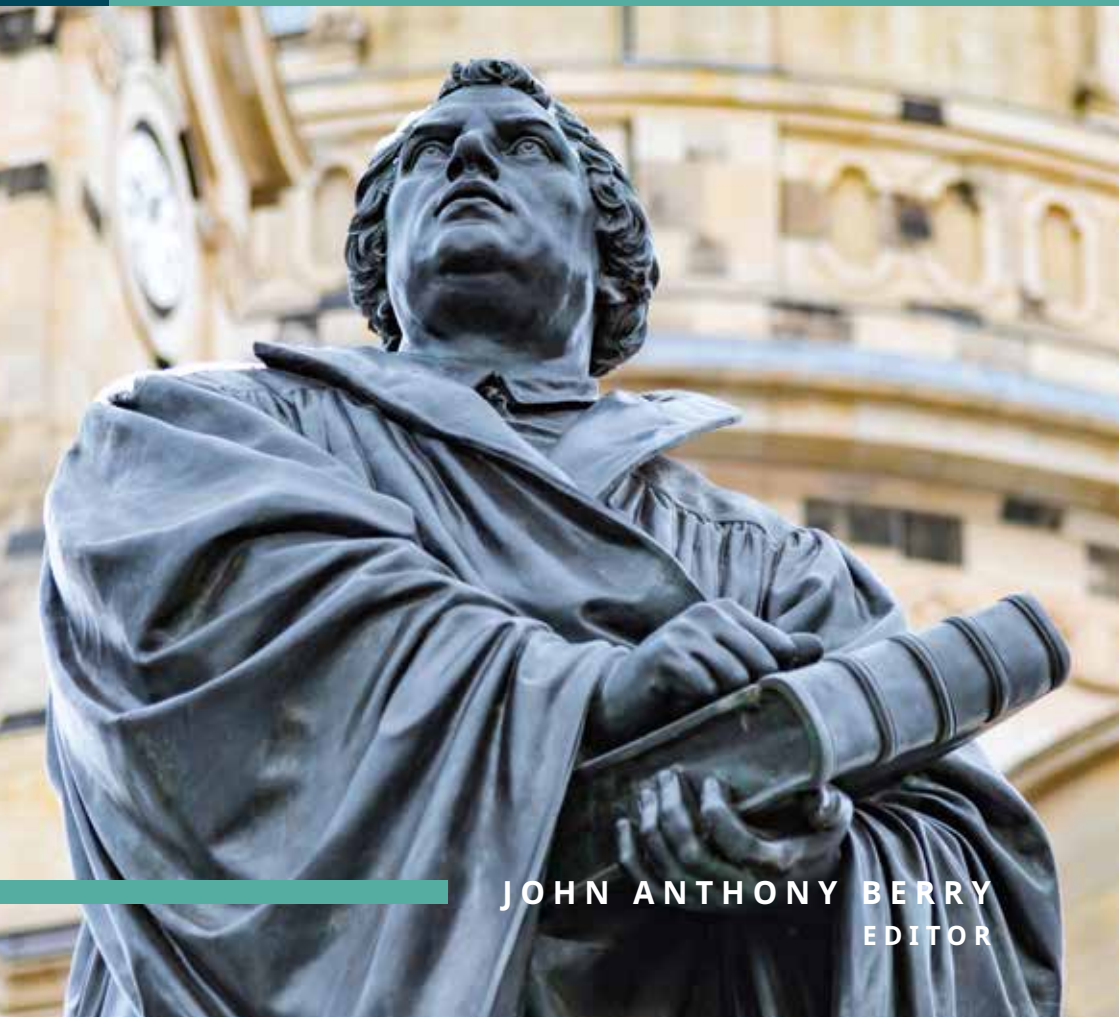


The Spirit of the Reformation

500 YEARS ON

Proceedings of the Malta International Theological Conference II



JOHN ANTHONY BERRY
EDITOR

**The Spirit
of the Reformation**

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Proceedings of the
Malta International Theological Conference
II

John Anthony Berry

Editor



L-Università ta' Malta
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Meritum in Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther

PIOTR ROSZAK, DAMIAN DOROCKI

The term “merit” often induces something akin to an allergic reaction in many who view this conception of man and his actions as somehow inappropriate.¹ For them, searching for any kind of merit on the part of man is a destruction of the primacy of grace, reducing it to a form of remuneration, making salvation no longer a gratuitous gift of God. For a great number of theologians, from the beginnings of Christianity until the present, it is a legitimate term, however, as it reveals the essential truth about man and his free answer to God’s call, even though it carries, deservedly or not, some negative connotations as a result of certain disputes.

Is it worth purifying the theological language of the notion of merit which has functioned in the Christian terminology to date? Do Martin Luther, known for his opposition against such merit-language, and St. Thomas Aquinas, who in his works repeatedly uses the term, represent two opposing views? For both theologians, merit is not the cause of

1 The text is in line with the research conducted within the framework of the grant of the National Science Center (NCN) “Identity and Tradition. The Patristic Sources of Thomas Aquinas’ Thought,” agreement number: UMO-2016/23/B/HS1/02679

grace but the result of it and there is no way we deserve this grace (*sine gratia vero nihil potest esse meritorium*),² as Thomas emphasises. Thus, the question appears to be in what sense Aquinas speaks of the “merit of faith” or the merit of eternal life. For many years, researchers have undertaken comparative studies on this problem but, as M. Root rightly observes,

“Merit does not appear to be a contemporary ecumenical problem ... the continuing discussion should neither be confessional nor ecumenical, it would simply be theological.”³

In this chapter we attempt to summarise this debate by referring to the biblical commentaries of Aquinas, which were previously absent in the discussions over the merit and the thoughts which they contain. These have rarely been quoted in recent studies⁴ and we will also seek to take into consideration not only a classic interpretation of Martin Luther’s thought, but also the Finnish school, opening up new perspectives for dialogue. It is worth noting not only their similarities, but also differences in anthropology, especially the perception of sin and concupiscence (*concupiscentia*), which led both theologians to different conclusions. Finally, after presenting these two ways of understanding merit, we will attempt to answer the question of their mutual relation.

