

"THE 'MEASURE AND MANNER' OF OUR LOVING: THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE BLESSED IN HEAVEN"

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Knowing God—whether from this side of eternity or within the courts of the heavenly Jerusalem—is truly a mystery, one which St. Thomas knew well. In his prologue to question three of the *Summa Theologiae*, he writes, “We cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not.”¹ At first glance, it would seem that this is a bleak state of affairs: can anything, then, be known of God now? Can anything be known of how we will know God in heaven? Almost as if in response to this question, St. Thomas enumerates the way that he will lead the reader to the understanding of God: firstly, by considering what He is not, and secondly, by considering the human soul’s knowledge of Him.²



The second of these two ways—consideration of our knowledge of God—is the foundation for our current reflection’s question: how will we know God after death?

As St. Paul states so well in his letter to the Romans, upon this earth, we see God indistinctly, as in a mirror—but in our heavenly homeland, we shall see clearly and know fully, for we shall see Him face to face (see 1 Cor. 13:12 NAB). St. John echoes this in his First Epistle as he writes, “We shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2). However, in what precisely this consists—seeing Him as He is—is the mission and ruminating study of St. Thomas. With the support of these two verses (and many others), St. Thomas begins his treatment of our knowledge of God by clearly demonstrating that the created intellect can see the essence of God; however, it is only the blessed which see this in heaven.³ This is because, as he further explains in article 11, as long as we are bound to our material bodies on earth, it is impossible for the soul of man in this life to see God’s essence, since in our material bodies we experience knowledge through things which have a form in matter, and God is completely immaterial.⁴

The Catechism of the Catholic Church echoes what St. Thomas taught centuries before, stating, “Because of his transcendence, God cannot be seen as he is, unless he himself opens up his mystery to man’s immediate contemplation and gives him the capacity for it. The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory ‘the beatific vision.’”⁵ In this quote, we find two distinct elements which distinguish the knowledge of God in heaven from the soul’s knowledge of Him on earth: firstly, the immediacy of knowledge of Him, and secondly, the capacity to receive this knowledge of Him. It is to these two elements that we now turn.

The immediacy of the contemplation of God’s essence is one of the marks of the knowledge of God which the blessed enjoy. On earth, our knowledge of things is not immediate. We proceed from one principle to another, considering each thing in itself or knowing effects through their causes.⁶ However, as St. Thomas teaches, God’s divine essence is that through which all of Him is seen and understood. Therefore, when the blessed can so contemplate Him in heaven, all things seen in Him will not be seen successively, each aspect of Him having its own idea, but rather simultaneously—immediately—because they are seen in light of the Word, Who is supremely one. St. Augustine ponders this heavenly knowledge of God as he writes, “Perhaps, too, our thoughts will no longer revolve by passing and repassing from one thing to another, but we shall see all our knowledge at once, and at one glance.”⁷ When we consider Augustine and Aquinas together, we can see that they complete each other: our thoughts will be so stable in heaven because all that we see and know will be seen in the Word, and thus, simultaneously and immediately. In this same work, St. Augustine further attests, “As regards that vision of the Word, no changing thoughts exist in the Saints.”⁸ This affirms this particular mode of knowledge that the blessed possess in heaven: because they now see God “face to face,” they are able to see Him and all things through His essence at once. Thus, we can say that the essence of their thoughts is God—who is altogether stable and unified—and therefore, their thoughts are stable, a quality that the created intellect on earth does not enjoy.

The second phrase from the Catechism to consider in relation to knowledge of God after death is “*the capacity for.*” As we previously saw, God Himself must be the One to tear away the veil of His mystery and give us the capacity to know it in the beatific vision. What then, can we say of this capacity? In his musings

on our knowledge of God, St. Thomas provides an answer: charity. He teaches that charity expands the heart and mind for a greater knowledge of God, for, “Where there is greater charity, there is the more desire; and desire in a certain degree makes the one desiring apt and prepared to receive the object desired. Hence he who possesses the more charity, will see God the more perfectly, and will be more beatified.”⁹ St. Thérèse of Lisieux illustrates this scholarly teaching well. Writing to her sister Pauline, she states,

“I once told you how astonished I was that God does not give equal glory in heaven to all His chosen. I was afraid they were not at all equally happy. You made me bring Daddy’s tumbler and put it by the side of my thimble. You filled them both with water and asked me which was fuller. I told you they were both full to the brim and that it was impossible to put more water in them than they could hold [. . .] you made me understand that in heaven God will give His chosen their fitting glory and that the last will have no reason to envy the first.”¹⁰

In this example, this little Doctor of Love speaks of the varying degrees of glory of the blessed in heaven; however, one could equally apply this to St. Thomas’ teaching, substituting instead what he speaks of: the “light of glory” given to the created intellect by God through grace, enabling man to see God’s essence. A smaller soul, in the words of St. Thomas, is one whose capacity for God has not been as greatly enlarged by charity; thus, he will not see God in heaven as clearly as will those whose desire for God, impelled by charity, has expanded their souls to a greater degree and enabled it to receive a fuller contemplation of the eternal Being of God.

