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Man Elevated to Share in the Divine Life

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Merit and Perseverance



© **Dr. Lawrence Feingold STD**
Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy
Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, Archdiocese of St. Louis, Missouri

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Association of Hebrew Catholics • 4120 W Pine Blvd • Saint Louis MO 63108
www.hebrewcatholic.org • ahc@hebrewcatholic.org

Merit and Perseverance

1. Merit

The merit of good works done in a state of grace is a theological topic that has caused great controversy between Catholics and Protestants. Protestants frequently accuse Catholics of trying to “earn” their salvation by good works, and of falling into a kind of Pelagianism. Let us look at the sources of revelation in this regard.

Biblical Texts on Merit

By merit we mean the right to a reward on the basis of a work done according to stipulated conditions, and on the basis of a promise or contract. Here the work done is fidelity to God’s Law, summarized in the double commandment of love, and the promise of reward is given by God’s covenant.

The Old Testament frequently states that we will be judged by whether our works are in conformity with God’s Law. A classic text in this regard is Ezekiel 18. Here the prophet explains that works against the Torah merit death, but works in accordance with the Torah merit life.¹ Death and life here seem to mean more than physical life and death; the meaning seems to be spiritual: eternal life and death. He also explains that merit is a personal reality. Although sin and righteousness bring about consequences that will fall on a man’s children, the merit or demerit are proper to the one who did them. Merit in the strict and ordinary sense is personal and not communicable²: “The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Ez 18:20).

But what if someone who did works meriting death, converts and does works meriting life? He shall “live” according to his latter state: “but if a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die” (Ez 18:21). And what if someone who did works meriting life, falls away from them and lives in a state of doing works meriting death? He shall die according to his latter state. The passage ends with an exhortation to conversion (Ez 18:30–32):

“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord God. “Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin.

1 See Ez 18:5–9.

2 The exception to this is Christ, who can merit in justice for all men because He is their Head, the New Adam.

Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! . . . For I have no pleasure in the death of any one,” says the Lord God; “so turn, and live.”

The “turning” here refers to conversion, which, as we saw in the last talk, has to begin with God’s initiative through prevenient or operative grace. It continues through cooperative grace, in which man cooperates with the divine impulse given by grace. It is this cooperation with God that can be meritorious, and it is perhaps this that Ezekiel refers to at the end of the passage, when he says, “and live.” To “live” here means to live a life in grace, in which the source of meritorious actions is a new heart and spirit.

This biblical doctrine of merit, both in its positive and negative aspects, is carried on in rabbinical teaching.³

The same doctrine on merit and demerit is found in the New Testament. Perhaps the key text is Matthew 25, in which Jesus speaks about the Last Judgment and its criterion, which is the consistent presence or absence of works of fraternal charity:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee? . . . And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when . . . ?” Then he will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.” And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Another crucial text in the Gospels is the parable of the talents, which is given in two slightly different forms in

3 See Rabbi A. Marmorstein, *The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinical Literature; and The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1968).

Matthew 25 (before the parable of the sheep and the goats) and in Luke 19. Matthew states the parable as follows:

For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. 17 So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. 18 But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. 20 And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, "Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more." 21 His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master." 22 And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, "Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more." 23 His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master." 24 He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." 26 But his master answered him, "You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. 29 For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 30 And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth."

The talents represent gifts of supernatural grace. In Matthew's version, one gets five, one gets two, and another gets one. God gives His gifts unequally, but all have inestimable value (represented by the one talent in Luke). The Master, however, expects those who receive these gifts to trade with them so as to acquire more through their industry in corresponding with the gift received. This is a perfect illustration of the Catholic concept of merit. None of these men could have traded and acquired any profit if they had not first received the gift of the talents. Nor, however, could they enter into the joy of their master without trading with those talents received, so as to acquire more. Thus we see both the priority of God's gift of grace and the necessity of correspondence with the gift by human effort.

What happens if the gift is received but no corresponding human effort is expended to make the gift grow? The man who received one talent shows that it is not enough to receive grace from God in order to be saved. One can only enter into the Master's joy by corresponding with the

grace received through human action that is meritorious. When Jesus says, "from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away," what does He mean? The context of the parable shows that "that which he has not" refers to the fruits of trading with the talent. In other words, it refers to merit. This implies that one capable of merit (by being in a state of grace and at the age of reason) can only enter into heaven through doing good works (here signified by trading), made possible by and on the foundation of the free gift of sanctifying grace (signified by the talents freely received).

There are also very many other texts that speak of merits with regard to eternal life or condemnation. Revelation 20:13 states: "Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done."

