

Why the Devil Fell: A Lesson in Spiritual Theology From Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*

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Many theologians today remain unwilling simply to demythologize the devil and leave him behind as a relic of religious primitivism, and yet the vast majority still avoid the subject of the devil. Yet the great theologians of the Christian tradition expressed no such reticence. The devil's identity, his fall from grace, his mischief and destructive interference in the world, and his eternal destiny are some of the significant theological loci covered in works by Origen and Aquinas and Anselm, Luther and Barth, not to mention the lay classic *Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. The texts of Thomas Aquinas, in particular, treat the devil with a seriousness that might embarrass us. In the sixteenth disputed question of *De Malo* and the sixty-third and sixty-fourth questions of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* he looks at the devil's identity, the character of his fall from grace, and his malevolence in the spiritual lives of men and women.

I will not undertake a full sketch of Aquinas's theology of the devil in this essay – though to do so might prove a fascinating project for a soul more morbid than even my own. I do want to meditate on Aquinas's interesting answer to one question: Why did the Devil fall? In the 'Treatise on the Angels' in the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas reflects on the chief sin of the devil, the sin by which the devil banished himself from heaven – the sin by which he left the state of sanctifying grace in which he had been created by God.¹ Sanctifying grace, of course, is distinct for Thomas from consummating grace, the grace of glory, the grace that enables a vision of the Word's essence as it is in itself (for we should never forget that for Aquinas the vision of God is the vision of the Word, eternally begotten of the Father). Sanctifying grace is the principle of supernatural knowing and loving of God as trinity that God imparts as a gift into the created soul, a gift that creates an ability or disposition beyond what natural knowing and willing are capable of – whether

¹ An un-customary note regarding pronouns: I will use masculine pronouns to refer to the devil in this essay, not because the devil is male any more than he is female but since masculine pronouns have traditionally been used to refer to the devil. Furthermore, this is a case where feminists, I am sure, will be happy to forego their very valid concerns to allow the sexism of pronouns in theology.

the mind and will be angelic or human. In sanctifying grace God enables humans to come to share in the divine life in this initial way, a way that will be fulfilled in the vision of the Word, which is glory and perfect bliss.

Why ask such a question? Surely there are more cheerful areas of theological research. Did Aquinas have a morbid fascination with demons, a fascination that we moderns have wisely abandoned? Perhaps or perhaps not. Yet to get to the heart of Aquinas's concern in this section of the *Summa Theologiae*, we need to read his investigation of the devil's identity and sin not merely as an investigation of the devil and his fall, but as a lesson in how to navigate the Christian spiritual life. In other words, we need to read Aquinas's treatment of the fall of the devil as an exercise of spiritual pedagogy. Aquinas looks, ingeniously, at the devil's fall to clarify some fundamental points about the logic of the spiritual life of those who are already justified by grace, who are beginning to be made holy, but who are not yet transfigured into glory. By looking at the devil's sin, his rejection of God's gift of sanctifying grace that is the beginning of the road to glory, we can better understand the logic of our own journey towards the consummation into glory that is our destiny in God – and better understand the ways that we can turn away from God's gifts. This essay centers therefore on a single article in the *Summa Theologiae*, which asks whether the devil wanted to be like God.² But before we engage that question, we should look at a few points in Aquinas's discussion about angels in general.

I. Natural Capacity, Sanctifying Grace, and Deification of Angels

In *STh* I.62.1 Aquinas asks if God created the angels in beatitude; in other words, were the angels in the state of eschatological bliss that comes from gazing at God's essence from the first moment of their creation? Aquinas responds that there are two kinds of beatitude. First, there is a beatitude that is a rational nature's perfect operation, i.e. its perfect knowing and loving of created truths and goods; this is what we might want to call natural happiness. For rational natures this means the contemplation of God as creator. Yet this beatitude is incomplete – it does not have a vision of God in his essence as trinity.

Hence besides this happiness, Aquinas avers that 'there is still another . . . whereby we shall see God as he is.' This bliss 'is beyond the nature of every created intellect.'³ In other words, there is the happiness that created rational – that is to say knowing and willing – agents

² *STh* I.63.3. All citations of Aquinas in this essay will come from the five-volume, misnamed *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948) translated by the Dominicans of the English Province in the early twentieth-century.