2 Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q.26, a. 6, ad 12.

3 Michael Root, “Aquinas, *Merit* and Reformation Theology after the ‘Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification’” in *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jim Fodor, Frederick Ch. Bauerschmidt (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 5-22.

4 See Piotr Roszak, Jörgen Vijgen, ed., *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas. Hermeneutical Tools, Theological Questions and New Perspectives* (Brepols: Turnhout 2015).

Aquinas on Merit Towards a Relational Theological Framework

The semantic spectrum of the term *meritum* is invaluable, but for St. Thomas it is not of a transactional character but rather a personalist one, as it reveals the quality of personal life. Thus, it expresses the way of treating a person whether they deserve a certain treatment, such as a beautiful woman who deserves to be married to a king.⁵ Merit is not something natural, as it does not refer to equal partners or relations between equals, which would create some form of “debt” and oblige payment (*ex condigno*), but is a gift (*ex congruo*),⁶ *ex gratia Spiritus Sancti*,⁷ as Thomas says.

Merit is possible due to God’s ordination (*ordinatio*), on the basis of which God associates the merit of a gratuitous reward with certain actions; they themselves do not carry any “power” but this “power” has been established by God.⁸ God wishes to give eternal happiness to man in an unmerited way and, as a means to achieve this aim, He establishes the *meritum* based on a free choice of good. That is why man needs God’s grace even if he does not commit sin: this is due to the difference between human and divine nature.

In this logic of God’s order, namely Providence, some actions become meritorious because they originate from the free will of man permeated by love. The divine gift is assimilated by man in his freedom in a manner which is typical for man (*convenientia*), as a being possessing both reason

5 *De veritate*, q. 26, a. 6, sol.

6 *S.Th.*, I-II, q.114, a.3c: According to Thomas, it is termed as “congruous (*congruum*)” because God should reward good human deeds, even though “considered as regards the substance of the work (*secundum substantiam operis*), and inasmuch as it springs from the free will, there can be no condignity because of the very great inequality.”

7 *In Rom*, cap. VI, lect. 4 (nr 517): “Thus, therefore, if our works are considered in themselves and as coming from our fee will they not merit eternal life condignly, but as coming from the grace of the Holy Spirit.”

8 That is why Thomas states that “merit and reward refer to the same, for a reward means something given anyone in return for work or toil, as a price for it.” – *S.Th.*, I-II, q. 114, a.1c.

and will, whereas merit offers the way to realise it. Thus, merit expresses not so much gathering points which give us the right to demand something in the future (it does not establish any kind of responsibility on the part of God), but entering the logic of God's action and receiving His gift. For Thomas, merit is not what the act of creation "gives" to God because "man can give God only what he has received from God."⁹ Thus, merit is primarily the "property" of a good work which entitles man to receive a reward.

The same key to understanding merit lies in the range of what we are the masters of, and Thomas repeatedly reminds us that only that which is truly free might be meritorious; the merit of faith is based on the free answer of man to the granting of grace; the merit of the passions is based on controlling our will over them and only in this way will they truly be "ours."

It refers to both actions directly commanded the by will, such as wanting or love, but also those which, although fulfilled by other powers, remain under the influence of the will (*imperium voluntatis*). That is why Aquinas does not distinguish types of certain passions as being meritorious by themselves, because merit does not concern a certain form of action but charity:¹⁰ But every virtuous act is meritorious, if it is performed with charity.¹¹ For Thomas, we are most free ("what we do out of love we do most willingly") when we love others with charity (*caritas*) and this is the reason why he considers love as the *radix merendi* and states that "merit chiefly rest[s] with charity."¹² It is impossible to interpret it without referring to the divine

9 *In Rom.*, cap. XI, lect. 5 (nr 941).

10 *De veritate*, q.26, a.6, ad 7: ... meritum autem non consistit in actu, proprie loquendo, secundum speciem actus, sed secundum radicem, quae est caritas. Et ideo non oportet quod formaliter passione mereamur, quamvis habeat se ut obiectum

11 *In 1 Cor.*, cap. VII, lect. 1.

12 *S.Th.*, I-II, q.114, a.4c.: "Hence, even inasmuch as merit depends on voluntariness, merit is chiefly attributed to charity."

idea of *ordinatio* since *proprius actus caritatis*, for Aquinas relies on directing our minds to the ultimate end for man and this end is the subject of charity.¹³ The relations of free and responsible agents to their ends must, in some sense, be one of merit.¹⁴

Thomas's approach to merit, as presented in his *Summa Theologiae*, clearly refers to a biblical framework which makes it possible to fully understand the theological significance of meritum. It is visible, for example, in biblical citations in *sed contra* or in q.114 where he refers to 2 Tm 4:8 and the "crown of righteousness," which will be the reward. It denotes that a merit is a different name for a gift which answers human nature thanks to a gracious grant of God.

