

St Anselm and St Thomas Aquinas on "Satisfaction": or how Catholic and Protestant understandings of the Cross differ

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Introduction

In what follows I hope to re-examine the traditional notion of satisfaction, and raise the question whether it still has soteriological significance in the light of modern theories of salvation, both Catholic and Protestant. My main focus will be on the way Anselm developed this notion and the manner in which Thomas Aquinas qualified it. However, by briefly discussing some of the modern theories of salvation, I hope to achieve two further goals: first, to argue for the viability of the theory of satisfaction; secondly, to highlight a major contrast between some of the main representatives of the "Catholic" and "Protestant" traditions respectively. Indeed, I will try to show that the different soteriological views between Catholics and Protestants have to be seen in the light of the different way Luther understood the traditional notion of exchange between God and man in Christ. Moreover, I will argue that it is one of the ironies of the history of theology that the central notion of traditional Catholic soteriology, namely satisfaction, as interpreted by Anselm and Aquinas, has somehow been popularly misunderstood in terms that are more similar to the later Protestant tradition, despite the fact that it entails the resources, at least in Aquinas' understanding but also, to some extent, in Anselm's, to criticise such a (mis)-understanding.

a) *The Catholic scene*

When one examines the Catholic theological scene of the last fifty years or so, one is bound to be struck by the fact that the most important Catholic theologians (such as Schillebeeckx, Rahner and Küng) fail, or refuse, to attribute salvific significance to the crucifixion itself.¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, for instance, argues that attributing any salvific meaning to the cross as such is deeply problematic, as it seems to glorify the suffering of an innocent man, i.e.,

¹ This critique does not apply to Hans Urs Von Balthasar, the fourth major Catholic theologian, but this has to do with the fact that he has been profoundly influenced by the major 20th century figure of Protestant theology, Karl Barth.

Jesus of Nazareth. More importantly, attributing redeeming value to the suffering of the Son seems to entail a rather problematic concept of God (evoking the spectre of a cruel God whose divine anger had to be appeased by the sacrifice of his Son). This transactional view (a "sadistic and bloody myth," as Schillebeeckx occasionally puts it) should therefore be rejected. According to Schillebeeckx and others, Jesus' death is the side effect of his faithful adherence to his cause but it is devoid of any redeeming value as such. Rahner is generally in agreement with this but in his later works he differs from Schillebeeckx by focusing more on the incarnation than on the crucifixion (in his attempt to reconcile modern evolutionary thought with traditional christology), thereby developing a doctrine somewhat reminiscent of Duns Scotus.

I suspect there are at least two general reasons why the focus of Catholic soteriology has shifted away from the cross. First, because an engagement with historical criticism and the life of the historical Jesus in recent decades has alerted theologians to other themes, such as Jesus' inauguration of the Kingdom of God, his concern for the poor and marginalized, and so forth. Second, as already suggested, because the traditional way of construing the salvific significance of Jesus' death was felt to be highly problematic, involving an a-historical, legalistic view, implying a vindictive God who has to be appeased by the bloody sacrifice of his innocent Son.

Undoubtedly, the immense suffering of the twentieth century has alerted us to the obscenity of attributing redeeming value to the suffering of innocent people. In the face of such suffering, it is being argued, we should keep silent and refrain from constructing theories – philosophical or theological: the problem of evil and suffering cannot be solved intellectually but only through praxis. However, as theologians we still have to make sense of Christ's suffering – unless we want to forfeit the view that the crucifixion is somehow or other part of God's providential plan. I will argue that the notion of "satisfaction" is indeed a useful category to do just that – that is, if it is understood correctly and not turned into a caricature. Hans Küng, for instance, argues that "this theory of redemption is in fact more or less dominated by a legalistic logic."² This sort of critique reveals more about modern commentators than about Anselm's treatise.³ Similarly, Schillebeeckx, alluding to the popular (mis)interpretations of Anselm states: "Many existing theories of our redemption through Jesus Christ deprive Jesus, his message and career of their subversive power,

² H. KÜNG, *On Being a Christian*, New York, Image Books, 1984, 423.

³ For a good discussion of Anselm's theory, see D. BENFLEY HART, "A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*" in *Pro Ecclesia* 7 (1998), 333-349.

and even worse, sacralize violence to be a reality within God. God is said to call for a bloody sacrifice which stills or calms his sense of violence."⁴

Focusing on aspects other than just the crucifixion to highlight Christ's salvific significance, such as the inauguration of the Kingdom, his concern for the poor and the outcast, is theologically sound. However, if it goes at the expense of the significance that both the NT and the ensuing tradition of Christian reflection attribute to the passion of Christ, then something is indeed amiss. It is surprising that a theologian of the stature of Schillebeeckx, for instance, who has always advocated the view that theology should engage with the scriptural witness, fails to do justice to the central role the crucifixion occupies in the gospels and the Pauline letters. I cannot help but feeling that a failure to interpret the theory of satisfaction in a meaningful manner may have something to do with his unwillingness to attribute salvific significance to the crucifixion as such.