³ *STh* I.62.1, *corpus*

are able to enjoy when they take as their perfect object the best truth, goodness, and beauty that can be engaged in the created order. Yet this kind of engagement occurs without supernatural grace, without God's additional assistance to the powers of intellect and will to give them a capacity and object higher than that which their ordinary created natures could aspire to be open towards. This is a happiness for an angel that consists simply in being fully an angel, in operating the angelic mind and will in acts of knowing and loving towards an object that perfectly engages these faculties as created.

But there is another happiness, which an angel cannot experience simply by flourishing fully as an angel from the resources of his natural created powers; this is a happiness that comes from seeing God's essence. This happiness 'the angels did not have from the beginning of their creation . . . because such beatitude is no part of their nature, but its end.'⁴ There is an activity of mind and will, a process of knowing and loving, that no created nature can give to itself by virtue of its own rational or appetitive powers. God's essence is an 'object' that the created mind and will, *qua* created and natural, can in no way understand or love. For an angel to see God as he is in himself, to have 'the knowledge of glory, whereby he knows the Word through his essence,'⁵ requires a gift beyond the first gift of a created nature – a second gift of deification in which the angelic mind and will turn to God as their perfect truth and good, surpassing any created truth and good. It seems strange to speak of angels being made deiform in glory, but this is what Aquinas is saying.

Seeing God in the vision of glory means 'turning to the good.'⁶ In article two of the same question Aquinas further unpacks how this turning occurs. How is an angel to turn to the supreme good, God himself, when this good radically exceeds the reach of his natural powers to know or love? By grace, Aquinas answers. Angels cannot know and love God as he is unless God himself moves their minds and wills to know and love him as an object – however problematic such a way of phrasing it. The angels' bliss requires them to focus their knowing and loving on God himself as he is in his essence, and yet because their created powers of knowing and willing cannot ascend to such an object of knowledge and love something external has to open up the possibility. 'The angels stood in need of grace in order to turn to God, as the object of beatitude.'⁷ For 'the will's natural inclination is directed towards what is keeping with its nature. Therefore, if there is anything which is above nature, the will

⁴ *STh* I.62.1, *corpus*

⁵ *STh* I.62.1, *ad* 3

⁶ *STh* I.62.1, *ad* 3

⁷ *STh* I.62.2, *corpus*

cannot be inclined towards it, unless helped by some other supernatural principle.⁸

The other happiness, the one coming from knowing and loving God in the vision of his essence, is what Aquinas calls the 'ultimate beatitude' of every rational intellect, every knowing and willing agent, human or angelic. As Aquinas puts it:

Now it was shown . . . that to see God in his essence, wherein the ultimate beatitude of the rational creature consists, is beyond the nature of every created intellect. Consequently no rational creature can have the movement of the will directed towards such a beatitude, except it be moved thereto by a supernatural agent. This is what we call the help of grace. Therefore it must be said that an angel could not of his own will be turned to such beatitude, except by the help of grace.⁹

The created soul in its powers of intellect and will has the ability to know and love created truths and goods. But its final and full happiness are contained in a good and truth beyond creation and therefore beyond its created powers. So the angel is in a bind: he has the ability to know created truths and love created goods, in short to exercise his intellect and will fully and thereby flourish as a creature; and yet his final eschatological happiness exceeds his created abilities. The flourishing that is available to him as a created angel is not sufficient; there is a further joy that is the angel's final and full joy, yet it is not a joy that the angel can give to himself. So the angel is to have an object of knowing and willing that his knowing and willing cannot attain.

Here is where the logic of deification begins to become evident. The angel needs to be able to know and love God in order to be fully in bliss, and yet his powers of knowing and willing are impotent to take him to such a state. We might say that God has to open up the capacities of mind and will beyond their created abilities. God has to extend their reach. God extends the range of intellect and will to enable in them a kind of knowing and loving of the divine essence that, without this extra assistance by God, they could never achieve. Indeed it is misleading to speak of 'achieving' such a knowledge and love. It is more a phenomenon of experiencing, of the angelic intellect and will being enfolded into the divine intellect and will, their created knowing and willing getting caught up into the divine knowing and willing that is God's eternal life. God chooses, we might say, to know and love himself through the knowing and loving of the angels. He chooses in his freedom to allow the angels to be a medium through which the current of the divine knowing and loving will flow. I think we can understand what Aquinas means when he speaks of the will