Understanding the Passion of Jesus, as happening by means of a "merit" which is communicated to the faithful, testifies to the relational context of merit.¹⁵ It stems from an understanding of grace that stresses the participative moment of it: the source of our justification is not our actions, but rather the meritorious righteousness of Jesus, thanks to which the renewal and sanctification of man occurs through his sharing in the life of God.¹⁶ It is not based on the addition of our merits to those of Jesus, but rather on their appropriation.¹⁷

Given the generic understanding of merit, it is easier to grasp the sense of the term *meritum fidei* which seems dangerously to liken Thomas to Pelagianism, however interpreted (naturalised grace, etc.). Nevertheless, Thomas does not wish to indicate whether freedom or

13 *S.Th.*, I-II q.114 a.4c.

14 *In IV Sent.*, d. 49 q. 1 a. 4 qc. 4. "Actus enim noster non habet quod sit meritorius ex ipsa substantia actus, sed solum ex habitu virtutis quo informatur. Vis autem merendi est in omnibus virtutibus ex caritate, quae habet ipsum finem pro objecto; et ideo diversitas in merendo tota revertitur ad diversitatem caritatis; et sic caritas viae distinguet mansiones per modum meriti."

15 *In I Cor.*, cap. I, lect. 2.

16 Matthew Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation According to Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 120.

17 *S.Th.*, III q.8, aa.1 and 5.

grace is primary, despite his belief in the latter being so, but instead he focuses on the realism of freedom in the act of faith. *Assentire* is essential for faith since what is not apparent happens not as *necessarium* but as *voluntarium*.¹⁸ That is why Thomas, following the Fathers of the Church, St. Gregory the Great in particular, underlines that For faith has no merit where human reason offers proof.¹⁹ Yet in the case of faith, there is no obvious evidence for the reason: in order to believe, we must be willing to do so. Thus, the presence of reason after the act of faith which follows its directions, increases the merit of faith and somehow supports the man who searches to understand that which he believes in.

Ultimately then, what is the significance of merit for Thomas? It describes the manner of growing in grace by means of offering a free answer on the part of man to the gift of God in the form of good deeds stemming from love and which direct man towards his ultimate end. It is significant that Thomas treats merit as a certain way (*per modum meriti*) of describing how the fruits of Christ's Passion, namely Salvation, reaches us.²⁰ According to Aquinas, humans need grace after the Fall for the removal of sin (operative grace) and to make human actions proportionate to God (cooperative grace.) How do human freedom and a grace which is realised in "merit" meet?

A. *PONDUS ANIMAE. MERIT AND COOPERATION WITH GRACE*

This vision of merit clearly indicates the primacy of grace, but for Thomas it is not totalizing, nor does it exclude the reality of human freedom. It is the result of his perception of the relationship between nature and

18 *Super De Trinitate*, pars 1 q. 2 a. 1 ad 5.

19 *In II Thes.*, cap. I, lect. 2.

20 *S.Th.*, III, q.48, a.6.

grace, two elements which do not operate on the same level and cannot compete with one another. Undoubtedly, the key to understanding merit (and also the reason for the related misunderstandings with Protestant theology) is a viewing of grace in an analogical rather than an unambiguous manner. These are not two sets which are parallel and they sometimes overlap: for Thomas, grace is a pneumatic substance which is autonomous but has a character of the habitus and, according to the famous adage, *supponit naturam*.²¹

Grace does not replace the fallen nature and become a new “nature” of man in a somehow substantial manner (which, after Luther, is supported by a considerable percentage of the Protestant tradition) because Thomas describes its action as being habitus, the facilitation of nature. The healing of nature and its elevation are the effects of grace which complement each other. It is not the replacement but the perfection and granting of what the nature wishes, but is not able to achieve itself. This is not the change of nature but rather granting it a power which exceeds its natural faculties. This can be compared to a situation where the Maltese rabbit whose nature is not to play the compositions of Chopin, suddenly performs the interpretation of The Revolutionary Etude, although it can only jump on the musical keyboard and make some sounds.

21 See Gilles Mongeau, *Embracing Wisdom: The Summa Theologiae as Spiritual Pedagogy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2015), 135. It is perfectly confirmed by the place of the treatise on grace in the structure of *The Summa Theologiae*, which is a pedagogical or even therapeutic work and its aim is to help young students to associate theoretical truths of faith about God in the Holy Trinity and the Incarnate with everyday life. It proves why *conformitas Christi* is the principle of Christian life from which it originates and how it functions. Grace appears to be, in this way, a trace and the image of God and it is elevated to the Image of the Only begotten Son. The foundation of this proposal is the origin of the Word which develops in the second part and concerns the forms of the presence and operation of grace.

Thus, the acts that are meritorious with respect to eternal life are hence the result of two agencies: the agency of human free will and that of God moving the will. The image used by Thomas to show the manner in which grace influences freedom is not based on a “manual steering” but on moving by means of “ebb and flow.” They do not violate nature, although they do contradict its natural *cursum*, and they stem from the movement of an external factor (the moon) which directs them towards new aims.²² In this image, sin is a form of resistance against grace, but the strength of this vision is based on showing the relation between nature and grace, not as the division of work into two parts but as a form of cooperation respecting these two realities. This gravity of grace, described by Thomas (following St. Augustine) as *pondus anime*, its weight: “like talent is the weight of metal so that the grace is the weight that inclines the soul,”²³ namely grace is not “something” added to the soul but it is its causative *inclinatio*.