b) *Modern Protestant theology*

On the Protestant side the picture is very different. Here the cross has retained its central place but in a manner which is not without its problems. One rather innovative way of thinking proposed by Jungel and Moltmann amongst others, argues that the cross is the most potent self-revelation of a co-suffering God. In his classic, *The Crucified God* Moltmann affirms that "the death of Jesus on the cross is the centre of all Christian theology. (...) All Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death have their focal point in the crucified Christ."⁵ In attributing a central place to the cross, Moltmann takes a traditional stance. However, he then argues that, if Christians regard the suffering Christ as a genuine self-revelation of God, we must say that God himself suffers on the cross. He attacks the traditional theistic view of an immutable, omnipotent God as an alien philosophical importation: "What kind of a poor being is a God who cannot suffer and cannot even die? (...) A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. (...) The 'unmoved Mover' is a 'loveless Beloved.'"⁶ Moltmann then goes on to exploit the implications of this idea in relation to the problem of theodicy: if God co-suffers with us, the traditional problem of theodicy (if God is good and almighty, why then so much evil and suffering) loses its edge. Or at least, Moltmann thinks it does. However, one can question the view that the knowledge that God "co-suffers" with

⁴ E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *The Church. The Human Story of God* (London: SCM, 1990), 125.

⁵ J. MOLTSMANN, *The Crucified God*, London, SCM, 1992, 204.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

us makes our sorry lot more bearable. I suspect that the knowledge that at least Someone is not subject to the humiliation of suffering can be a source of consolation too. In other words, I would not so readily discard the theistic view of God as immutable and blissful – not on the grounds that Moltmann proposes anyhow. Moreover, the so-called alien or Hellenistic philosophical categories Moltmann rejects, can be easily recast in biblical language: in this context, immutability, for example, should be understood as faithfulness of God. I will not pursue this critique any further but look instead at more traditional Protestant presentations of the cross as salvation from sin.

The most important Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, sees the cross of Christ as the place where God judges human sin, squashes it and annihilates it: “The meaning of the death of Jesus Christ is that there God’s condemning and punishing righteousness broke out, really smiting and piercing human sin, man as sinner, and sinful humanity.” He continues: “The wrath of God which we had merited, by which we must have been annihilated, and would long since have been annihilated, was now in our place borne and suffered as though it had smitten us and yet in such a way that it did not smite us and can no more smite us.”⁷ As I will show, Barth is a faithful representative of the mainstream Protestant tradition insofar as he argues that Christ shared in “the status, constitution and situation of man in which man resists God and cannot stand before him but must die.”⁸ In Christ, then, God became “the object of his own anger, the victim of his own condemnation and punishment.”⁹ On Golgotha, it was God himself who took our place and “thereby freed us from the divine anger and judgement.” The cross reveals the divine anger towards sin, it reveals what it means to resist God. On the cross, God himself bears the anger of God – and this is how Barth reconciles the divine mercy with the divine justice. Barth’s almost exclusive emphasis upon the *divine* action in Christ also ties in with the Protestant notion of *sola gratia*, whereas, as we will see, a theory of satisfaction (at least in Anselm’s and Aquinas’ interpretations) will imply an equally significant emphasis upon the redemptive work of the man Jesus of Nazareth, the sinless *representative of humanity*.

What is both distinct and yet congruous with the mainstream Protestant tradition is the way Barth emphasizes the objective nature of Christ’s salvific activity. All have been justified in Christ, “whether they hear and receive the news or whether they tried and still try to escape it. His death was the death

⁷ CD II.1, 30; p. 396-97.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

of all, quite independently of their attitude or response to this event..."¹⁰. This view too has to be seen as a radical application of the *sola gratia* principle – but it leaves critics wondering whether human freedom to respond to God's gracious activity is not being underplayed here. Finally, the objective nature of redemption in Christ also explains the universalistic tendencies of Barth's theology: the judgement all of us deserve has been already executed and suffered by Christ. Given his objective understanding of redemption salvation occurs without us, even "against us," as Barth puts it.

This short overview raises a number of problems: first, as already suggested, the objective nature of Christ's salvific activity as described by Barth seems to leave very little scope for our participation in, and free response to, Christ's redeeming activity. This "objective" character of redemption probably has to be seen in the light of Barth's almost transactional understanding of the redemption Christ effected.¹¹

Second, full scope is given to the idea of divine anger and the notion of punishment of sin in the cross of Christ. Barth attempts to qualify this view, which seems repugnant and at odds with the view of a merciful God, by appealing to the Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ, thus arguing that God suffers his own punishment and anger. However powerful this idea may seem, it remains questionable whether punishment is the most appropriate category to understand the passion of Christ.

Despite the fact that Pannenberg's approach to theology differs radically from that of Barth, his main category to grasp the salvific significance of the crucifixion does not diverge that much from the Barthian one. Indeed, Pannenberg makes the point that sin and death are, in the Jewish understanding, intrinsically bound up with one another (which implies a critique of the view that death is imposed *externally* as a punishment for sin). However, this does not mean that he refrains from understanding the crucifixion in terms of penal suffering. On the contrary, as I will show, Pannenberg adopts the idea that the crucifixion can best be understood in terms of penal suffering (*das Strafleiden Christi*) – an idea that only makes sense in the light of the Lutheran view that Christ is the universal sinner.¹² Pannenberg makes the case

¹⁰ CD IV/1, p. 295.

¹¹ If you understand sin in terms of disease, as Aquinas does, such a transactional understanding becomes less appealing.