Furthermore, many Biblical texts, both of the Old and the New Testaments, speak of this present life as a trial in which only those who legitimately combat shall be crowned and receive the inheritance. These texts imply some kind of merit that is gained through fidelity in the combat. For example, Wisdom 3:1–6 states:

But the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God. . . . Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them.

Similarly, Rev 21:7 says that "He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son." St. Paul writes to Timothy before his impending death: "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Tm 4:8). The notion of merit is doubly present here through the mention of crowning and of the "just judge" who crowns. In other words, God's crowning of Paul is a work not only of the divine mercy but also of the divine justice, which implies some kind of merit.

Indeed, to be tested and found worthy to receive an inheritance implies the notion of merit. The key exemplar of this kind of merit is given in the Old Testament with Abraham in his sacrifice of Isaac. In Gen 22:16, the angel of the Lord tells Abraham, after his readiness to sacrifice Isaac, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only-begotten son, I will indeed bless you." Clearly Abraham's work of corresponding to God's grace in faith, hope, and charity, was supremely meritorious and merited a blessing that was not for Abraham alone.

As we shall see below, it is through grace that we are given this opportunity to merit. But a true trial presupposes a true possibility of merit.

Theological Reflection

In the last talk we saw that purely human works cannot merit justification in any way, for there is an infinite disproportion between human nature and its natural powers and heavenly beatitude. The Pelagian heresy failed to understand this lack of proportionality between nature and grace. Natural works cannot merit anything supernatural, such as justification, grace, or heavenly glory. It is different, however, with regard to *works moved by charity* that God has gratuitously poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, as merited by the Blood of Christ. A purely human work is in no way proportionate to eternal life, and so cannot possibly merit it. However, a human act motivated by supernatural charity is in a quite different condition. By stemming from supernatural charity, it is no longer completely disproportionate with eternal life, for charity is the essence of eternal life.

In order to rightly understand the value of good works, it is crucial therefore to distinguish two different kinds of “good works”: natural and supernatural. In a person in a state of mortal sin, there can still be “good works” according to natural human virtue. Thus a person in a state of mortal sin can still love his family, be generous to others in need, work for the common good of his country, even die for his country in military service. In addition, a person in mortal sin can have faith and hope (dead faith and dead hope). However, none of these works, since they are not inspired by supernatural charity, are meritorious for eternal life. Hence St. Paul says that “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” (1 Cor 13:2). Such works done without charity may be naturally good, but they are not proportioned to eternal life, which is the life of God who is love.

Works moved and inspired by supernatural charity, on the contrary, are “good works” in a far higher sense. *Because they stem from God’s own gift of love, they can merit an increase of that same gift of love.* Thus they contribute to a growth in justification/sanctification and merit eternal life.

St. Thomas addresses the question of meriting eternal life in the *Summa of Theology*, I-II, q. 114, aa. 2 and 3. In article 2, he establishes that no one who is not in a state of grace can merit sanctifying grace for themselves or eternal life because of the lack of proportionality. A merely natural work done by natural human powers can never merit grace or glory, because they are on an immeasurably higher plane. This is true even independently of sin. However, mortal sin adds a second reason why one cannot merit without being in a state of grace, through which sin is forgiven. St. Thomas writes:

Man cannot merit eternal life without grace, by his purely natural endowments, because man’s merit depends on the Divine pre-ordination. Now no act of anything whatsoever is divinely ordained to anything exceeding the proportion of the powers which are the principles of its act; for *it is a law of Divine providence that nothing shall act beyond its powers.* Now everlasting life is a good exceeding the proportion of created nature; since it exceeds its knowledge and desire, according to 1 Cor. 2:9: “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man.” And hence it is that no created nature is a sufficient principle of an act meritorious of eternal life, unless there is added a supernatural gift, which we call grace. But if we speak of man as existing in sin, a second reason is added to this, which is the impediment of sin. For since sin is an offense against God, excluding us from eternal life, as is clear from what has been said above (q. 71, a. 6; q. 113, a. 2), no one existing in a state of mortal sin can merit eternal life unless first he be reconciled to God, through his sin being forgiven, which is brought about by grace.

In article 3, St. Thomas asks whether a man in a state of grace can merit eternal life. In order to resolve the question, he makes an important distinction between two kinds of merit: condign and congruous. The former is merit in the strict sense of the word, and implies that to a particular work a reward is *due* according to what God has ordained or promised.