Thus, within this framework of grace the sense of merit in Christian life might be summarised in the words of St. Paul (1 Cor 15:10) as *cooperari gratiae Dei*. If Paul’s preoccupation is to lead such a life in which, “his grace toward me has not been in vain” (*et gratia Dei in me vacua non fuit*), it is important to understand the nature of this *cooperatio*. For Thomas, it is not a passive approach, as in the Protestant understanding, but it relies on making good use of this grace: “For God not only infuses but he also moves us to use the graces infused well, and this is called cooperating grace.”²⁴

22 S.Th., II-II, q.2, a.3

23 In Matt., cap. XXV, lect. 2: “sicut enim talentum pondus dicitur metalli, sic gratia pondus est quod inclinat ipsam animam; unde amor est pondus animae.”

24 In I Cor., cap. XV, lect. 1.

The development of this idea can be seen in one of Aquinas' biblical commentaries. Explaining the reasons for human eternal happiness and making an exegesis of the scene of the Last Judgment in Mt 25, Thomas observes that this cooperation with grace is based on performing works of mercy:

“We ought to consider that there is a twofold cause of beatitude: one cause is on the part of God, that is to say, God's blessing; the other is on our part, meaning our merit which is from our free will: for men ought not to be lazy but cooperate with God's grace, as it is said: By the grace of God, I am what I am. And His grace in me hath not been void (1 Cor 15:10). But although there are many good and meritorious works, He only mentions the works of mercy.”²⁵

Against the background of Thomas' understanding of *concupiscentia*, the difference in Aquinas' approach to merit is clearly visible: according to him, many of the actions of the faithful are not perfect but they are not sins, since those must be chosen voluntarily. What determines the action is its subject and thus the greater good of the action does not depend on its species or the kind of action (for example, doing one activity, such as reading, is not better than any other activity, such as cleaning).²⁶ For Luther, such an explanation seems impossible, as grace and merit are not the same. The difference appears not only to be in linguistic divergences but is also rooted in the doctrine on sin and concupiscentia. It is visible in the reflection on

25 *In Matt.* [rep. Leodegarii Bissuntini], cap. XXV, lect. 3, trans. Paul M. Kimball.

26 *S.Th.*, I-II q.18 a.11 ad 1.

whether a venial sin cannot be more meritorious and how the degree of meriting increases. Aquinas explains it in his Commentary on the Letter to the Corinthians.²⁷

2. THOMISTIC GRAMMAR OF “MERIT”

In his commentaries, Thomas develops the relation between merit and reward by introducing a division between principle reward, which we owe to charity (*praemium substantiale*) and accidental reward. Interpreting the passage from the Gospel according to St. Matthew, he observes that:

“It ought to be said that the principle of merit pertains to charity, and consequently, charity pertains to the merit of the other virtues. For merit regards the principle reward, governing which, charity is considered. Thus, every work, which is performed with greater charity, has more merit. Charity alone has God for its object and end. Hence, the merit of charity corresponds to the accidental reward. Therefore, because charity informs the intention, inasmuch as man intends to do something out of greater charity, so much does he do; but the same is not true as far as the accidental reward.”²⁸

27 *In I Cor.*, cap. 11 vs. 27: “totum meritum hominis est in caritate, et ideo quanto aliquis actus magis est ex caritate, vel secundum suum genus vel quantum ad modum faciendi, tanto magis est meritorium; et dico secundum suum genus, quia contingit aliquem actum minus meritorium secundum genus aequiparari actui secundum genus suum magis meritorium quantum ad modum faciendi, in quantum fit ex maiori caritate, sicut actus matrimonii fit aliquando ex tanta caritate quod aequiparatur actui virginitatis in merito.”

28 *In Matt.*, cap. XII, lect.2. See also “The greatness of merit pertaining to the essential reward is primarily measured by charity” (*In Rom*, cap. VIII, lect. V, no. 677).

Thomas also poses a question about the “growth of merits” in man when he reflects upon Jesus’ behavior in Mt 9, where he seems to ask his listeners the question of whether he is able to perform something or not. It does not result from Christ’s lack of knowledge but is somehow an occasion for merit. Aquinas understands it to be a gracious expression of incorporating us in the communion with God which occurs through merit.

Luther on Merit

Martin Luther is frequently difficult to interpret because he was not really a systematic theologian like Philip Melancton, for example. However, in terms of merit, one can expect that his position would be strongly anti-scholastic since Luther affirms that no one can merit salvation. So, is it true that there is nothing in Luther’s writings which can surprise the reader?

This part of the chapter will present two modes of interpretation of the Reformer’s thought. The first one is termed the “classical perspective” by us with second constituting a “new perspective” associated with the New Finnish Interpretation of Luther.

1. CHANGING MERITUM TO PRAEMIUM

It has to be mentioned that the problem of Luther’s break with medieval theology of merit began from his rejection of the *via moderna* theology of merit which today could be called “semi-pelagian” by some. Authors such as John Duns Scotus, Wilhelm Ockham or Gabriel Biel have observed that prior to receiving grace, man can perform acts which are “half-merits,” that is, the acts not truly deserving grace but receiving

grace on the basis of God's covenantal contract and generosity. Thus late medieval theologians believed that the *meritum de congruo* could occur before the obtainment of grace from God.²⁹

Luther explicitly abandoned this concept and considered it to be heresy.³⁰ Nevertheless, when the Reformer started his biblical lectures from the Book of Psalms (1513–1515) in Wittenberg, he used the language of Ockhamist nominalism³¹ and spoke about the *meritum gratiae* and *gloriae* in the sense of *meritum de congruo*. But his understanding of merit developed alongside his doctrine of justification the seeds of which are visible in Luther's lectures on Psalms. However, in his lecture on Romans (1515–1516) he broke with the *meritum gratiae* and from 1518 onward, he also broke with the *meritum gloriae*.³²

This turn can only be understood in light of the fact that Luther changed his mind in the matter of sin, will, grace and – as the fruit of this – in the matter of justification. As Rafał M. Leszczyński, a Polish Reformed theologian observed, in his Commentary to the Romans, Luther developed his opinions on justification and limited Ockhamist terminology to that of St. Paul's.

