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Man Elevated to Share in the Divine Life

Talk #9

Predestination



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Predestination

Last week we examined God's universal salvific will. God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). To realize this plan the Son of God has become incarnate, offered Himself for us, merited our salvation, and established the Church and her sacraments as the ordinary means for receiving the grace won for us on Calvary.

What does predestination add to God's universal salvific will? In what sense can we speak of predestination? The term has two parts; the prefix "pre" refers to an eternal plan of God prior to the creation of the world, and "destination" refers to an effective ordering to our final destination, the heavenly Jerusalem. Predestination thus is the eternal act of God by which He has ordered us to the heavenly Jerusalem, together with the entire series of graces from God by which the just actually attain that goal through Christ and His Church. Since God's impulse always precedes and accompanies our good acts directed towards conversion, sanctification, and eternal life, we can speak of an action of God by which He orders men to eternal life, guiding and directing them on all the steps of their journey there, as an archer destines an arrow to reach a target. This predestination includes the entire series of graces that God has eternally planned to give to the human person, and the infallible knowledge of our cooperation with those graces in the decisive moments of our lives. Predestination is the supremely merciful ordering of God's providence by which the just reach their final end.

Predestination is thus a particular aspect of God's providence, by which He governs the universe and realizes His plan for creation, ordering all things according to His eternal Law and His wisdom, for the manifestation and communication of His goodness. Predestination is that particular part of God's eternal plan by which He freely wills to bring men to eternal salvation through providing them with an abundant series of gratuitous graces, with which He foreknows that they will cooperate, at least at the decisive moments of their lives, so that they will be found in the grace of God at the point of death. Predestination is thus a superabundant effect of God's merciful love to His rational creatures, bringing them to that glorious participation in God's own beatitude, for the sake of which the world was created.

Since our supernaturally good acts are always preceded by the impulse of actual grace, our journey to eternal life is moved both by God as source of grace and by ourselves as free cooperators in God's plan for us. From all eternity God knows all of history as effects of His creative action. He knows all the graces that He destines to be given to

us, and He knows our free resistance to or cooperation with those graces.

Thus we can truly say that God predestines the just to attain eternal life. The notion of predestination includes two elements: gracious aid directing us to a supernatural end which we could never attain by ourselves, together with foreknowledge of our correspondence with His grace—or lack of hardened resistance to it—at the decisive moments of life.

St. Augustine gave the classic definition of predestination: "Predestination is the foreknowledge and preparedness on God's part to bestow the favors by which all those are saved who are to be saved."¹ Predestination thus includes two fundamental elements: (a) God's *loving will* to bestow a whole series of graces by which the elect are to be saved, and (b) God's *foreknowledge* of man's correspondence and cooperation with these graces, at the decisive moments of life.

St. Thomas explains predestination in a marvelous article from the *Summa of Theology*, I, a. 23, a. 1, in which he compares God's work of predestination to the work of an archer:

It is fitting that God should predestine men. For all things are subject to His providence, as was shown above [q. 22, a. 2]. Now it belongs to providence to direct things towards their end, as was also said [q. 22, aa. 1-2]. The end towards which created things are directed by God is twofold; one which exceeds all proportion and faculty of created nature. This end is life eternal, consisting in seeing God which is above the nature of every creature.... The other end, however, is proportionate to created nature, to which end created being can attain according to the power of its nature. Now if a thing cannot attain to something by the power of its nature, it must be directed thereto by another; thus, an arrow is directed by the archer towards a mark. Hence, properly speaking, a rational creature, capable of eternal life, is led towards it, directed, as it were, by God. The idea [*ratio*]² of that direction pre-exists in God; as in Him is the Idea [blueprint] of the order of all things towards an end, which we proved above to be Providence. Now the idea in the mind of the doer of something to be done, is a kind of pre-existence in him of the thing to be done. Hence the idea of the aforesaid direction of a rational creature towards the end of life eternal is called predestination. For to destine, is to direct or send. Thus it is clear that predestination, as regards its objects, is a part of Providence.

¹ *De dono perseverantiae*, ch. 14.

² The word "*ratio*" in Latin is often very difficult to translate. It signifies the *idea* of something, its *notion* or *definition*, or the model or pattern or intelligibility of something.

In comparing man to an arrow shot by the bow of God's actual graces, we must always keep in mind that he is a free and rational "arrow," who has the ordinary power to resist the motion of God's grace, and so to frustrate it, impeding the arrow from reaching the target. The arrow will never get to the target if it is not sent by God with superb aim and a supernatural motion, but likewise, it will never get to the target if it persistently resists the motion imparted to it by the grace of God. In a similar way, an ordinary arrow will not hit a target either (a) if it is not shot well, or (b) if the arrow itself is defective. In our analogy, a defective arrow is one that voluntarily and persistently resists God's grace, rendering itself hardened or incurable.

It follows that salvation (and predestination) has two causes. The first and principal cause is surely God, but the secondary cause is man's free cooperation with—or lack of resistance to—God's grace. God is immeasurably more the cause of predestination than man, for He is the divine archer. Nevertheless, man's free correspondence foreseen by God cooperates with the movement imparted by the divine archer so that man reaches salvation. Thus man's free cooperation would seem to be a cooperating cause of predestination. The persistent lack of cooperation, on the other hand, is the only cause of reprobation.

God's gracious and merciful love, therefore, is the principal cause of predestination, whereas man's resistance is the cause or motive of reprobation.³

Predestination in the Letters of St. Paul

St. Paul speaks of predestination in his letters, especially in Rom 8:28-31 and Eph 1:3-6. In Romans 8:28-31, St. Paul is seeking to strengthen the hope of eternal salvation in the Christians to whom he is writing:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us?

