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INTENTIONS IN CHRIST

A Thomistic Account

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ABSTRACT

In question 12 of the Ia IIae of the *Summa Theologiae*, St Thomas presents the will's act of intention as a constitutive factor of free human operations. In the 17th century, the French Dominican, Charles-Réne Billuart assigned to the act of intention maximal voluntary efficacy insofar as it efficiently moves the will towards the end in virtue of means. His seminal account, however, severed the study of the genesis of human acts from moral questions pertaining to the freedom and the entelechy of the agent. As a result, human acts became monoliths that are only accidentally related to one another and to the moral perfection of the human person. The monumental work of Servais-Théodore Pinckaers, in the mid-20th century, impugns this worldview. In keeping with the principles of his renewal of Thomistic Moral Theology, Pinckaers displaces the primacy of intention and assigns it instead to the first act of the will, simple volition. For this is the act closest to the sources of morality, namely the intellect and the will, as principles of freedom, as well as to the ultimate end of the acting subject. Accordingly, Pinckaers' view ensured that all human acts are essentially interconnected on account of the final end pursued by the human person and integrated within the one overarching desire for human flourishing.

This controversy may be traced back to the confluence of two traditions that inform Aquinas' treatise on intention. On the one hand, the Augustinian tradition furnished Aquinas with the conceptual framework and terminology of intention. For Augustine *intentio* entails the use or subordination of all secondary goods by the creature for the fruition of its ultimate good, God. On the other hand, the Aristotelian tradition, along with influences from the works of St John Damascene, offered Aquinas a systematic account of human desire. In his treatise on intention, St Thomas embeds the Augustinian notion of intention within a wider Aristotelian psychology in order to develop a fuller account of Christian anthropology.

As a result, Aquinas considers the will's act of intention both (a) as a psychological constituent by which the will effectively moves itself towards an intended end and (b) as an ordering principle by which goods are subordinated to higher goods as means towards an end. Such a view crowns intention as the distinctive act that marks out human operations as voluntary and free. At the same time, it also forges an intrinsic mutual interdependency between human acts, the freedom of the acting subject and the interior moral character of the human person.

Transposed to the Christological realm, intentions allow us to establish a correlation between Christ's historical acts and his interior perfection whence they ultimately stem. I propose to approach intentionality in Christ following a 'Chalcedonian logic'. According to his divine nature, Christ possessed a divine intention which he consubstantially shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This intention is the divine providential order according to which God's wisdom creates and orders all essential goods of his creatures for the manifestation of his goodness in creation. Thus, the proclamation of divine goodness in the created order is achieved through the entelechy of creatures. Moreover, according to his human nature, Christ's will freely elicited intentional desires whereby the divine will was fulfilled through a chosen set of means. Finally, considered on the level of Christ's divine person, these intentions receive a particular modality. In being formed in obedience to the Father's will, Christ's human intentions become a missiological manifestation of the way the Son eternally possesses the divine intention as received from the Father in accordance with his personal Trinitarian mode of being.

Christ's intentions, then, not only account for the voluntary nature of his human acts but also posit an act of human freedom at the heart of redemption. Moreover, Christ's actions are the noblest manifestation of divine providence. For since in Christ the essential perfection of human nature is realised in an unsurpassable way, the acts of the incarnate Saviour constitute the supreme proclamation of God's goodness in the created order. Finally, the study of Christ's intentions also bears significant import for a renewed view of Thomistic soteriology. In the *IIIa pars*, Aquinas organises his soteriology around two major bearings: (a) the fittingness of the passion within God's sapiential ordering in q. 46; (b) the Son's act of obedience to the Father's decree in q. 47. Both questions are undergirded by intentionality. Redemption, then, may be considered as the intentional reorientation or subordination of all elements of human nature towards God. In Christ, human freedom is realigned and reconstituted as an instrument that manifests the goodness of God in creation. By the work of the Holy Spirit and the New Law of grace, the human person, sharing in the fulness of the incarnate Lord, establishes an interior order of justice through the perfection of its own freedom, habitually ordering all things for the sake of the consummate end of *being* human, namely union with God.

All in all, Christ's intentions, beside the historical proclamation of God's will (cf. Eph. 1:9-10), also possess a truly efficient Christo-conforming, or *Christo-logical*, quality that effects an inward intentional reordering or reconfiguration of the image of God in the human person according 'to the image of his Son' (cf. Rom. 8:29).

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