace of the *lumen gloriae* allows him to affirm that the desire for



perfect happiness, which is nothing other than the direct vision of the divine essence, is not void, but capable of fulfillment. But the doctrine of the *lumen gloriae* also allows him to affirm with the Greek Fathers that the divine essence is unapproachable to any creature by nature; to see God *sicuti est* remains strictly gratuitous.

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