¹² W. PANNENBERG, *Grundzüge der Christologie*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1976, 251ff: "Der Kreuzestod Jesu ist von seiner Auferweckung her als die an unserer Stelle erlittene Strafe für das gotteslästerliche Dasein der Menschheit offenbar." English translation as *Jesus, God and Man*, London, SCM, 1992, 245ff. According to Pannenberg, Luther is the first to properly formulate this Pauline insight: Daß der Tod Jesu in seinem eigentli-

that substitution (*Stellvertretung*) should be interpreted in an inclusive manner. Fully aware that the notion of penal substitution might seem problematic to modern people, he argues that the ethical individualism that lurks behind this modern critique should be challenged from the scriptural perspective, rather than the other way around. That is, instead of criticising the view that it seems unacceptable that one man dies for all, we should be aware of the social dimension of evil and challenge the modern individualistic conception of guilt and responsibility. One may agree with this, or one may not; however, that does not solve the issue of the penal character of Christ's salvific work. This aspect (*das Strafleiden Jesu*) remains unquestioned in Pannenberg's exposition.¹³ And yet this is, I feel, the more problematic aspect: can we really interpret the crucifixion in terms of punishment? Many modern people would find this view deeply problematic and totally at odds with the notion of a merciful God.

We have therefore reached an impasse. Some of the main representatives of Protestant theology have retained the cross as the central locus of Christian theology, but construct its salvific significance in what I feel to be fairly problematic categories. Catholic theologians seem to have lost sight of the cross as the central salvific event. In my view this is partly due to the fact that they have misunderstood the theory of satisfaction and construed it in terms that are actually more indebted to the later Protestant tradition. In order to make this point, I will first examine how Luther and Calvin understand the way Christ effects our salvation through his death on the cross. I will argue that the Protestant tradition has a radically different understanding of the relation of Christ to sinful humanity. This, in turn, will have repercussions on the way they understand the meaning of the cross. My point can be briefly summarized as follows: because Luther took Gal. 3:13 fairly literal the door was opened for an understanding of the cross in terms of penal substitution (as we find it in Calvin): if Christ becomes the universal sinner, then the conclusion that he should be punished on our behalf is easy to draw – and Calvin, for instance, was happy enough to do so. If, on the other hand, you refuse to give such a radical interpretation to Gal. 3:13, but put a much stronger emphasis on Christ's sinlessness, then an understanding of Christ's death in terms of satisfaction (to be understood in penitential terms, as opposed to penal terms) sug-

chen Sinne als stellvertretendes Strafleiden zu verstehen ist, das ist seit Paulus und seiner Schule wohl bei Luther zum erstenmal wieder in voller Schärfe erkannt worden." *Idem, Op. Cit.*, p. 287, (English transl. p. 279).

¹³ In his more recent *Systematic Theology*, (Vol. II, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1991) Pannenberg argues along the same lines. See chapter XI, section 3 b: "Expiation as Vicarious Penal Suffering."

gests itself. Let's have a look at the original insight of Luther: to understand the traditional notion of "exchange" between God and humanity in Christ in terms of an exchange between God and the sinner.

1. Luther and Calvin on Gal. 3:13

Gal. 3:13 runs as follows: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written: 'Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.'"

Commenting on this passage in 1535, Luther explicitly distanced himself from "Jerome and the sophists who followed him" for attenuating the view that Christ becomes "a curse." Against the Catholic view Luther argues that Christ, although sinless in himself, assumed a radical solidarity with sinful humanity. Christ, although innocent so far as his own Person is concerned, "bore the person of a sinner and a thief – and not of one sinner but of all sinners and thieves." It is worth quoting Luther at length:

"And all the prophets saw this, that Christ was to become the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world. He is not acting in his own Person now. Now he is not the Son of God, born of the Virgin. But he is a sinner, who has and bears the sin of Paul, the former blasphemer, persecutor, and assaulter; of Peter, who denied Christ; of David, who was an adulterer and a murderer, and who caused the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of the Lord (Rom. 2:24). In short, he has and bears all the sins of all men in his body – not in the sense that he has committed them but in the sense that he took those sins, committed by us, upon his own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with his own blood. Therefore this general Law of Moses included him, although he was innocent so far as his own Person was concerned; for it found him among sinners and thieves. Thus a magistrate regards someone as a criminal and punishes him if he catches him among thieves, even though the man has never committed anything evil or worthy of death. Christ was not only found among sinners; but of his own free will and by the will of the Father he wanted to be an associate of sinners, having assumed the flesh and blood of those who were sinners and thieves and who were

immersed in all sorts of sin. Therefore when the Law found him among thieves, it condemned and executed him as a thief".¹⁴

Luther criticizes those who "segregate Christ from sins and sinners," claiming Christ thereby becomes "useless" to us. Only when Christ "bears the sins of the world" and "his innocence is pressed down with the sins and the guilt of the entire world," and "our sins are as much Christ's own as if he himself had committed them," only then can Christ be subject to the divine judgment on our behalf: "And this is our highest comfort, to clothe and wrap Christ this way in my sins, your sins, and the sins of the entire world, and in this way to behold him bearing all our sins."¹⁵