⁸ *STh* I.62.2, *corpus*

⁹ *STh* I.62.2, *corpus*

being turned to the ultimate good by a supernatural agent. The only supernatural agent is God, of course, since the angels, even though not corporeal, are as natural and created and as in need of the theological virtues as humans. So God takes abode in the soul of the angel, which means God's knowing and loving, his very self, takes into its current of life the angelic knowing and loving, so that the angel can know and love God like God knows and loves himself. This is what it means to see the divine essence, to have the angelic mind become deiform, to enjoy the 'perfect love of God . . . the possession of God.'¹⁰ So the angelic mind and will when it possesses glory is fully in act as angelic mind and will, and yet it is riding the crest of the divine knowing and willing, knowing and loving as God knows and loves, having the divine essence in-form the angelic mind and will by God's gift.

Yet between these two states, the created state of angels' natural happiness and the eschatological state of angels' final bliss in glory, there is a middle state, viz. being in the state of sanctifying grace. In this state the angels have received the ability to know and love God in a way that goes beyond natural capacity, but does not yet enjoy the ability to see him in his essence. In human beings this would be called the soul's life of faith, hope, and charity. The angel knows in this state that God is triune, but he does not see it for himself, his mind and will have not yet been taken into God and made deiform. So Aquinas speaks of stages in the rational creature's (including an angel's) journey to glory, the vision of God's essence. Angels are 'created in sanctifying grace,'¹¹ the grace that allows the angels from the very moment of their creation to know and love God as trinity, not just as first cause.

So this state of sanctifying grace is the mid-point between the 'purely natural' created life of the angel – which exists for Aquinas in theory alone – and the vision of glory that is the angels' eschatological destiny. How does this work? Sanctifying grace is like a seed, which, if created freedom assents to its promptings, will eventually deliver the created angelic soul into the bliss of the vision of God. Sanctifying grace is rather God's act of putting himself as an object to the soul, to be known and loved. This is grace because the soul could never 'find' the triune God as an object of knowing and willing on its own. Yet this giving by God of God's self to be known and loved by the created rational nature does not guarantee or force the mind and will into knowing and loving God. For this grace, Aquinas notes, can be resisted, since grace frees the will and gives it liberty to know and love God as triune but does not coerce it into doing so.¹²

¹⁰ *STh* I.62.2, ad 3

¹¹ *STh* I.62.3, *corpus*

¹² *STh* I.62.3, ad 2

In order for the created mind to be able to know and love God, there must be the possibility that the created mind will reject such knowledge and love – otherwise the created mind would be mechanical, not free. If an angel receives God's gift into his soul, God's giving of himself as an object to the soul to be known and loved, and if the angel lives into this possibility of knowledge and love, then the angel begins to merit beatitude.¹³

Questions of merit are justly suspicious to many Protestants, so it is worth taking just a moment to get at exactly what Aquinas means. Merit is used in a very particular sense in Aquinas: God rewards the creature for an act – charity – that God himself has enabled. God rewards, in other words, his own gifts.¹⁴ So charity merits beatitude, but grace gives the will the ability to be charitable. 'An angel did not merit beatitude by natural movement towards God; but by the movement of charity, which comes of grace.'¹⁵ Beatitude, the vision of God, the making of the mind and will deiform by in-forming them with the divine essence, comes as a gift of God, but one that involves the created will and can be rejected by the created will. What is crucial to remember here, though, is that the bliss of the vision of God cannot be attained without the prior gift of God: grace, as God's gift of himself to the created intellect and will, enables the intellect and will to know and love God.

Key here is the way in which the mind and will are fundamentally responsive powers – so again while the mind and will are active it is less a matter of them moving themselves *ex nihilo* than letting themselves be drawn into knowledge and love of God as God gives himself as an object to the mind and will. So it is responsive in a way that transcends the dichotomy between passivity and activity. The angelic soul to whom God gives himself as an object of knowledge and love needs, in a sense, to do nothing at all, to simply relax and not resist the movement of its mind and will from flowering into love and knowledge. When one hears a piece of beautiful music, one does not force one's will to love it. The music elicits love, which is really the activity of a person, but it is not generated *de novo* in any ordinary sense; it is elicited, it responds to a gift of the good present in the music. In the same way, the life of grace is a life of relaxing, letting one's mind and will be taken into the activities of knowing and loving God in response to God's gift of himself as an object to the divine will – the ultimate end of this responsiveness is for the angelic mind and will to become deiform, to be deified, in-formed by the

¹³ This paragraph is indebted to Prof. Reinhard Hütter of Duke University.

