

### XIII Sunday after Pentecost – Gratitude

*In the name of the Father ...*

Leprosy being a biblical symbol for sin, today's gospel account speaks of *gratitude* for healing from sin.

Of this virtue, St Thomas Aquinas notes: *[by] gratitude ... we give thanks to our benefactors... from whom we have received particular and private favors, on account of which we are under particular obligation ...*<sup>1</sup> because a benefactor ... *conferred the favor gratis without being bound to do so... of his own free-will [giving] something he was not bound to give.*<sup>2</sup>

Thomas observes of practicing *gratitude*: *As regards the affection of the heart, repayment should be made at once, wherefore Seneca says: "Do you wish to repay a favor? Receive it graciously."* He cautions, however, against haste: *[If] one wished to repay at once, favor for favor, it would not seem to be a virtuous but a constrained repayment. For, as Seneca observes: "he who wishes to repay too soon is an unwilling debtor, and an unwilling debtor is ungrateful."*<sup>3</sup>

Curiously asking: *Whether the innocent is more bound to give thanks to God than the penitent?*<sup>4</sup> Thomas considers favorable points. First, he recognizes that ... *the greater the gift one has received from God, the more one is bound to give Him thanks, [and] the gift of innocence is greater than that of justice restored.*<sup>5</sup>

Second, he quotes St Augustine: *What man, weighing his own infirmity, would dare to ascribe his purity and innocence to his own strength so that he should love Thee the less as if he had less needed Thy mercy. Rather: let him love Thee as much, yea and more, since by Whom he sees me to have been recovered from such deep torpor of sin, by Him he sees himself to have been from the like torpor of sin preserved.*<sup>6</sup>

Thomas requires, however, the penitent to be more grateful, citing Our Lord's teaching of two debts forgiven: *Which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." [Jesus] said to him, "You have judged rightly."*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [ST IIa IIae 106, 1, c](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Ibid. 6, c & ad 3um](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Ibid., 4, c](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Ibid., 2](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Ibid, 2, ob 1um](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Ibid., 2, ob 2um](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Lk 7:41-43](#)

Thomas reasons that... *a favor may be said to be greater because it is given more gratuitously so that the penitent is more bound to give thanks than the innocent because what he receives from God is more gratuitously given: since, whereas he was deserving of punishment, he has received grace.*<sup>8</sup>

Thomas here may have been influenced by his rejection of the Blessed Virgin's Immaculate Conception, in his time a disputed question. Of this, the Catholic Encyclopedia notes: *His great difficulty appears to have arisen from the doubt as to how she could have been redeemed if she had not sinned.*<sup>9</sup> Recognizing that it was better to be preserved than to be restored, Thomas reasoned that no one could have been so preserved: *[S]he could never have incurred the stain of original sin, and thus she would not have needed redemption and salvation which is by Christ, of whom it is written: "He shall save His people from their sins." But this is unfitting, through implying that Christ is not the Savior of all men.*<sup>10</sup>

The problem was how to understand St Paul, writing: *But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin*. Elsewhere Paul wrote: *We have our hope set on the living God who is the Savior of all men*. Again: *Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*. And again: *For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all*.<sup>11</sup>

As St Paul noted, God permits evil – sin – so that he might exercise *mercy*, his greatest act to creatures. For Thomas, God could not exercise *mercy* unless someone actually was afflicted by sin. Shortly after Thomas' time, the Franciscan Blessed John Duns Scotus ... *removed the great difficulty of St. Thomas showing that, so far from being excluded from redemption, the Blessed Virgin obtained of her Divine Son the greatest of redemptions through the mystery of her preservation from all sin*.<sup>12</sup> Broadening the notions of *mercy* and redemption, Scotus taught that God exercised *mercy* where sin was a real threat but nonetheless by His aid was not contracted.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [ST IIa IIae 106, 2, c](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Catholic Encyclopedia: Immaculate Conception](#)

<sup>10</sup> [ST IIIa 27, 2, c](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Gal 3:21](#); [1 Tim 4:10](#); [Rom 5:12](#); [Rom 11:32](#). Clearly St Paul did not include Our Lord under this debt, so that «all men» cannot mean «all men without exception».

<sup>12</sup> [Catholic Encyclopedia: Immaculate Conception](#)

<sup>13</sup> Here we can utilize the Aristotelian notions of act and potency: a potency is a reality, but not an actual one. In the Blessed Virgin there was a potency to commit actual sin as she did not yet have the Beatific Vision. In a derived sense, there was a "potency" for contracting Original Sin (derived because a not-yet-existent subject cannot be the

The Blessed Virgin, then, preserved from Original Sin in view of her divine maternity, experienced the greatest of redemptions. St Paul writes: *Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring ... referring to one ... who is Christ.* The Old Testament model of *faith*, Abraham was a type of the Blessed Virgin:<sup>14</sup> his son Isaac prefigured Our Lord in his passion;<sup>15</sup> the seed promised to Abraham actually was hers, the seed promised at the dawn of history to the woman who also received the promise of enmity with the serpent.<sup>16</sup>

The Blessed Virgin received from God the greatest gift - to bear his Son - and in view of this received ... *the gift of innocence [incomparably] greater than that of justice restored.* Given ... *the greater the gift one has received from God, the more one is bound to give Him thanks,* no one was more aware than her of what God gratuitously bestowed, and no one was more grateful.

Thus, we can side with St Augustine, discerning therein overtones of the Blessed Virgin's canticle of *gratitude*, the Magnificat.<sup>17</sup> Augustine wrote: *Who would dare to ascribe his purity and innocence to his own strength?* The Blessed Virgin sang: *He has looked on the humility of his handmaid ... he who is mighty has done great things for me.* Of one preserved in innocence, Augustine denied ... *that he should love Thee the less, as if he had less needed Thy mercy.* The Blessed Virgin sang: *His mercy is from age to age for those who fear Him,* recognizing that she was redeemed: *My spirit exalts in God my savior.* St Paul wrote of Abraham's faith: *Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.* Elizabeth told her kinswoman: *blessed is she who believed that it would be fulfilled which was spoken to her from the Lord,*<sup>18</sup> i.e., those promises made at the dawn of history.

Upon the Blessed Virgin, God ... *conferred the favor gratis without being bound to do so ... of his own free-will gave something he was not bound to give.* In turn, she recognized that she had received ... *particular and private favors, on account of which [she was] under particular obligation to him.* Thomas quoted Seneca: *Do you wish to repay a favor? Receive it graciously.* None received God's favors more graciously than her with her simple *fiat*: let it be done.<sup>19</sup>

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subject of a true potency: nonetheless, the threat was real – she would have contracted it). Therefore, she could experience a true redemption.

<sup>14</sup> [Mt 1:1](#): Abraham as a type for the Blessed Virgin is alluded to by St Matthew's genealogy of the Christ.

<sup>15</sup> [Gen 22:1-19](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Gen 3:15](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Lk 1:46-55](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Lk 1:45](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Lk 1:38](#)

Like the lepers, we who merited only punishment for our sins, have received gratuitous healing from God. Let us not be like the nine – ungrateful. Rather, let us imitate the one who showed *gratitude*: *One of them, when he saw that he was made clean, went back, with a loud voice glorifying God. And he fell on his face before his feet, giving thanks.*

But how much more so was she grateful to God who, in view of the greatest gift freely bestowed on any mere creature – the divine maternity – was preserved free from all stain of sin.

*In the name of the Father ...*