Luther's radically new insight is that in a sense Christ becomes the universal sinner. In Calvin, this view was combined with the view that God punishes Christ in our place with an emphasis and a logic that was even more radical than in Luther. Commenting on the same passage (Gal. 3:13) in 1548 (revised in 1556), Calvin argues that the curse of all was placed on Christ: Christ "took our place and thus became a sinner and subject to the curse, not in himself indeed, but in us; yet in such a way that it was necessary for him to act in our name. He could not be outside God's grace, and yet he endured his wrath."¹⁶ Thus, a transfer of anger takes place: "how could he have freed us from the wrath of God if he had not transferred it from us to himself? Therefore he was smitten for our sins and knew God as an angry judge. This is the foolishness of the cross and the wonder of the angels, which not only exceeds

¹⁴ M. LUTHER, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, J. Pelikan, (ed.), Saint Louis, Missouri, Concordia Publishing House, 1963, p. 277. The reference to making satisfaction should not be taken as an indication that Luther accepts the Anselmic understanding of satisfaction. In the same passage (p. 279) we find: "Is. 53:6 speaks the same way about Christ [i.e., that our sin must be Christ's sin]. It says: 'God has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.' These words must not be diluted but must be left in their precise and serious sense. For God is not joking in the words of the prophet; He is speaking seriously and out of great love, namely that this Lamb of God, Christ, should bear the iniquity of us all. But what does it mean to 'bear'? The sophists reply: 'To be punished.' Good. But why is Christ punished? Is it not because He has sins and bears sins? That Christ has sin is the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Psalms. Thus in Ps. 40:12 we read: 'My iniquities have overtaken me; in Ps. 41:4: 'I said: 'O Lord, be gracious to Me; heal Me, for I have sinned against Thee!'; and in Ps. 69:5: 'O God, Thou knowest My folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from Thee.' In these psalms the Holy Spirit is speaking in the Person of Christ and testifying in clear words that He has sinned or has sins." Luther's comments on the "sophists" indicate that he has misunderstood traditional Catholic views.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

¹⁶ J. CALVIN, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 11, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, Thomas & David Torrance (eds.), Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1996, p. 55.

but swallows up all the wisdom of the world."¹⁷ In his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Calvin develops the same idea: "Our acquittal is in this – that the guilt which made us liable to punishment was transferred to the head of the Son of God. We must especially remember this substitution in order that we may not be all our lives in trepidation and anxiety, as if the just vengeance, which the Son of God transferred to himself, were still impending over us."¹⁸

For our purposes it is crucial to examine how this understanding of Gal. 3:13 differs from that of Aquinas. When Aquinas comments on Gal. 3:13 he uses the traditional distinction between *malum culpae* (the evil of guilt or sin, i.e., moral evil) and *malum poenae* (evil of pain or evil suffered). Explaining how Christ was made a "curse" for us, he states that Christ was made *malum culpae* (a sin) "in the opinion of men, and particularly the Jews" only, who regarded him as a sinner.¹⁹ The *malum poenae* or evil suffered is identified with Christ's suffering and death on the cross itself. This is indeed a minimalist, if not almost trivial, way of understanding the phrase that Christ became a curse, and it differs radically from Luther's understanding (as Luther was well aware) who exploits this verse, as we have seen, to argue for the radical identification of Christ with human sin. For Aquinas, Gal. 3:13 merely means that Christ suffered on the cross and that he shared in the consequences of our sinful state, or that he was considered a sinner by the Jews. For Luther, it means that Christ is the universal sinner.

This different perspective has major implications for the ways in which the Catholic and Protestant traditions (which are being considered here for heuristic reasons in a fairly general and ideal sense, without being able to do full justice to individual nuances) understand the salvific significance of the cross. Put simply, in a theory of satisfaction – the dominant Catholic view – an emphasis on the sinlessness of Christ is essential for the theory to "work": only somebody who was radically free from sin could satisfy for human sin. If, however, a radical identification of Christ with the sinner is presupposed, then the salvific work of Christ on the cross is more likely to be understood in terms of vicarious penal suffering (the cross as an instrument that appeases the divine anger).

As will become clearer throughout this paper, the medieval understanding of Christ's salvific work differs in two important aspects from that of later Protestant theologians. First, whereas in traditional medieval soteriology we,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ J. CALVIN, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk II, chap. 16, para. 5, trans. by H. Beveridge, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998, p. 439.

¹⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, Albany, NY, Magi Books, 1966, pp. 85-89.

as members of Christ, share in the redemptive work he performed on our behalf, in Protestant theology it is taught that Christ comes to share in our god-forsaken, sinful, state. Without being an actual sinner, Christ shares in the state of sinners and is accordingly subject to divine anger: "the curse of all was placed on him." Second, medieval theologians were generally reluctant to describe Christ's suffering in terms of a divine punishment imposed on Christ in our place. Rather, they understood his suffering as "making satisfaction." The theory of satisfaction, as we will see shortly, is popularly misunderstood in terms of a punishment that Christ underwent in order to appease the divine anger. However, as I will show, the theory actually implies a critique of seeing Christ's passion in terms of punishment, and sees it rather in terms of restoring a broken relationship through penance.