¹⁴ On merit in Aquinas see the crucial work by Joseph Wawrykov, *God's Grace and Human Action: 'Merit' in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame, 1995).

¹⁵ *STh* I.62.4, ad 2

divine essence in perfect bliss of seeing God, contemplating and delighting in the Word.¹⁶ For the mind to be so in-formed is for the angelic mind and will to be caught up into the divine mind and will, for the angelic knowing and loving to take on the form, to share in, the divine knowing and loving that is God's life. Angels attain to God's likeness, become like God, when they allow their minds and wills to respond to God's gift of himself to such a degree that they become sharers of the activity of the divine mind and will. It is to allow the angelic mind and will to respond fully to God's gift of himself as an object of willing – a gift that is fulfilled when the angel's subjective knowing and willing takes on the very form of the eternal life of knowing and loving that is God's essence. At this point the angel has become like God, but only by letting his mind and will grow into total response and assimilation – without merging – to the divine gift. In one sense, this is the angel's own action of knowing and loving; but in another sense it is not a self-generating action, it is a wholly responsive action. The angel cannot take credit for knowing and loving God, just as it would seem odd for someone to take credit for loving a Beethoven symphony. Truth and goodness elicit love and knowledge; perfect truth and goodness elicit perfect love and knowledge. Sanctifying grace is the seed that frees the Angelic mind and will to love and know and enjoy God in the bliss of the vision of the Word. All the angel needs to do is to allow the seed to continually draw out his knowing and willing towards the source of everything that is, a source that desires to share its own bliss with the angelic nature.

Yet since love and knowledge are free actions, they can be rejected. An angel can turn from the gift, reject the seed implanted. This may seem like lengthy prolegomena to the central discussion of this essay, but we needed to set the table, so to speak, to be able to understand the main dish. Now we turn to the risks involved in the angels' desire to know and love God freely. To the tragic story of one angel's fall we now turn.

II. A Tragic Grasping at Glory: The Cause of the Fall of the Devil

Because angels were created in sanctifying grace, but not that fullness of grace which would merit them complete beatitude, it was possible for the angels to reject the gift of grace, the seed that would flower and lead them into perfect bliss in the vision of God's essence. This is where 'we must consider how angels became evil.'¹⁷ What was the sin

¹⁶ For the notion of the Christian life as a kind of relaxing, I am indebted to conversations with James Alison.

¹⁷ *STh* I.63.Prologue

that caused some of the angels, and pre-eminently the devil, to fall from grace? At a basic level, Aquinas thinks it is pride. He has what may initially appear to be a rather austere definition of pride, one that seems 'medieval' in all the worst ways. 'The sin of pride [is] not to be subject to a superior where subjection is due.'¹⁸ Is Aquinas setting forth a brutal theory of what we could call knowing one's place, not rocking the boat, a kind of spiritual slavery? No. Submission to God here means receiving a gift. For an angel to know himself as a creature under the lordship and providence of God is to know himself first of all as a receiver of gifts: the gift of creation and the second gift of sanctifying grace, which, if not resisted, will flower into deification. For the angel to know himself as a creature is to know himself as a gift and a receiver of gifts and to know God as the giver of gifts, the chief of which is his own divine life given when he makes creatures deform. So the sin of pride is the refusal to receive the gifts that God wants to give, the stubborn and utterly mistaken belief that God has not structured creation to be under his lordship and providence in a way that is supremely beneficial to the creature; for God did not create the world for his own pleasure, but for creatures' pleasure.

Indeed we see the way in which the sin of pride is exercised by the devil in the following question: 'Whether the Devil Desired to be as God?'¹⁹ To begin with, Aquinas does not even argue over whether the devil's sin was to want to be like God – it is assumed. But there are two ways in which an angel might want to be like God. The devil could have wanted to be like God 'by equality' or 'by likeness'.²⁰ What is the difference? To seek to be like God by equality would mean to want to become God himself. While this may have seemed attractive, it would have meant the devil's own annihilation as an angel in his own right. 'There exists in everything the natural desire of preserving its own nature.'²¹ The devil, we might say, cannot desire to be like God by equality, to become God himself, because on the one hand he knew this was impossible – since even the devil knows that God is God and that he, the devil, is not – and because on the other hand to will to become God would be to will his own annihilation as an existing subject in his own right, something Aquinas believes no creature is willing to do, according to the logic of self-preservation.