29 Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross. Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 78–80.

30 Alister McGrath warns against calling this position a "Pelagian" or "semi-Pelagian" because such terms were not known to Biel. Biel was not aware of the decrees of the Second Council of Orange (529) and understood Pelagianism as it was described in the canons of the Council of Carthage (417–418) so his doctrine of justification which embraced a notion of *meritum de congruo* was orthodox if we measure orthodoxy by the consciousness (McGrath 2011, 81–83). Nevertheless, Luther rejected the *via moderna* opinion about merit as unbiblical.

31 Rafał Marcin Leszczyński, *Ojcowie reformacji i filozoficzne wątki ich teologii* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo "Nowe Spojrzenia," 2010), 27.

32 Johann Heinz, "Luther's Doctrine of Works and Reward," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 22 (1984): 68–69.

Phrases such as *arbitramur hominem iustificari ex fide absque operibus* (Rom 3:28) or *simul iustus et peccator* (Rom 7:14-25) come from that work.³³ A closer analysis of his Commentary on Romans shows that he was under the influence of Augustine, especially his *De spiritu et littera* which Luther cited as an argument for the so-called *iustitia aliena* by means of which God covers the sinner.³⁴ Luther's anthropology plays an important role in our topic. When compared and confronted with soteriology, it was pessimistic. In one of his early sermons Luther called a fallen man an unsuccessful vessel, which God the Potter had to reject and re-paste.³⁵ By this illustration, Luther described the experience of the death of the old-self. This view is reflected in his Small Catechism:

What does such baptizing with water indicate?

It indicates that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should emerge daily and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

33 Rafał Marcin Leszczyński, *Ojcowie reformacji i filozoficzne wątki ich teologii* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo "Nowe Spojrzenia," 2010), 27-28.

34 See for example Luther's *Commentary on Romans* (Rom. 3:21) where he cited *De spiritu et littera* in context of imputed righteousness (Luther 1954, 76-77).

35 Luther Martin. 1884. "Ein sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen sakrament der tauffe" in *Weimar Ausgabe*, Vol 2/1, 727-737, Access: 27 December 2017, 727-737. <https://archive.org/stream/werkekritischege02luthuoft#page/726/mode/2up>.

Where is this written?

St. Paul writes in Romans chapter six: “We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”³⁶

So, grace which is not built on anything, on the human part alone, is not a starting point but only a change by grace, and therefore salvation gives a starting point for the change of man and his restoration or sanctification. Divine activity alone is the beginning of salvation. It has to be mentioned that Luther’s soteriology has a monergistic character. It is crucial for our topic because in monergism the notion of merit in relation to man cannot work. So it is the reason why he rejected the *meritum de congruo* but also the *meritum de condigno*.

This logic stems from the doctrine of justification. Since faith – which is not merit – “but rather the means or medium, that receives the grace of God in justification (...), is the ground of our justification, and since justification is not an infusion of righteousness that makes a sinner righteous in and of himself,”³⁷ the sinner cannot do anything of merit, even of “half-merit.” “The good acts which flow from grace are divine acts in us and contribute nothing at all to man’s salvation. Since, in this view, only perfect righteousness can be meritorious, only Christ merits life in and of himself, not for himself, but vicariously for us. This merit of Christ (...) is the superabundant ground of salvation and is

36 http://www.st-ansgars-montreal.ca/WhatIs/Small_Catechism.pdf [20.12.2017].

37 Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms. Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985), 162; 283.

the sole true merit.”³⁸ But here it should be noticed what the Reformer said about *iustitia infusa* or “the second kind of righteousness,” i.e. the relation between justification and sanctification:

“The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works, in the first place, in slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self (...) in the second place, this righteousness consists of loving one’s neighbour, and in the third place, in meekness and fear toward God. This righteousness is the product of the righteousness first type, actually its fruit and consequence (...) This righteousness goes on to complete the first for it ever strives to do away with the old Adam and to destroy the body of sin.”³⁹

So, for Martin Luther, forensic justification, which is complete, precedes an inner sanctification as the basis for it. Only a justified believer can experience sanctification, which is the work of a lifetime for the Reformer. And grace is not a “new nature” (in the sense of replacement) of a corrupted sinner. Sanctifying grace is a work of the Holy Spirit who shapes the heart of a man. As Luther puts it:

“Moreover, we are here admonished, that, according to the flesh, there are yet natural vices remaining in the Churches, and in the godly. Grace maketh not such a change in the faithful, that by-and-by they become altogether new creatures, and perfect in all things: but there remain yet certain dregs of their old and

38 Ibid., 190.

39 Martin Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 157-158.

natural corruption. As if man, that is naturally prone to anger be converted to Christ, although he be mollified by grace (the Holy Ghost so framing his heart, that he is now before more meek and gentle), yet this natural vice is not utterly quenched in his flesh. So it is with such as are, by nature severe and sharp, although they be converted to the faith, yet they cannot entirely forsake this vice (...) Thus the Spirit of God, being poured into diverse vessels, doth not quench at once the vices of nature: but by little and little, during this life, He purgeth that sin which is rooted (...) in all men.⁴⁰

Although Luther had to struggle with biblical fragments about reward, he insisted that those passages do not refer to merit and so he changed the Latin *meritum* to the Latin *praemium*. This change is not only a linguistic modification, but it also entails either a new theological perspective or this perspective is the cause of a shift from merit to reward. The “biblical reward implies that the work is done for God’s sake and is an illustration of the promise of God, which the believer now possesses by faith and will later possess by sight.”⁴¹ Thus the term of promise is crucial in this context since reward is not based on our meritorious works but on God’s promise. The moral dimension of a believer’s deeds is not important for Luther in the first place. The most important is the theological aspect of good works – i.e. the reference or relation to God.