2. Satisfaction in Anselm

In *Cur Deus Homo* Anselm argues for the "necessity" of the incarnation as follows. Given the fact (1) that all of humanity was subject to human sin; (2) that sin distorts the order that God had established in his creation and creates "a debt" we owe to God (to the will of whom all creatures ought to be subject);²⁰ (3) that it is necessary in the light of God's justice and honour that this debt does not remain outstanding;²¹ (4) that humanity, because of the Fall, was not in a position to make satisfaction to God, although the onus is actually on humanity to do so (as we have incurred the debt); and (5) that only God could repay the debt we had incurred, it follows that it was "necessary" that somebody who was both God (who could make restitution) and Man (who ought to make restitution) did it.²²

Stating the theory in such a brief manner is bound to give fuel to the popular criticism that has been raised against it. As suggested earlier, it has been alleged that Anselm's theory entails a transactional, legalistic view of God that is utterly unfaithful to the biblical witness and the ensuing patristic theological reflection, but seems more indebted to the medieval feudal system in which categories of kingly honour and vassalage distort the Christian worldview;

²⁰ *Cur Deus Homo*, I, 11 The translation used is by B. Davies and G. Evans from *Anselm of Canterbury. The Major Works*, Oxford, OUP, 1998, pp. 260-356.

²¹ *CDH*, I, 11: "everyone who sins is under an obligation to repay to God the honour which he has violently taken from him, and this is the satisfaction which every sinner is obliged to give to God." Earlier in the same passage Anselm had clarified what "repaying God's honour" entails: it is "our righteousness or uprightness of will." This righteousness, Anselm states, is "the sole honour, the complete honour which we owe to God and which God demands from us."

²² *CDH* II, 6.

moreover, it evoked the spectre of a vindictive Father who demands the sacrifice of his Son to appease his anger; also, Anselm's God would be guilty of subjecting his mercy to his justice, and so forth.

Before we turn to this critique, there is a preliminary remark that I would like to make. It relates to the "necessity" of the incarnation Anselm establishes. A superficial reading might lead the reader to believe that Anselm is arguing in an abstract manner, without reference to the history of salvation as we know it, from within the divine mind, so to speak. However, this impression is incorrect. In *Cur Deus Homo* Anselm applies his notion of theology as faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*): he tries to better understand revelation by reasoning about it. In other words, Anselm's views do not reflect the divine mind but the human mind thinking about God and his relation to the world. It is important to remember this, in order to avoid misunderstandings. When Anselm is claiming that humanity could not be saved without recompense for sin, he should not be understood as somehow revealing to us the workings of the divine mind; he is merely trying to make sense of what has *actually* happened in Christ. In more technical theological terms, Anselm is talking about the economy of salvation, rather than the immanent divinity.

Let us now deal with some of the critique that has been levelled at Anselm's work. First, the idea that God's anger was somehow appeased by the sacrifice of his Son need not detain us, as the idea of a changeable God was unacceptable to medieval theology.²³ Moreover, salvation is *pro nobis*, it affects us and our relation with God rather than God himself. Those who argue that Anselm's views are more akin to feudal categories than to the Christian faith should remember that the notion of "satisfaction" has patristic roots.²⁴ Similarly, although Anselm's emphasis upon God's honour and the necessity to make restitution may give fuel to the critique that his theory is more influenced by the feudalism than by the scriptures, a careful reading of his text suggests otherwise. For Anselm, honouring God means nothing else than living a life of virtue in obedience to God's will: "When such a being [a rational being] desires what is right, he is honouring God, not because he is bestowing anything upon God, but because he is voluntarily subordinating himself to his will and governance, maintaining his own proper station in life within the natural universe, and, to the best of his ability, maintaining the beauty of the uni-

²³ *CDH* I, 8 (in which it is being argued that the divine nature is immutable and impassible) and I, 15: "Nothing can be added to, or subtracted from, the honour of God, in so far as it relates to God himself. For this same honour is, in relation to him, inherently incorruptible and in no way capable of change."

²⁴ See for instance TERTULLIAN, *De Poenitentia*, ch. 5, *CCSL* 1, 328.

verse itself."²⁵ Of course, every theology is influenced to some extent by its specific historical context but this should not blind us to the fact that Anselm's theory should not be seen in the light of feudal categories but rather in the light of the penitential system of the church that was developing around this time.²⁶

Similarly, the popular critique that the justice of Anselm's God overrides his mercy shows a disturbing lack of first-hand knowledge of Anselm's text, who explicitly states that one of the main purposes of his work is to show how divine justice and mercy are harmonized in the cross of Christ. Indeed, at the end of the *Cur Deus Homo*, after it has been explained how Christ, the God-man "satisfies" on behalf of humanity and thereby restores the right order within the universe, we find Anselm concluding: "Now the mercy of God which, when we were considering the justice of God and the sin of humankind, seemed to be dead, we have found to be so great, and so consonant with justice, that a greater and juster mercy cannot be imagined. What, indeed, can be conceived of more merciful than that God the Father should say to a sinner condemned to eternal torments and lacking any means of redeeming himself, 'Take my only-begotten Son and give him on your behalf,' and that the Son should say, 'Take me and redeem yourself.' For it is something of this sort that they say when they call us and draw us towards the Christian faith."²⁷

Moreover, Anselm's understanding of sacrifice is influenced by the Augustinian notion of sacrifice. In *De Civitate Dei* X, 5 Augustine had argued that God does not need any sacrifices for his own gratification ("it is man, not God who is benefited by all the worship which is rightly offered to God") but he only desires what sacrifices signify: "a heart that is broken and humbled." (Ps. 51:18)²⁸ "Thus," Augustine writes, "the true sacrifice is offered in every act which is designed to unite us to God in a holy fellowship, every act, that is, which is directed to that final Good which makes possible our true felicity." True sacrifices are "acts of compassion, whether towards ourselves or towards

²⁵ CDH I, 15.