If the devil did not want to become God himself, what did the devil want? The second way to become like God is by likeness. And there are two ways for a creature to desire to be like God by likeness. 'In one way, as to that likeness whereby everything is made to be likened

¹⁸ *STh* I.63.2, *corpus*

¹⁹ *STh* I.62.3

²⁰ *STh* I.63.3, *corpus*

²¹ *STh* I.63.3, *corpus*

unto God. And so, if anyone desires in this way to be Godlike, he commits no sin; provided that he desires such likeness in proper order, that is to say, that he may obtain it of God.²² So for the angel, the desire to become like God in the way appropriate to the angel, for the angelic intellect and will to become deiform and be enfolded into the divine knowing and willing that is God's self, is perfectly appropriate. Indeed the angel is created to desire such a supernatural end. But we need to note that Aquinas also believes that there is a logic to attaining this deification, this being transformed into the likeness of God. Creatures have to want to become like God in the right way, and the right way means that creatures have to want to become like God by means of receiving God's own giving of the ability to become like God. Creatures, especially rational creatures, can desire to become like God, to see the beatific vision, but they must desire to receive this vision as a gift, not as an achievement or possession that they can cultivate or attain on their own. For the creature 'would sin were he desire to be like God even in the right way,' that is to become like God by becoming deiform, 'as of his own, and not of God's power.'²³ To try to seize glory by the creature's own power, to try to give oneself the gift that only God can give, is sinful, and indeed the sin of pride: it eliminates the distinction of creator and creature, of the giver of gifts and the receivers.

And this is precisely the sin of the devil. It is worth quoting Aquinas at length here as he explains the two ways in which we can understand the devil's sin as a belief in self-sufficiency in two different ways.

It was in this way that the devil desired to be as God. Not that he desired to resemble God by being subject to no one else absolutely; for so he would be desiring his own not-being; since no creature can exist except by holding its existence under God. But he desired resemblance with God in this respect – by desiring, as his last end of beatitude, something which he could attain by virtue of his own nature, turning his appetite away from supernatural beatitude, which is attained by God's grace. Or, if he desired as his last end that likeness of God which is bestowed by grace, he sought to have it by the power of his own nature; and not from divine assistance according to God's ordering. This harmonizes with Anselm's opinion, who says that 'he sought that to which he would have come had he stood fast.'²⁴

So there are two possibilities for the reason why the devil fell from grace. Each involves an unwillingness to recognize that God as God is the giver of gifts and that the devil as an angel is primarily the receiver of gifts, gifts that God gives in God's good order. In the first case, the devil simply does not believe that he needs the gift: he

²² *STh* I.63.3, *corpus*

²³ *STh* I.63.3, *corpus*

²⁴ *STh* I.63.3, *corpus*

believes he can find his final happiness within himself, from his own resources of knowing and willing merely as an angel. Aquinas is making a serious Augustinian point: the soul that believes it can give its final happiness to itself is sorely deceived. A rational soul's final bliss can only come as a supernatural gift; any thought of a self-sufficient ability of a rational creature, angelic or human, to give itself perfect bliss, is mistaken and prideful: it represents an unwillingness to be a creature, to submit to the order of creation and providence, wherein God is the giver of the gift of our final bliss and in which we are gracious recipients. The devil believes he can give the gift of beatitude to himself, believes that he does not need God to be happy.