40 Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, Trans. Erasmus Middleton (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1979), 102.

41 Johann Heinz, “Luther’s Doctrine of Works and Reward,” 46.

The Bible calls for Christians to do good because living faith is fruitful (the so-called *fides incarnata*), otherwise it would not be real faith. This call reminds the believer about his need for obedience to God.⁴² The reward is fully gratuitous and, in general, it is eternal life. Yet apart from this universal reward, Luther distinguished a special “charismatic reward.” The charismatic reward refers to extraordinary Christians, such as Apostles or martyrs. “This greater reward is derived from the greater gifts which were given to the Apostles and the martyrs, gifts which “without any cooperation and thought” come from God and therefore do not provide a basis for any merit.”⁴³ This obviously raises the question of what the object of this merit is. It appears that it must be some greater glory or some other spiritual gifts added to that of the general reward – of eternal life.

Thus it seems that this concept of reward is built upon Luther’s doctrine of justification within the monergistic framework of soteriology. In this perspective, man’s freedom or goodness is not important. They are only a means by which God reveals his mercy and glory. Therefore, a discussion on the divine response to good does not make sense for Luther, since the only reason of one’s salvation is Christ – His person and work. As a result of this understanding, the notion of *meritum de condigno* had to be useless for the Reformer. The Holy Spirit does not work in us in order to contribute something to our salvation. Christ’s redemption provides everything that is needed to reach heaven and it eliminates any type of merit from the equation.

42 Ibid., 54.

43 Ibid., 46.

New Finnish Perspectives on Luther

A new interpretation of Luther's thought has recently been proposed by Finnish Lutheran theologians. The context of the origins of this new perspective is an ecumenical one, namely the theological dialogue since the 1970's between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church. Finnish scholars emphasise the motif of a living Christ in faith or the indwelling of Jesus' righteousness in Christians, which is known in Protestant theology as the *unio cum Christo*. Once again, a discussion about the new opportunities offered by the Finnish School concerning the issue of merit lies in the context of justification.

The main point of the Finnish theologians is that for Luther, justification means a close ontological union with Christ, as the author of this line of thought, Mannermaa, wrote:

“According to Luther, Christ (in both his person and his work) is present in faith and is through this presence identical with the righteousness of faith. Thus, the notion that Christ is present in the Christian occupies a much more central place in the theology of Luther than in the Lutheranism subsequent to him. The idea of a divine life in Christ who is really present in faith lies at the very center of the theology of the Reformer.”⁴⁴

What is interesting is that, for the Finns there exists a discontinuity between Luther and Lutheranism in terms of theological accents. The “Finnish Luther” is not focused on forensic justification as much as on the presence of Christ in the believer. One of the most important sources for Finnish theologians is Luther's Commentary on Galatians.

44 Tuomo Mannermaa, “Why is Luther so Fascinating? Modern Finnish Luther Research,” in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten, Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids-Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 2.

The crucial text is Gal. 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (NIV) These words of the Apostle Paul were commented upon by the Reformer in the following manner:

“And he (i.e. Paul) teacheth what true Christian righteousness is, namely, that righteousness whereby Christ liveth in us, and not that which is in our own person. And here Christ and my conscience must become one body, so that nothing remain in my sight but Christ crucified, and raised from the dead. But if I behold myself only, and set Christ aside, I am gone.”⁴⁵

In light of the theology of the union with Christ, justification appears as the intrinsic dwelling of Christ in persons who have faith. Thus, if we understand it rightly, the *iustitia aliena* is not imputed but infused, or at least imputed as something in the believer, and this is the main novelty of the Finnish interpretation. Christ lives in the believer, He is one person with him, and his righteousness belongs to the Christian. That is why every good deed which we do, we do because of this ontological *unio cum Christo*. Christ is present in our faith, as Luther expressed it in his Commentary on Galatians: “He is my form, my furniture and perfection, adorning and beautifying my faith (...)”⁴⁶ But following this logic, it can be said that Jesus Christ is present in our works as well. And if this is true, the door to embracing the language of merit in Lutheranism is open.

45 Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Erasmus Middleton (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1979), 88. Emphasis added.

46 Ibid.

At least, this is the thesis of the Roman-Catholic theologian Mats Wahlberg, whose ideas will be presented later and against whom we will raise some objections.⁴⁷ Since Christ meritorious works made outside the sinner, are transferred by faith to him in order to become his attribute, what about the deeds which Christ performs in and through Christians? They still have to be works worthy of merit, because Christ is their source and He is one person with the believer. Obviously, human nature is corrupted by sin, even after the conversion, but the same nature is involved in the life of Christ, who now lives and not me.⁴⁸

The most interesting argument of Wahlberg's stems from Luther's analogy between the human and divine nature of Christ regarding the relation of faith and works. He criticises Luther for his claim that only the divine nature of Jesus played a role in the salvific process of redemption. It would mean that incarnation was unnecessary and useless, but if God wanted to save people as He did, the humanity of Christ was actively involved in salvation. "The incarnation represents an extension of divine action by which God implicates human nature as a vital element in the process of salvation."⁴⁹ Returning to faith and works, the Reformer from Wittenberg believed that faith "divinised" the believer's deeds and called them the *opera deificata* or *fides incarnata*. And if that relation is analogous to the hypostatic union in Christ, it naturally follows that the works of the Christian have a salvific dimension because faith, which produces the good works, makes them pleasing to God. According to Wahlberg, this is the reason why Catholic tradition maintains that the deeds of those who are united with Christ are considered as merits which secure access to heaven.⁵⁰

47 Mats Wahlberg, "Merit and the Finnish Luther," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16 (2014): 284-290.