²⁶ See J. PELIKAN, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine. Vol. III. The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*, Chicago, The Chicago University Press, 1978, pp. 143-45: "'Satisfaction,' then was another term for 'sacrifice,' and Christ's sacrificial act of penance made even human acts of satisfaction worthy, since of themselves they were not." See in this context Boso's second reply in I, 20 to the question of Anselm what sort of payment he will give to God as restitution for sin: "Penitence, a contrite and humbled heart, fasting and many kinds of bodily labour, the showing of pity through giving and forgiveness, and obedience." However, as these things are owed to God anyhow, we are unable to give God what is owed to him. Only Christ can do this.

²⁷ CDH II, 20.

²⁸ AUGUSTIN, *De Civitate Dei*, X, 5, translated by H. Bettenson as *St Augustine. The City of God*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984.

our neighbours, when they are directed towards God."²⁹ In offering our sacrifices "we shall be aware that visible sacrifice must be offered only to him, to whom we ourselves ought to be an invisible sacrifice in our hearts."³⁰ And the Church, being the Body of which Christ is the Head, learns to offer itself through him.³¹ Thus, for Augustine sacrifice has to be seen as a form of (self-)gift which mirrors the sacrifice of Christ. Understood against this larger context it becomes clear how Anselm's terminology can vary from "paying our debts," "making satisfaction," "offering," to the language of "(self-)giving" without any noticeable differences. Examples of the latter can be found throughout St Anselm's text. One example will suffice: "Is it not fitting that man, who, by sinning, removed himself as far as he possibly could away from God, should, as recompense to God, make a gift of himself in act of the greatest possible self-giving?"³² This quotation (and the book in general) suggests that "making satisfaction" centres around restoring a relationship with God through the self-gift of Christ. Indeed, the sacrifice of the God-Man is both a divine self-gift and a gift of humanity to God in Christ: "because Christ himself is God, the Son of God, the offering he made of himself was to his own honour as well as to the Father and the Holy Spirit; that is, he offered up his humanity to his divinity..."³³

In short, we need to understand "satisfaction" not as something directed towards God but rather towards the relationship between God and humanity: satisfaction is a cleansing of the sinner in his relation to God.³⁴ Therefore, even if God were to forgive sins without further ado, the relationship between God and humanity would not really be restored. It comes therefore as little surprise that we find Anselm saying that even if God were to forgive sins without asking for penance, we would not arrive at happiness.³⁵ In Christ God allows *humanity* to restore the relationship with its Creator.³⁶ Justice requires

²⁹ *De Civ. Dei*, X, 6.

³⁰ *De Civ. Dei* X, 19.

³¹ *De Civ. Dei* X, 20.

³² *CDH* II, 11.

³³ *CDH* II, 18.

³⁴ St Anselm's metaphor of the pearl (=humanity) in *CDH* I, 19 illustrates this point.

³⁵ In *CDH* I, 24 Anselm points out that he who does not pay to God what he owes him will not be able to be happy. See also I, 19.

³⁶ Of course, there are other reasons as well why to forgive sin out of mercy alone without asking for restitution would be unfitting: for instance, God would be dealing with sinner and non-sinner in the same way, which is unfitting: "this incongruity extends even further: it makes sinfulness resemble God. For, just as God is subject to no law, the same is the case with sinfulness." (*CDH* I, 12).

that evil does not prevail and is being penalized; however, the “satisfaction” Christ effects through his obedience and love, as displayed in his passion, renders “punishment” unnecessary: whereas “satisfaction” is popularly misunderstood in terms of meeting the demands of vindictive justice (Christ is being punished on our behalf), for Anselm satisfaction (which should be understood in terms of penance) rules out punishment: *aut poena aut satisfactio*. This is of major importance: Anselm’s view on the relation between satisfaction and punishment implies a critique of the popular misinterpretations of his theory in terms of penal substitution.

This is not to say that Anselm’s theory is devoid of difficulties. For instance, Anselm fails to clarify the connection between Christ’s satisfactory activity and our participation in it. This is the main weakness of his theory and has contributed to misunderstanding it in transactional terms. His understanding of “forgiveness of sins” seems at times rather limited (namely in terms of non-punishment). Moreover, whereas in Book I, 9 and 10 Anselm seems to adhere to an Augustinian understanding of sacrifice – the soteriological significance of Christ’s suffering is derived from his obedience and love rather than from his actual suffering – he seems to develop a more problematic reasoning in Book II, 14, where the value of Christ’s sacrifice seems to be derived from the value of his Person as such.