Even though his first answer has a great deal of power, his second answer is even more interesting. Here the devil's sin is precisely his desire to claim deification for himself, to become like God by means of his own resource. Sanctifying grace is, we remember, a seed, the presence of God that will ultimately lead to deification if it is allowed to make intellect and will flower, if it is allowed to pull the mind and will towards an ever deeper knowledge and love of God, a journey consummated in the vision of God. Created knowing and willing are enfolded into divine knowing and willing in an experience of ecstasy. But in this journey the mind and will of the angel have to be led and drawn into the bliss of the beatific vision – the vision of the Word is not something the angelic soul can possess of its own power or resource. So the sin of the devil is precisely that he wants to deify himself, he wants to give himself the gift of becoming like God, of making his own knowing and loving be taken into the divine knowing and loving in the devil's time, not God's. But, as we have seen, this is the sin of pride, the unwillingness to accept one's place in the created and providentially guided order. It is the refusal of the devil to see himself as he is – a creature who is receiving the blissful gifts of God – and the refusal to see and acknowledge God for who he is – the giver of every good and perfect gift, even and perhaps especially when these gifts are given in the time and order of God's providence, a time and order we may not understand.²⁵ The devil wants to claim his highest bliss, his own deification, by his own resource, his own power of knowing and willing, and this is precisely his tragic sin. In refusing to allow the gift of deification to be the flowering of the seed of sanctifying grace the devil refused to see himself as the angelic creature that he was, and he refused to see God as the giver of bliss that God is. His failure to know himself and his failure to know God threw him from God's presence and prevented him from receiving the gift of beatitude in the vision of God that would have been his, had

²⁵ James 1:17

be been content to wait for it to come to him. The devil desired to be like God, to see the vision of God's essence for himself, but he was not willing to wait for this gift to come to him as a gift. His aspirations were nothing but noble – to see God as he is in his essence and to enjoy perfect bliss – but his means challenged the very identities of himself and God; indeed, had he succeeded in grasping what only God could give, he would have annihilated not only himself but God as well. And hence God had to cast him out of heaven, for his own sake and for God's.

Yet it is not enough to say that the devil fell through pride. We need to look behind the sin of pride. What is the impetus for the devil's pride? I would like to suggest that, for Aquinas, it is a lack of patience. The devil began to think he could seize the beatific vision for himself because he could not wait to receive it from God's hands. The devil could not wait in God's time, rejected the gifts that God was giving him at the present moment, refused to wait in hope and faith for the ultimate gift of the beatific vision that God was planning to give to him in the time of God's providence, the logic of time that is supremely good for creatures. God had every intention of giving the gift of the beatific vision to the angel who became the devil, but the devil had to try to seize the gift in his own time. Rather than living in God's providence and its time, he tried to take God into his own time, to manipulate God. But what he did in truth was to refuse the gift that God wanted to give him. The way he lost the gift of the beatific vision was paradoxically by having a too greedy desire for it. He could not wait to receive the gift of God in the time of God. Impatience begot pride, and pride begot tragedy. So it seems that for Aquinas, the reason for the fall of the devil was the devil's lack of patience, his inability to wait on God, to receive the gifts of the day, to wait in hope and anticipation for the final gift that God would have given in God's own time. In so doing he tried to annihilate the distinction between creator and creature, the giver of gifts and the receiver of gifts. He mounted a fundamental challenge to God's identity and the goodness of his providential manner of time.²⁶

²⁶ Nor is this idea new to Aquinas. Here, as he often does, Aquinas stands in the great tradition of theology. After an initial draft of this essay was completed, Stanley Hauerwas brought to my attention that both Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian believed that the devil fell because of a lack of patience. For a discussion of patience in these two figures see Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame, 1997). Indeed one could chart this history of the theological explanations of the devil's fall – this might be a most interesting project.

III. Pedagogy of Patience in the Spiritual Life

The fall of the devil serves as a kind of pedagogy for the Christian in her spiritual pilgrimage into God, a pilgrimage that begins with the human person turning to God by God's initial grace, continues in her meriting of beatitude through the presence of God working within her by sanctifying grace, and consummates in the final glory of beatitude that she enjoys when she sees the Word in his essence. What is distinctive about this whole journey, however, is that it is a journey through time. The Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément has written that 'Time is the God-given opportunity to learn to love.'²⁷ Aquinas might agree.