In his Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI speaks about this very phenomenon in the context of hope—how prayer is the school for expanding our hearts in hope. He writes, “Man was created for greatness—for God himself; he was created to be filled by God. But his heart is too small for the greatness to which it is destined. It must be stretched.”¹¹ He then quotes St. Augustine, who says, “By delaying [his gift], God strengthens our desire; through desire he enlarges our soul and by expanding it he increases its capacity [for receiving him.]”¹² What is God’s gift, if not the total and complete revelation of Himself to man—seen in fullness in the beatific vision? It is interesting to note here a connection that St. Thomas also makes between hope and the knowledge of God. While he maintains that God cannot be comprehended by the created intellect (since to comprehend is to know something perfectly, to the fullest extent that it can be known), he admits that there is another way to consider comprehension: by means of attaining to God—that is, possession of Him. He writes, “In this sense [of attaining God] God is comprehended by the blessed [. . .] Comprehension is one of the three prerogatives of the soul, responding to hope [. . .] the blessed [. . .] see Him, and in seeing Him, possess Him as present, having the power to see Him always; and possessing Him, they enjoy Him as the ultimate fulfillment of desire.”¹³ Although all three of the theological virtues function harmoniously and inseparably, here we see a great connection between hope, love, and the soul’s possession of God—that is, receiving His fullness in the beatific vision.

Setting aside the virtue of hope, let us return to the question of love and its ability to expand our capacity to know God in heaven, seen in another teaching from Our Holy Father. In his General Audience on William of Saint-Thierry, Pope Benedict XVI writes,

“Love has another important quality: it illuminates the mind and enables one to know God better and more profoundly and, in God, people and events [. . .] A famous saying of William expresses it: ‘*Amor ipse intellectus est*: love in itself is already the beginning of knowledge.’ Dear friends, let us ask ourselves: [. . .] is it not perhaps true that we only truly know *who* and *what* we love? [. . .] And this applies first of all to the knowledge of God and his mysteries that exceed our mental capacity to understand: God is known if he is loved!”¹⁴

Although this audience refers primarily to the soul’s knowledge of God on earth, we can apply this teaching to our glorified state, knowing that none of what we are is destroyed in heaven, but rather, brought to its fulfillment—just as Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (see Mt. 5:17). We are truly able to know God through our love of Him on earth—and it is our love for Him on earth that will determine our degree of knowledge of Him in eternity. As then-Cardinal Ratzinger taught, “The measure and manner of [man’s] eternity depend on the measure and manner of his loving.”¹⁵ This conclusion comes at the end of the following teaching: that love alone is eternal, as this is God’s nature. Thus, man’s eternity *is* God’s love: being lifted up “imperishably” by Love.¹⁶ Cardinal Ratzinger writes, “If [man’s] loving is his future, then the future for him is both doing and receiving—at the same time entirely his own and entirely what is given to him.”¹⁷ We can see how this teaching comes full-circle with St. Thomas’ teaching on our knowledge of God in heaven: we are given the beatific vision by God Himself, when at last we are fully in union with Him and can see Him face-to-face. This is what Cardinal Ratzinger refers to as “receiving.” However, we are also “doing”

in eternity in the sense that our knowledge of God will truly be our own—it is not one common knowledge of God that all the blessed receive, as if the beatific vision were the same vision that each of the blessed beheld for all eternity. Rather, although the content of the vision is the same (since it is the same God seen and known by all, just in varying degrees of profundity), we could say that we personally shape this vision by our individual capacities. For just as we retain our individuality in heaven (yet find our truest selves in complete union with Christ), we also retain the individuality of our thoughts and desires in reference to God. As we have seen, this capacity is determined by our manner of loving here on earth.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul interestingly ends one of the most beautiful discourses on love in Scripture by speaking about our knowledge of God both on earth and in heaven. He teaches that the imperfect shall pass away when we die; that the mirror through which we have beheld God for so long will be replaced by the True Light Himself—and we shall “know fully, even as [we are] fully known” (see 1 Cor. 13:10, 12). As then-Cardinal Ratzinger taught, St. Paul also knew so well: the measure and manner of our loving here on earth will determine the measure and manner of our eternity. Thus, although we cannot precisely say what we shall know or what we shall see—all of the details, or the manner in which our knowledge shall burst the boundaries that our mortal bodies have imposed upon our intellect while on earth—we do know that we shall not only see Him as He is, but that we shall also be like Him (see 1 John 3:2). And this, as St. Augustine so beautifully concludes, is enough for us:

“What then shall we be, when we shall see this? What is promised to us? We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. The tongue has done what it could, has sounded the words: let the rest be thought by the heart [. . .] Return we therefore to that unction of Him, return we to that unction which inwardly teaches that which we cannot speak: and because ye cannot at present see, let your part and duty be in desire.”¹⁸

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 3, prologue, in *The Summa theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1947), at Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org>.

² *Ibid.*

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 12, a. 1, Second and Revised Edition, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920), at New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

⁴ *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 11, trans. English Dominican Province.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 1028, at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, www.scborromeo.org

⁶ See *ST*, I, q. 14, a. 7, trans. English Dominican Province.

⁷ Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity*, 15, 16, at New Advent, www.newadvent.org

⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity*, 15.

⁹ *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 6, trans. English Dominican Province.

¹⁰ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 20.

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical on Christian Hope *Spe Salvi* (30 November 2007), §33.

¹² *Spe Salvi*, §33.

¹³ *ST*, I, q. 12, a. 7, ad 1, trans. English Dominican Province.

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience on St. William of Saint-Thierry (2 December 2009).

¹⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 259.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *Homily 4 on 1 John*, 6, at New Advent, www.newadvent.org

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