3. Aquinas on satisfaction

Aquinas adopts the notion of satisfaction³⁷ but he develops the link between Christ’s redemptive activity and our participation in it in much greater depth by espousing the Pauline notion of the Body of Christ. Aquinas also takes the edge off the Anselmic “necessity” of the Incarnation. Finally, Aquinas differs from Anselm in that he understands sinfulness as a disease, a sickness of

³⁷ In ScG IV, 54, 9 Aquinas summarises Anselm’s theory as follows: “The tradition of the Church, moreover, teaches us that the whole human race was infected by sin. But the order of divine justice – as is clear from the foregoing [ScG III, 158] – requires that God should not remit sin without satisfaction. But to satisfy for the sin of the whole human race was beyond the power of any pure man, because any pure man is something less than the whole of the human race in its entirety. Therefore, in order to free the human race from its common sin, someone had to satisfy who was both man and so proportioned to the satisfaction, and something above man that the merit might be enough to satisfy for the sin of the whole human race. (...) Therefore, it was necessary for man’s achievement of beatitude that God should become man to take away the sin of the human race.” Translation by Charles O’Neil from St Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra Gentiles*. Book four. Salvation (Notre Dame: UNDP, 1975), 232. For a good treatment of satisfaction in Aquinas, one can consult the study of R. Cessario, *The Godly Image. Christ and Salvation in Catholic Thought from Anselm to Aquinas* (Petersham: St Bede’s Publications, 1990).

the soul (*infirmetas animae*) and this different understanding will have repercussions for his understanding of the redemptive work of Christ.³⁸

Aquinas too sees satisfaction in terms of purification and penance, and he shares Anselm's view that satisfaction excludes punishment. There are, he states, two significant differences between punishment and satisfaction. First, the person who makes satisfaction to God *freely submits* himself to penance so as to renounce sin in his will. Therefore, whether afflictions are actually "punishments" or "satisfactions" depends on the *attitude* of the person who is subject to them. If we accept afflictions about which we ourselves cannot do anything, they lose their penal character and acquire instead a "satisfactory" or purifying character.³⁹ Given the purpose of both punishment and penance – purifying the sinner and restoring the "right order," which means that God (and not any creaturely idols) should be our ultimate concern (enjoyment or fruition, as he puts it in Augustinian fashion)⁴⁰ – Aquinas states that they can be dispensed with if we have sufficient love for God, for it is through charity that we are orientated towards God. This illustrates that *poenae* are not inflicted by God for their own sake, "as if God delighted in them," but for something else, namely redirecting the creatures toward their genuine goal. It is this that Aquinas has in mind when he talks of the right order of the universe.⁴¹ God is not subject to an external law; he only wants his own goodness and the fulfilment of his creatures in him.

There is a second difference between satisfaction and punishment. Whereas punishments are always personal (if Tom sins, Tom is the one to be punished), *somebody else* can "satisfy" for another *if the two are united in love*. Quoting Aristotle that "things we can accomplish through the efforts of our friends we seem to do ourselves" Aquinas states that, just as a person can make satisfaction to God by himself, so also can he do it through another person: "the love of charity in the person who suffers for a friend makes his satisfaction more acceptable to God than if he suffered for himself, for in the one case it is prompted by charity; in the other, by necessity. It may be taken from this that one person can make satisfaction for another provided both abide in char-

³⁸ Some of the following material will be developed in greater detail in my article "Bearing the marks of Christ's Passion": Aquinas' Soteriology" in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, R. Van Nieuwenhove & J. Wawrykow (eds.), Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2003.

³⁹ *ST I-II*, 87, 6 and 7; *ScG III*, 158, 5.

⁴⁰ *ScG III*, 145, 3: "the man who puts his end among created things does not use them as he should, namely by relating them to his ultimate end."

⁴¹ *ScG III*, 140, 10.

ity."⁴² I suppose this teaching could be easily misconstrued in terms of penitential substitution – a common practice throughout the Middle Ages (and a very profitable one for the Church). However, Aquinas' point is clearly Christocentric in inspiration. The merit of Christ's satisfaction is derived from his love and obedience. Through identification with Christ's redemptive work and by sharing in his charity we become utterly transformed and become part of him, and *vice versa*. This idea of incorporation in Christ – becoming part of the Body of Christ – is crucial to preclude a misunderstanding of Aquinas' soteriology in transactional or even substitutional terms. Participation in the strong sense, as Aquinas advocates here, excludes substitution: because Christ and his Church form as it were one single mystical person (*quasi una persona mystica*), Christ's satisfaction extends to all the faithful as to his members.⁴³

If Christ's obedience and love as shown in his suffering on the cross have "satisfactory" or salvific value for us insofar we are part of him, it is also the case that our own sufferings may acquire a "satisfactory" value through our incorporation in Christ. Indeed, when dealing with the objection that it appears odd to claim that Christ saved us, while death and the other afflictions are still with us,⁴⁴ Aquinas makes some points of considerable significance for a proper understanding of his soteriology. He points out that it was fitting that the afflictions (*poenae*) remain even when the fault was taken away because, amongst other reasons, the misfortunes and sufferings allow us to achieve conformity to Christ as members to the head: "hence, just as Christ bore many sufferings, and thus arrived at the glory of immortality, it was also becoming to his faithful to undergo sufferings and so to arrive at immortality, bearing in themselves, so to say, the marks of the Passion of Christ, in order to achieve a likeness to his glory."⁴⁵ This teaching is thoroughly Pauline, even according to its most recent interpretations: it is Paul's view that Christ did not die in the place of others that they escape death; rather, Christ's sharing their death makes it possible for them to participate in Christ's life and death.⁴⁶ Ultimately, Aquinas shares this view.⁴⁷

In summary, satisfaction does not refer to a legalistic transaction. Christ's death (which functions as a sign of his utter humility and obedience⁴⁸) atones

⁴² ScG III, 158, 7; see also ST I-II, 87, 8.

⁴³ ST III, 48, 2 ad 1.

⁴⁴ ScG IV, 53, 26.