This is because Aquinas in speculating on why the devil fell seems to make the astonishing claim that the devil fell because he lacked patience. The devil rejected the necessity of taking time in the spiritual journey into God. We remember that sanctifying grace for Aquinas is a kind of seed in the soul, God's presence that elicits the mind and will into a knowing and willing alive with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, which ends in the soul's moving into glory. The soul is a fundamentally responsive agency for Aquinas. The seed of sanctifying grace, which is nothing other than the presence of the triune God in the soul of the Christian, elicits an ever deeper pattern of knowing and loving of God, a knowing and loving that finally will be consummated in the bliss of the beatific vision at the end of time. The journey to the beatific vision is a journey that requires time. The devil could not wait for the gift of deification to be given in the time of God's providence. To use Clément's language, he was not willing to receive the time God had given to him to learn to love. He desperately wanted the gift of the vision of God's essence, and he was unwilling to wait for the seed of sanctifying grace to flower in him in order to bring him to that vision by the grace and gift of God. And so he attempted to seize the vision of God's essence by his own resource and power. In this move, however, he fundamentally challenged both his own identity and God's identity. Had the devil been able to seize this gift on his own, then he would have ruined God's nature as the giver of gifts; and he would have ruined his own nature as fundamentally receptive and responsive. In order to let God be God, and to allow himself to be the angel he was created to be, to reach the destiny that God had lovingly planned for him, the devil had to take time, to have the patience to allow the seed of God's presence in his soul to elicit ever deeper and stronger knowledge and love of the Word, until finally his knowing and loving

²⁷ As quoted in Geoffrey Wainwright's *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (New York: Oxford, 1980), p. 34. I would like to thank my friend Rob Rexroat for sharing this quotation with me.

became so intimately bound up with God's knowing and loving, the knowing and loving that is the life of the divine trinity, that the vision of the Word, the vision of the essence of God, would be given to him at last. The devil, in short, refused to take time, to wait for the gifts of God to be given in the time of the providence of God.

What the devil's fall has to do with our own human spiritual lives should be clear by now, but let me make some observations. Aquinas is a theologian of the quotidian – while his life may have ended with a mystical experience of unquestioned sweetness, he is not a theologian known for developing a program for spiritual ecstasy. The spiritual journey ends in a vision of God that exceeds our very capacities to know and love; we can only participate in God's knowing and loving of himself, something akin to riding the crest of a wave of eternally irrepressible joy. But this is not a destination to which we can travel on our own, by our own resource. The spiritual life is a life in which we must take time, in which we must allow ourselves to live into the time of God's providence, in which we must learn to trust that God's spirit is working in us, bringing God himself to birth in our bodies and souls, according to God's time, not ours. The spiritual life can be understood as a quest for ecstasy, and indeed some mystics and saints of the Christian tradition can be read, perhaps despite their intentions, as offering a program for ecstasy – something like a diet that promises you can lose twenty pounds in one week. You can now buy a book that in seven easy lessons helps you be ravished by the experience of God. But for most of us, the moments of ravishing are few and far between – more in the storehouse of memory and the yearning of hope than in the reality of our everyday life.

Hence perhaps one of the devil's temptations of the Christian on his or her journey into God is to tempt us to the same sin he committed, the sin of impatience that leads us to seek an ecstatic experience of God, the vision of God's very essence, and to claim it for ourselves, to try to possess it by our own resource – and to despair when we find that this is impossible, to feel abandoned by God because we do not feel his presence in the way that we imagine we should. A genuinely Thomistic spirituality – which might also be a genuinely Christian spirituality – might instead take time, have patience, be more a journey of self-questioning and small steps. Where is God wanting to be born in me today? Where is the divine life seeking to elicit my knowing and loving right now? Am I so desirous of spiritual ecstasy that I have forgotten how to bring God's love to birth in the practice of daily devotions or going to liturgy? Can I have faith that God is present in my soul and body right now – and this is what Aquinas means by sanctifying grace – and that there are resources for spiritual growth in *this* soul and body at *this* time as I am surrounded by *these* people and circumstances? Aquinas seems to

be suspicious of any kind of spiritual heroism – for it can quickly turn into a Pelagian grasp to deify oneself, a grasp that we have seen fundamentally challenges God's identity as gift-giver and our identities as receptive and responsive receivers of God's gifts.