Congruous merit does not imply that a reward is merited in strict justice, but rather it is a work that calls down God’s mercy. In this sense we say that someone’s prayer “merits” being heard. St. Thomas says that congruous merit is based on “an equality of proportion,”⁴ for “it is congruous that when a man makes good use of his power, God should by His super-excellent power work still higher things.”⁵

Since God has ordained that no act have an effect exceeding its proportionality, it follows that a natural human work could never merit a supernatural reward in strict justice (condign merit). Such a work could only be said to merit congruously. Thus if someone in a state of sin sincerely seeks God, he can congruously “merit” to find Him. However, nothing he does can merit grace in justice (condign merit). Thus no one can justly merit their own conversion or justification. Likewise, no work done in a state of mortal sin can merit heaven.

However, if a person is already in a state of grace and his acts are moved by a supernatural principle, then they could justly (condignly) merit a supernatural reward *due to grace itself*. It is in this sense that St. Paul speaks of God, the just judge, giving a “crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8). St. Thomas explains:

Man’s meritorious work may be considered in two ways: first, as it proceeds from free-will; secondly, as it proceeds from the grace of the Holy Spirit. If it is considered as regards

4 ST I-II, q. 114, a. 3.

5 ST I-II, q. 114, a. 6.

the substance of the work, and inasmuch as it springs from the free will, there can be no condignity because of the very great inequality. But there is congruity, on account of an equality of proportion: for it would seem congruous that, if a man does what he can, God should reward him according to the excellence of his power. If, however, we speak of a meritorious work, inasmuch as it proceeds from the grace of the Holy Spirit moving us to life everlasting, it is meritorious of life everlasting condignly. For thus the value of its merit depends upon the power of the Holy Spirit moving us to life everlasting according to Jn. 4:14: “Shall become in him a fount of water springing up into life everlasting.” And the worth of the work depends on the dignity of grace, whereby a man, being made a partaker of the divine nature, is adopted as a son of God, to whom the inheritance is due by right of adoption, according to Rom. 8:17: “If sons, heirs also.”

Sanctifying grace gives a supernatural dignity to those who have it, making them sons of God, heirs of a divine inheritance. It likewise makes the acts that flow from grace and charity to have a supernatural worth, so that they are *worthy of a divine reward*: eternal life. For this reason the Catholic Tradition speaks of grace as the “seed of glory.”

The Council of Trent, quoting St. Augustine,⁶ states that when God crowns our merits, in reality He is crowning His own gifts, because the merit was made possible first by the free gift of sanctifying grace and the impulses of actual grace.⁷ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2008 explains:

The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace. The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man’s free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful. Man’s merit, moreover, itself is due to God, for his good actions proceed in Christ, from the predispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit.

Charity Is the Principle of Merit

We have stated that sanctifying grace makes the works that flow from it to merit a divine reward. St. Thomas then poses the question of whether charity, after grace, is in a special sense the source of merit. This question is intimately related to the controversy that rocked Christendom at the Reformation. Does salvation come through faith alone, or is it merited through works done in charity (faith working through charity)? The answer is given in revelation. In 1 Cor 13, St. Paul makes this absolutely clear: “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” Likewise in Mt 25, Jesus shows that charity is the principle by which

the elect merit eternal life, and lack of charity is the reason for reprobation. Those who end up on Christ’s right hand are those who practiced fraternal charity. Charity is the principle of merit because it is the act by which we participate in the divine life and rest in union with God. Thus it is the principle by which our acts gain a divine dignity worthy of the reward of eternal life. St. Thomas explains:

For we must bear in mind that everlasting life consists in the enjoyment of God. Now the human mind’s movement to the fruition of the Divine good is the proper act of charity, whereby all the acts of the other virtues are ordained to this end, since all the other virtues are commanded by charity. Hence the merit of life everlasting pertains first to charity, and secondly, to the other virtues, inasmuch as their acts are commanded by charity.⁸

Growth and Loss of Merit

Good works merit eternal life, with the condition, however, that a man persevere in grace until the end of his life, by the avoidance of mortal sin. For if a man falls into mortal sin, the merits that he has accumulated are incinerated, so to speak, by the loss of sanctifying grace, which is the principle of all merit.

Does every good act moved by charity merit an increase of grace? Jesus implies this when He promises (Mt 10:42): “And whoever gives to one of these little ones but a cup of cold water to drink because he is a disciple, amen I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.” Every act motivated by charity and done in a state of grace merits various treasures: (a) an increase of sanctifying grace, (b) an increase of faith, hope, and charity, and (c) eternal life, presuming one dies in a state of grace.

Are All Meritorious Acts Equal?