⁴⁵ ScG IV, 55, 28; compare ST I-II, 85, 5 ad 2 and ST III, 56, 1 ad 1.

⁴⁶ See J. D. DUNN, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1998, p. 223.

⁴⁷ See also *Ad Rom.* 8:17, no. 651 for another text that suggests the significance of our own suffering in the light of Christ's.

⁴⁸ ScG IV, 54, 20.

(*satisfacit*) because of the charity in which he bore it. This "satisfaction" changes us (and our relationship with God), not God as such.⁴⁹ Through our incorporation in Christ, the disease of sin is being healed. In this sense Christ can be said to take away the sins of the world. Although God could have forgiven sins without "satisfaction" this would have been less fitting: for in satisfying we are allowed to put matters right with God: through Christ, humanity regains the confidence to approach God.⁵⁰ In other words, although salvation is from God alone, through Christ's satisfaction we begin to participate in God's redeeming work or even: satisfaction is an inchoative participation in our abiding with God. The interpretation of Aquinas' soteriology can be further supported by his analysis of the death of Christ as sacrifice – a topic I will be developing elsewhere.⁵¹

Conclusion

I began this article by purveying the state of affairs in the field of soteriology. I argued that in general modern "Catholic" theories of salvation fail to do justice to the salvific meaning of the cross. Twentieth century "Protestant" theology has remained faithful to the centrality of the cross as the focus of Christian soteriology, but it construed its meaning mainly in terms of vicarious penal suffering (*Strafleiden*) – a notion that seems, in my (admittedly Catholic) view, too transactional and highly problematic in the light of the NT witness to God as a loving and caring Father. It goes without saying that I have used the terms "Catholic" and "Protestant" in a heuristic manner, without wanting to imply that every Catholic theologian thinks along "Catholic" lines and every Protestant author along the lines of a "Protestant" soteriology, as outlined here. Nevertheless, given the centrality that the notion of satisfaction (as understood by Anselm and Aquinas) held in Catholic theology, and given the fact that "satisfaction" excludes understanding the cross in terms of punishment (*aut poena aut satisfactio*) and, finally, given the highly new and orig-

⁴⁹ A commonplace in medieval theology, given the immutability of God. See *ST* III, 1, 1 *ad* 1 and *ST* III, 49, 4 *ad* 2.

⁵⁰ *ScG* IV, 54, 8.

⁵¹ See note 38. This notion of sacrifice receives an emphasis and attention in *ST* it did not enjoy in the *ScG*. Perhaps Aquinas' growing personalist perspective explains why "satisfaction" (which was still the most important category governing Aquinas' exposition of the salvific activity of Christ in the *ScG*) becomes in the *ST* merely one amongst several categories (such as "sacrifice," "reconciliation," "redemption," ...) aimed at denoting Christ's salvific work and our participation in it. Or perhaps this needs to be seen in the light of Aquinas' more profound engagement with scripture during the later years of his life: unlike "satisfaction," "sacrifice" is a truly scriptural notion.

inal insight of Luther that Christ is the universal sinner, it seems correct to hold that Catholic and Lutheran soteriologies are intrinsically different. After all, one of the key presuppositions of Anselm's theory of satisfaction is that the man Jesus Christ is sinless; without this sinlessness Christ is not in a position to make satisfaction. On the other hand, Protestant theology, insofar as it concurred with Luther's affirmation of the radical identification of Christ with sinful humanity, had to abandon this perspective. This opened the door for understanding the cross as the place where God judges sinful humanity, the place where Christ undergoes a penal suffering on our behalf. It seems ironic that the popular criticism that is often levelled against Anselm's notion of satisfaction, is probably more suited to mainstream Protestant soteriology.

In the third part of this text I tried to unpack the meaning of satisfaction in Anselm's view. I argued that satisfaction should be understood in terms of the restoration of a relationship with God through the obedience and love of the sinless Christ. I also pointed to some of the weaknesses of Anselm's theory and I tried to show how Aquinas qualifies Anselm's theory.

In my view, the main ideas of the satisfaction theory, especially as developed by Aquinas, remain valuable for modern soteriology, although we may want to adopt a somewhat different vocabulary in order to avoid misunderstandings. Interpreting Aquinas' central soteriological categories in terms of meeting the demands of a vindictive justice or even in terms of substitutional penance is misplaced: as I argued, satisfaction excludes punishment, while the emphasis upon participation in Christ excludes substitution.

However, perhaps I am misrepresenting the issue when I speak of a "theory" of salvation. After all, it should have become clear that Aquinas' soteriology is more than a "theory." Given the centrality of the idea of our incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ, we should indeed refrain from reducing his soteriology to a "theory" of salvation. Christ's "satisfactory" work and sacrifice should not be understood in isolation from our participation in them, and *vice versa*: our sacrifices and penances only acquire their meaning in the light of those of Christ – which suggests that the tidy scholarly distinction between "objective" and "subjective" theories of salvation is totally inapplicable to Aquinas' soteriology. Given the close connection between sin and suffering in Aquinas' thought, it is not surprising that Christ's salvific activity on the cross also suggests to us a way of how to deal with suffering, namely by treating our suffering as an instrument to become more Christ-like. This is not to deny the crushing reality of afflictions, nor to explain them and even less to justify them. It is merely a pointer as to how to deal with them in Christ.