In his discussion of the devil's fall from grace, then, Aquinas is also speaking of our own spiritual lives, and the temptation to mystical experience in our own time, not God's, the temptation to make the spiritual life my own project instead of God's project in me, to which I simply try to respond as best I can. The spiritual life is a life of patience and questioning: what does God seem to be wanting to do in my life right now, in *this* life of mine? How is he trying to enfold my knowing and loving into his own knowing and loving in the concrete life and relationships I am inhabiting now? God rarely takes us to the third-heaven. God intervenes in time and space, in the lives we are living, not the lives we want to be living or think we should be living. God is present in the baptized and waiting to be born in them in ever deeper ways: our task is to take time, to listen, and to seek to respond, in ways that will often seem prosaic, to God's urgings and promptings through the Word's gift of himself to us in scripture, preached word, and sacrament. The journey to the vision of God's essence, the final bliss of love to which we are all called, is a journey of time, and the time is not ours to govern. To the extent that we strive for spiritual heroism of a sort that we think is appropriate, we ignore this lesson, as Aquinas so seriously shows, to our peril.

A Thomist of happy memory, Fr. Herbert McCabe, O.P., noted that sin was a kind of suicide – and we should not think that the perils or potential for sin fade once we are baptized, once we are in the Body of Christ, once we receive sanctifying grace. For the devil fell *after* he had received the gift of sanctifying grace, after God had already made abode in his soul and begun to lead the devil into faith and love and hope. The spiritual life can be perilous and offer opportunities to fall prey to the sin of pride that have devastating consequences. Indeed perhaps the temptation to pride is even more dangerous within the Christian life, the life of sanctifying grace, than outside it. The desire that we might think to be most noble – to see God's face – can become the ruin of our souls if we cannot accept that this vision will be one that God gives us in God's time, not ours. The perils of sin do not decrease once we have entered the Christian journey, according to the logic of Aquinas; in some sense they increase. Who knows whether we will be able to endure the temptations – coming from the demons or simply from our own sin? What we can do is respect the need for patience and continual self-questioning in our spiritual lives – am I trying to recognize how I am to receive

the love of God, the gifts of God, which God wants to give me now, or am I trying to seize a spiritual experience, a vocation, a brilliant theological insight, that God does not want to give me right now? Am I being myself, a creature, and am I letting God be creator and redeemer? Am I willing to be patient, to let myself take time and be taken into God's time, so to speak? A similar way to ask the question is this: can I desire my good in God in the way that God desires my good in himself? Can I know and love God according to God's time and desire rather according to my personal egotistical strategies? A willingness to be taken into God's time and God's desire can be maddening, but we must trust that divine providence makes for a time that is loving and good, which in the end we will see was God's act of generosity for our benefit all along.

The devil could not wait for the gift that would have been his had he had patience: he refused to allow the seed of grace to grow in his soul, refused to ride the crest of God's prompting that is the trinity's presence in the soul. Can we learn from the devil's mistake, or shall we repeat it? In his providence, God gives growth in the spiritual life through and in time. Yet taking time is difficult. Living in time, resisting the grasp for the final ecstasy now, requires, paradoxically, more spiritual strength than trying to attain it before God wills to give it. God wills that in his providence we live in time and that justification, sanctification, and glorification be a process in time. The Devil resisted thus the very grammar of God's economy of creation and consummation. If we grasp at bliss eternal, if we try to become like God, i.e. give the gift of the vision of God's essence to ourselves by our own resource, we imitate the devil not Christ – who had to take his own sort of time, practice his own kind of patience through the passion and the cross – and we will miss the bliss of that vision of God altogether *and* the growth into bliss which God wants to give us today, in this moment, in the life of faith, hope, and charity with God and others in the Church and beyond. Christian life means a way through time, a process of the soul growing in knowledge and love until, in a final act responding to God's gift, the soul becomes deiform, knowing and loving the divine essence, that essence having become the form of soul's knowing and loving. God does not change his gift: the gift God gives is always the gift of the divine life itself; what changes is our own growth into that gift, growth that takes time. God's grace encounters us initially and turns our minds and wills toward him, and God's continual presence in the soul gradually elicits a deeper knowing and loving. We look forward to the loving and knowing of God's very essence that will be ours once we have risen into our glorified bodies and been taken into the life of knowing and

loving that is God's trinitarian bliss. But as we wait, let us learn to love God and one another in the ways that the time and wisdom of God's providence have made possible today.²⁸

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²⁸ This essay is indebted to the notion of 'taking time' mentioned more than once in writings of Archbishop Rowan Williams. I also want to thank Rob Rexroat, Jennifer Peters, and Stanley Hauerwas for comments and encouragement in writing this essay. I would also like to say thank you to my mother, Diane, who helped clean up my style and typos!