48 *Ibid.*, 285.

49 *Ibid.*, 287.

50 *Ibid.*, 286-7.

It is divine grace that makes works pleasing to God, but grace really makes the works pleasing, which means that they too are implicated in salvation (albeit in a way that is totally dependent on grace). Luther's own Christological argument should lead him to the same conclusion. Works, as 'incarnate faith/grace,' are meritorious in relation to salvation.⁵¹

The theology of merit in such a form should not necessarily lead to "self-trust" and pride, because every believer knows that he is deeply dependent on Christ and the divine grace which dwelt in Him. It is only due to the *unio cum Christo* that one can produce meritorious works and, therefore, who can be proud if the first cause of my righteous deeds is grace?⁵²

Wahlberg, however, notices one serious obstacle – the formal cause of justification.⁵³ For the Council of Trent, it is God's justice which transformed the sinner into a righteous person, but for Lutherans it is the righteousness of Christ alone. If we cannot overcome this difficulty, we cannot speak about the possibility of the language of merit in Lutheran theology. Yet he also tries to harmonise the Tridentine declarations with the Finnish interpretation of the doctrine of justification. He notices that the term "faith" in the Finnish School reminds us of the Catholic infused grace/virtues, because faith always occurs for Finns together with love. The second point is that a formal cause would be interpreted not as Christ's righteousness but as a participation of the believer in this righteousness. It reflects the Tridentine "distinction between 'the justice by which God himself is just' (Christ's righteousness) and 'inhering justice' or 'infused grace'

51 Mats Wahlberg, "Merit and the Finnish Luther," 286-7.

52 *Ibid.*, 289-90.

53 *Ibid.*, 291-2.

(the believer's participation in Christ's righteousness).⁵⁴ This is only a cursory analysis and the starting point for further research, something of which Wahlberg is well aware.

Wahlberg's perspective is an interesting one and certainly has its strengths, however it seems to us that he omitted some aspects of Luther's thought. Firstly, he mentions that merit is "that property of a good work which entitles the doer to receive a reward."⁵⁵ This means that merit is closely related to the virtue of justice (Catechism of the Catholic Church, § 2006) and morality. However, for Luther, the ethical dimension of a good deed should not be important in his theology of reward. For Luther, the motif of the good works which he calls sins occurs repeatedly and it is a theological qualification, not an ethical one – these are deeds without faith. Sin is not a moral category; it is primarily a theological category that defines the relationship (or rather its absence, God's negation, unbelief) to God.⁵⁶ Faith, then, really makes works pleasing to Him, because faith is a proper reference to God. Thus, a believer acts as one who is justified, being in a good relation to God and this is what counts in the first place.

Secondly, since Christ redeemed us by His death and resurrection and this redemption is perfect, there is no need for merit in our life. Even if Christ dwells in us and leads a righteous life, his works done both in and through us are the fruits of his righteousness, but they are not merits because the *meritum Christi* which secured eternal life was made up outside of us and nothing can be contributed to it, otherwise Christ's righteousness would not be perfect and full. Thirdly, while the Council of Trent defined justification as a process, Luther (no matter if we consider him in his classic or Finnish incarnation)

54 Ibid., 292.

55 Ibid., 276.

56 I am thankful to Dr Jerzy Sojka, a Polish Lutheran theologian from the Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw for his help in understanding the theology of Martin Luther and for showing me this specific element of Luther's thought.

considered it to be a single act. Man is justified by God in the moment when he believes in Christ. The repair of man's nature is obvious, so the entire work of God cannot end with imputed righteousness. Making someone righteous is a salvific process in terms of the recreation and preparation for God's kingdom, not in terms of earning the eternal life. So, it appears that the Finnish Luther does not necessarily lean towards merit theology.

An Attempt to Summarise Thomistic and Lutheran Approaches to the Question of "Merit"

In Luther's approach, there is a conviction that the salvation (or damnation) of man is not a question of merit as nothing can determine God in His freedom. The sign of this freedom is the granting of grace, namely love revealed in Jesus Christ. According to Luther, it is not possible to reconcile grace and merit, since they are like two parallel lines. For Aquinas, the perspective is different, as expressed in his division of merit into the *de condigno* and *de congruo* varieties which, however, do not happen consecutively but are two aspects of one action (whether it is discussed from the perspective of grace or freedom acting under the influence of grace).

Aquinas, however, does not think about the way it is presented later in nominalism, where grace and merit are seen as the "partial" causes of salvation, concepts Martin Luther had to struggle with. Evident anthropological differences overlap with metaphysical ones, especially in the understanding of freedom, which for Luther is associated with free will whereas for Thomas a voluntary act does not equal a free act. Similarly, Luther understands contingency as a coincidence or good luck and therefore he excludes it from the world in which God

acts. However, all these differences are rooted in a more fundamental distinction – the rejection of analogical language and following nominalist solutions.⁵⁷

In the field of anthropology there is a considerable difference between Aquinas and Luther which is visible in their manner of treating concupiscence and sin, although it seems that there is a change of approach in this respect. In a recent publication *Aquinas Among the Protestants*, Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen draw attention to the surprising absence of those noticing the anthropological potential of Aquinas' theology which is so close to Protestant ideas, such as the creation of the world as the act of grace, the fall as a loss (the wound of sin) and not as the loss of likeness and the redemption as an "asset" and not as the return to a former state of the Paradise.⁵⁸

By the way of a conclusion, for those trying to discover a profound message hidden behind the language of "merit" in Aquinas' thought it is worth concentrating on three issues presented here in the following sub-sections. They reveal not only the truth about man, but mostly about God and His manner of acting.