Although every good act motivated by charity and done in a state of grace merits an increase of grace, not all meritorious acts are equal, for some merit more grace than others. We can see this truth illustrated in the parable of the talents. Those who traded with the talents earned different amounts. There are various causes for the difference in the merit of different supernatural works. Some of these are the following: (a) greater sanctifying grace to start with; (b) greater intensity of cooperation; (c) the excellence of the work done, such as participating in Holy Mass and Holy Communion; (d) the difficulty of the work done; (e) the greater purity of the intention in doing the good work.⁹

Can We Merit for Others?

Another question concerning merit posed by St. Thomas is whether a person in a state of grace can merit grace for others. Here again we need the distinction between condign

6 St. Augustine, Sermon 298, 4–5; PL 38:1367: “Grace has gone before us; now we are given what is due. . . . Our merits are God’s gifts.”

7 Decree on Justification, chapter 16, DS 1548 (Denzinger 810); cited in CCC 2009.

8 *ST I-II*, q. 114, a. 4.

9 See F. J. Remler, *Supernatural Merit: Your Treasure in Heaven* (St. Louis, MO: Vincentian Press, 1934), 59–103.

and congruous merit, or merit in justice and merit through God’s mercy.¹⁰

Sanctifying grace makes the acts that flow from it to be worthy of a supernatural reward, thus meriting (in justice) an increase of grace in the person who acts through grace. However, meritorious works done in grace do not suffice to make the acts of another person worthy of a supernatural reward, for everyone’s acts come from themselves. Thus one can merit (in justice) only for oneself.

Only Christ, the new Adam and head of the human race, could merit for others in strict justice (condign merit), in virtue of His solidarity with the human race of which He is head. As St. Thomas says: “Christ’s soul is moved by God through grace, not only so as to reach the glory of life everlasting, but so as to lead others to it, inasmuch as He is the Head of the Church, and the Author of human salvation, according to Heb 2:10: ‘Who hath brought many children into glory.’”

However, with regard to merit through God’s mercy (congruous merit), it is possible for those in a state of grace to merit conversion for others through prayer and sacrifice. Nevertheless this grace can be frustrated by the persistent resistance of those for whom we pray:

But one may merit the first grace for another congruously; because a man in grace fulfils God’s will, and it is congruous and in harmony with friendship that God should fulfill man’s desire for the salvation of another, although sometimes there may be an impediment on the part of him whose salvation the just man desires.¹¹

Protestant Rejection of the Possibility of Merit

At the Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin rejected the possibility of merit because of their forensic understanding of justification and their rejection of man’s capacity to truly cooperate with the grace of God. This rejection is coherent with the general Protestant tendency to attribute all good exclusively to God, as if human participation and merit would detract from the glory of Christ.

In reality, the capacity of the sons and daughters of God to merit on the basis of sanctifying grace and charity manifests the glory of God far better. For God is more glorified in His mercy, wisdom, and omnipotence by giving to creatures a share in the salvific activity proper to Him, than if such a share were denied. Indeed, if it were denied, then *it would seem that God were either unable or*

¹⁰ See *ST I-II*, q. 114, a. 6, ad 2: “The impetration [action of obtaining by request or entreaty] of prayer rests on mercy, whereas condign merit rests on justice; hence a man may impetrate many things from the Divine mercy in prayer, which he does not merit in justice, according to Dan. 9:18: ‘For it is not for our justifications that we present our prayers before thy face, but for the multitude of thy tender mercies.’”

¹¹ *ST I-II*, q. 114, a. 6.

unwilling to communicate to the creature the dignity and responsibility of cooperating in his own salvation.

In response to the Lutheran denial of merit, the Council of Trent infallibly defined the Catholic notion of merit in session 6 on Justification, chapter 16, and canon 32:

Canon 32: If anyone shall say that the *good works of the man justified* are in such a way the gifts of God that they are not also the good merits of him who is justified, or that the one justified by the good works, which are done by him through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ (whose living member he is), does not truly *merit increase of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of that eternal life* (if he should die in grace), and also an *increase of glory*: let him be anathema.¹²

2. Final Perseverance

Intimately tied to the notion of predestination is that of *final perseverance*, for the predestined are those who are found persevering in a state of grace at the end of their lives. Final perseverance therefore is the most important of graces.

Canon 10 of the Council of Orange defined the necessity of a special gift of grace for final perseverance: “God’s help is always to be sought even for the regenerated and holy, that they may come to a happy end, or that they may continue in the performance of good works.”¹³

St. Thomas discusses the necessity of a special grace (which would seem to be a series of actual graces) of God for final perseverance in *ST I-II*, q. 109, a. 10, in which he asks whether a man possessed of grace needs the help of grace in order to persevere:

Perseverance is called the abiding in good to the end of life. And in order to have this perseverance man does not, indeed, need another habitual grace, but he needs the Divine assistance guiding and guarding him against the attacks of the passions, as appears from the preceding article. And hence after anyone has been justified by grace, he still needs to beseech God for the aforesaid gift of perseverance, that he may be kept from evil until the end of his life. For to many grace is given to whom perseverance in grace is not given.

