

THOMAS AQUINAS—CONSULTATION

Topic:	Mercy in the Thomist Tradition
Convener:	Gregory LaNave, Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception
Moderator:	David Whidden, Our Lady of the Lake College
Presenter:	Romanus Cessario, O.P., St. John's Seminary
Respondents:	Mark Johnson, Marquette University Michael Dauphinais, Ave Maria University

Romanus Cessario began his paper, “Mercy in Aquinas: Help from the Commentatorial Tradition,” by evoking the single article on God’s mercy in the *Summa Theologiae* (*STh* I, q. 21, a. 3). There Aquinas associates mercy (*miser cordia*) with misery of heart (*miserum cor*), and sorrow. But, as Cessario noted, Aquinas denies that there is any sorrow in God; rather, we speak of mercy in God because he *effects* the alleviation of misery even though he is not *affected* by it. To explain this, Cessario turned to various commentators in the Thomist tradition, from whom he drew three principles for understanding this view of divine mercy. First, certain qualities are incompatible with the divine being. Misery implies some lack, or potency, in the subject, and since God is pure act this cannot be said of him (Cajetan, Salmanticenses). Also, sorrow belongs to the sense appetites, and so does not pertain to God (Gonet, John of St. Thomas). However, God can still properly be said to be merciful, because his goodness is the formal principle of the act of mercy, while the recipient of that mercy is the material principle (Billuart, Salmanticenses). Second, to deny the affective quality of mercy of God actually extends its effective reach. One can alleviate misery only if one is free from that particular misery (e.g., only those who are not in poverty can alleviate poverty). Since God has no lack, no “misery,” there is no restriction upon his action of mercy (Cajetan, Garrigou-Lagrange). Third, God’s mercy must be connected to his truth, justice, and wisdom. Every creature exists within the divine order, established by God’s wisdom. To understand God’s action with respect to the creature, one must consider the truth of the creature within that order. For example, all creatures experience defect, but only the rational creature can experience the misery of its defect; the just truth of the rational creature includes its need for mercy. Cessario said, “Divine wisdom establishes the just and true distributive order all creatures receive. Divine wisdom also serves as the foundation for the reestablishment of this true order through God’s mercy.” God’s mercy is not opposed to his justice; rather, it fulfills that justice in a superabundant way by giving the rational creature what it needs in order to be restored to the just order of divine wisdom.

In the discussion that followed, Cessario emphasized that a proper understanding of divine mercy is important to combat two common errors: one is the Jansenist inclination to regard only the divine justice, the other is the laxist tendency to rationalize mercy.

Mark Johnson focused on the location of Aquinas’s treatment of divine mercy in the *Prima Pars*, and its connection to other of his texts. As part of question 21, mercy is seen, together with justice, as pertaining to what belongs to God’s will absolutely. This suggests its connection not only with justice but also with love (q. 20), and that it lies at the very heart of divine action. Certain common conceptions of mercy—that

Consultation: Thomas Aquinas

it involves passion and co-suffering, and that it is opposed to justice (a “relaxation” thereof)—are acknowledged and refuted, and here the commentators are indeed helpful. But Johnson suggested going further, in two ways. First, if mercy is indeed at the heart of divine action, then our understanding of God’s mercy may come more from the things he has actually done than from a consideration of a divine quality *in se*; the *Tertia pars* may be understood as question 21 of the *Prima pars* writ large. Second, Aquinas recognizes that speculative theology prepares one to turn back to Scripture more fruitfully. The philosophical and theological lessons in the *Summa* regarding divine mercy may be seen to illuminate his sevenfold distinction of mercy in his commentary on Psalm 50.

Michael Dauphinais developed the theme of the coherence between Aquinas’s philosophical doctrine and his scriptural commentary by examining Aquinas’s exegesis of Ephesians 2:4 and Matthew 5:7. In both places Aquinas distinguishes divine mercy and human mercy, regarding the former as perfect and as the exemplar of the latter. It is the difference between divine and human mercy that allows the former to be salvific, to effect the true alleviation of the deepest human misery. Dauphinais also evoked Garrigou-Lagrange’s description of the language of divine mercy as not metaphorical, but analogical.

GREGORY LANAVE

*Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception
Washington, D.C.*