3.1 A GOD WHO REACTS TO GOOD

Merit emphasises the responsiveness of God who reacts to the good done by man thanks to God's movements. *Ordinatio* is a sign of wisdom in relating some actions with reward, not a compulsion of God. For both thinkers, merit is based on the internal action of the Holy Spirit, whereas what divides them is the notion of sin and the manner of cooperation with grace. For Luther, it is passive, such as a new birth out of the divine womb (*uterus divinus*), whereas for Aquinas, who

57 See Piotr Roszak, "Analogical Understanding of Divine Causality in Thomas Aquinas," *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2017): 133-153.

58 Manfred Svensson, David VanDrunen, *Aquinas Among the Protestants* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018).

does not think in a dialectic nominalist manner, cooperation with grace is possible thanks to grace itself; it is not placing man on the same level as God. This is a consent to God's action in man resulting from respecting one's created nature and leading it in the manner which is most appropriate (*convenientia*) to its full realisation in grace. It is perfectly illustrated by the metaphor of the tides.

3.2 A LOSS OF ONTOLOGY

It is difficult to find in Thomas' thought the conviction that there is a purely natural area in human action so that it would be possible to separate the sphere of God and the sphere of man. Merit is not a notion which expresses a sterile human act which results in the obligation of remuneration on the part of God. Thomas does not present this kind of attitude, but he inscribes merit in the dynamics of the growth of grace: God does not contradict human freedom, nor does He replace it, but makes it truly free by means of cooperation with grace. The language of merit is a promotion of human self-trust whereas, for Thomas, it directs one towards the realism of human freedom which in the service of grace is able to receive the gift of salvation. The aim is to discover the truth about God who elevates and brings the true good performed by man to fruition. This seems to be insignificant for Luther because of his concept of the theological dimension of human actions.

3.3 ZERO-SUM GAME? EXTRINSICISM IN PERCEIVING GRACE

Thomas' approach to reality is based on the logic of *inchoatio*, namely the initiation on earth of what man will participate in for eternity thanks to God's grace. Thus, faith is "the beginning of eternal life" that is not so much the choice of one of many options but the true seed of eternity. The granting of the reward will not happen later but is

happening now and merit is the element of this logic which makes the work of grace in life more concrete. For Thomas, merit is not the cause of grace, but the result of it.

Thus, it is not a zero-sum game where we do not have anything now, but we are accumulating points in order to receive gratification later. Metaphysical thinking within the capacity-realisation framework undoubtedly helped St. Thomas to express what happens through the Holy Baptism in theological language.

The relation of nature/grace and, by extension, merit is analogical to the relation between human nature and divine nature in Christ. Both faith (grace) and acts which result from faith (merit) are truly engaged in human salvation but to a different extent. The frequently recalled resolutions of the Council of Chalcedon concerning the natures of Christ are pertinent to the reflections on merit: the point is to propose such a discourse which would present nature and grace “without confusion” and “without separation.”

Conclusions

The literature on the question of the relation between Aquinas and Luther has formed two ways of perceiving this problem. One of them is represented by Father Otto-Herman Pesch OP who draws attention to the fact that the differences between these two thinkers result from a different approach to theological themes.⁵⁹ Aquinas is characterised by the sapiential approach, whereas Luther reflects the existential one.⁶⁰ Further studies by, among others, Servais-Théodore Pinckaers OP open up perspectives on the theses widespread in the late Middle

59 See Olli-Pekka Vainio, “Martin Luther on Perception and Theological Knowledge,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie. Gruyter* 57, no. 1 (2015): 87 -109.

60 See Otto Hermann Pesch, “Die lehre vom ‘verdienst’ als problem für theologie und verkündigung,” in *Wahrheit und verkündigung: Festgabe M. Schmaus*, ed. L. Scheffczyk, et al. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1967), 2: 1865–1907.

Agnes concerning human freedom which was identified with free choice and not with the choice of good, as Aquinas emphasises.⁶¹ This was the intellectual climate which Luther encountered.

Perhaps a different suggestion, namely of viewing the reflections of both thinkers on merit, might be expressed by analyzing the inspirations of Eleonore Stump and her proposal of “quantum theology.”⁶² This is practicing a form of theology which is able to describe the same reality (such as light) in many different ways (waves, particles). It will not be limited to only one discourse but will rather be aware of its own multifaceted nature.

Applying a slightly different metaphor, it might be said that Thomas is an advocate of a symphonic approach which stems from his awareness that the manner of speaking about God is analogical. However, it does not mean that the unisono, which clearly and distinctly articulates the main melodic line, is worthless. It is frequently difficult to recognise the main motif in the symphony, although great theologians have always been able to do so. Perhaps in a world of clear-cut divisions (black and white, us and them) Thomas appeared to represent an avant-garde approach which is also relevant to the treatment of his thought nowadays.⁶³

61 Servais-Théodore Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

62 Eleonore Stump, “God’s Simplicity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies, Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 135-146.

63 We would like to thank to Anna Olkiewicz-Mantilla and Aeddan Shaw for their help in translation and proof-reading of this text.

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