Since we need a series of actual graces for final perseverance, it is always necessary to pray for final perseverance. Indeed, in every Hail Mary we are praying for final perseverance when we ask Mary to pray for us at the hour of our death.

The Council of Trent defines that perseverance is a “gift which cannot be obtained from any other than from Him who is able to establish him who stands that he stand perseveringly, and to restore him who falls.”¹⁴ The Council

¹² Denz. 842.

¹³ Denz. 183.

¹⁴ Denz. 806.

speaks of this gift as “the great and special gift of final perseverance.”¹⁵

Can Final Perseverance Be Merited?

We have seen that supernaturally good works done in a state of grace merit an increase of grace and eternal life. However, eternal life cannot be actually gained unless one perseveres in grace until the end. What about final perseverance itself? Can it be merited also?

Indeed if it could be merited and one could gain that assurance through prayer before the end of one’s life, one would no longer need to be vigilant, in opposition to the constant teaching of Jesus. Furthermore, perseverance in grace is the condition for all merit and the foundation of the very possibility of meriting. It follows that perseverance in grace cannot be merited, any more than the initial grace of conversion by which one first acquires the possibility of meriting. Perseverance in grace enables one to merit eternal life, but that perseverance itself cannot be merited, for it is the principle of merit. For this reason, Christ exhorts us: “Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation” (Mt 26:41). Although perseverance cannot be merited, it can certainly be prayed for, and we should pray for it with confidence and perseverance! Jesus implies that if we pray for it with sincerity and perseverance, it will infallibly be given: “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

In *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 9, St. Thomas asks whether final perseverance can be merited. He responds that it cannot be merited. Two arguments are given. The first is from experience, in which we find that many people who have done meritorious works do not persevere in grace to the end (at least as manifested by their actions and lack of contrition). In the body of the article, St. Thomas argues that God’s supernatural motion that is imparted to the soul is the principle of merit. However, the principle of merit cannot itself be merited. For this reason, there is no way for man to merit the initial grace that gives supernatural movement to the soul. Through perseverance, this supernatural motion continues to vivify human acts so as to produce merit for eternal life. And what is true of the initial movement of grace is also true of the continuance of that grace through perseverance. Thus, one cannot merit perseverance any more than one could merit the initial grace of conversion.

Can the Faithful Have Complete Assurance of Final Perseverance?

The issue of final perseverance was deeply involved in the controversy over justification at the time of the Reformation. The views of Luther and Calvin on justification were motivated in large part by the desire for security con-

cerning final perseverance. Hence Luther taught that the act of faith had to include faith in one’s own justification, and Calvin taught that it had to include faith in one’s own final perseverance to glory (predestination).

The Council of Trent responded to these claims in the decree on Justification, canons 15-16:

Canon 15. If anyone shall say that a man who is born again and justified is bound by faith to believe that he is assuredly in the number of the predestined: let him be anathema.

Canon 16. If anyone shall say that he will for certain with an absolute and infallible certainty have that great gift of perseverance up to the end, unless he shall have learned this by a special revelation: let him be anathema.¹⁶

It is obviously impossible to have divine faith in one’s final perseverance, simply because it is not a revealed truth. On the contrary, our capacity to resist God’s grace, obstinately sin, and thus merit reprobation, is all too clear from Revelation and experience. The uncertainty of final perseverance must always be a motive for vigilance, continual prayer, and self-abandonment to the divine mercy.

The uncertainty of our own final perseverance, however, should in no way detract from our most firm *hope* that we shall attain heaven through the grace of God. The theological virtue of hope is based on the mercy and omnipotence of God, who will most certainly not be lacking in anything on His part to bring us to heaven, but will offer most abundant graces so that everyone who comes to the age of reason may be brought into a state of grace, and remain in it until death.

In Rom 8:31–39, immediately after speaking of the mystery of predestination, St. Paul exults in the power of God’s mercy to bring us into final union with Christ:

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The only thing that can separate us from the love of Christ is the possibility of our own free rejection of God’s love, through obstinate resistance to the grace offered us in Christ. Hence we must be vigilant and pray constantly for perseverance. But on God’s part, we must believe most firmly that nothing will be lacking that is necessary for our salvation.

¹⁵ Denz. 826.

¹⁶ Session 6, Denz. 825-26.