In this text St. Paul presents a series of divine actions which are put in logical order: foreknowledge, predestination, vocation, justification, and glorification. The first two of these divine acts are eternal, inherent in God's eternal act of knowing and loving. Foreknowledge belongs to the eternal knowledge of God, and predestination also includes the eternal divine act of willing, by which God establishes a providential plan for creation and salvation.

³ See Philippe de la Trinité, Notre liberté devant Dieu," *Etudes Carmelitaines* (1958): 71: "Our merits are absolutely incapable of being the first cause of our predestination. . . . On the other hand, the demerits incurred in refusing graces are really the first cause of damnation." (Translated by William Most in *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God*, 392.)

Although both acts are eternal and there is no chronological priority, it is fitting that foreknowledge comes before predestination, because the will logically follows on and presupposes knowledge, even in God. Predestination logically presupposes some divine foreknowledge of man's free cooperation or lack thereof.

The other acts—vocation, justification, and glorification—concern the execution of God's plan of predestination, and they occur in time. Vocation comes first, and involves both external and interior graces. Externally, vocation involves the proclamation of God's Revelation, and internally it involves operative grace by which man's conscience is illuminated and good desires are awoken in the heart. God's prevenient grace in calling man is ordered to bringing him to justification in Baptism, by which he receives sanctifying grace. The life of grace, in turn, is ordered to glorification, presupposing final perseverance. Thus vocation, justification, and glorification, are chronologically differentiated, and the former is ordered to the second, and the second to the third. Evidently, more are called than are justified, and more are justified than are glorified, because it is possible for those who have been justified to fall away from grace through mortal sin, and remain in it until the end. This seems to be the principal meaning of the phrase of Jesus: "Many are called, but few are chosen."

Ephesians 1:3-6 is very closely parallel to the earlier text of Romans 8:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he *chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He predestined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ*, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Here another eternal divine act is added: election. Thus it would seem that the logical order of the eternal divine acts would be foreknowledge, election, and predestination. Predestination adds to election the eternal divine choice of all of the salvific means by which God's gratuitous election is to be realized in the course of time. The principal means, of course, are the Incarnation of Christ, the merits won in His Passion, and the constitution of the Church endowed with her seven sacraments for the communication of grace. Ephesians 1:3-6 thus stresses the connection between predestination, the Incarnation, and the Church.

In this particular text, the election and predestination spoken of by St. Paul are principally ecclesiological. We have been chosen before the foundation of the world to receive the great gift of Baptism, by which we have been made God's "sons through Jesus Christ." The predestination spoken of here is to receive divine sonship in the Church.

St. Paul also touches on the notion of predestination in two other texts. In 1 Corinthians 2:7–9 St. Paul speaks of heavenly wisdom being predestined for our glorification:

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God *decreed* [predestined] before the ages for our glorification. . . . Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him.

The object of God’s predestination is heavenly or supernatural beatitude, which He wills to give us for our glorification. This beatitude is God’s gift, and it exceeds not only our capacity to acquire, but even to rightly desire. Because it transcends us, it is possible for us only through an eternal plan of God by which it is made available to “those who love Him.” We see, however, that not all will receive this gift, for the “rulers of this age” (1 Cor 2:8) did not will to understand it.

The notion of predestination is also mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 5:6–10:

For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. . . . But, since we belong to the day, let us . . . put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not *destined* us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him.”

Here St. Paul speaks of the object of God’s act of predestination, which is eternal salvation, merited by Christ’s Passion. God does not predestine anyone to wrath, but calls us to glory, and he does so by drawing men into the Church as into the universal sacrament of salvation. Paul is addressing those who are inside the Church with the understanding that they have all been made “sons of light and of the day” through the sacraments of Christian initiation, and are not “destined for wrath, but to obtain salvation.” But for God’s purpose to be realized, they have to cooperate with grace by putting on the breastplate of faith and love.

In other words, God wills all men to be saved and predestines no one to wrath, but not all respond to the call, becoming sons of the day, and not all those who have become sons of the day continue to cooperate until the end by putting on the breastplate of faith and love.

This Pauline notion of predestination was already contained in germ in the Jewish understanding of election. Israel understood that God’s election of them was completely gratuitous, the result of an eternal divine choice that could not be merited.⁴ The gratuity of the election is beautifully manifested in Deuteronomy 7:6–8:

The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face

of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers.

God’s election is gratuitous and caused only by His love, but it brings with it a great responsibility that requires man’s active cooperation. This election is manifested by incorporation into the People of God. Man cannot initiate the election, but he can disqualify himself from receiving its fruit. The effect of election is not received unless man cooperates by fidelity and perseverance. In the book of Maccabees, for example, we see that not all of those who received the election showed themselves to be worthy of it by remaining faithful in trial. It could be said of Israel what Christ says with regard to the Church: “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

God Does Not “Predestine” Men to Hell

St. Paul speaks only of predestination by which men are made to be sons of God in the Son. He does not speak of any “predestination” of the reprobate. They are not predestined to hell! In their case, God knows all the graces destined to be given to them, as well as their resistance to those graces at the decisive moments of their lives, such that they end up blocking God’s work of grace through their own fault alone.

In this case God cannot be said to predestine them to heaven, for they do not arrive there, nor to hell, for God does not wish them to arrive there nor direct them to that end! They arrive there by their defection alone, resisting grace. Thus although they end up condemned, they are *in no way “predestined” by God to be lost*, even though from all eternity God knows that they will be lost. God has not aided or directed them to be lost, but quite the contrary, He has graciously and mercifully and superabundantly *aided them not to be lost through sufficient graces*, which they have resisted through their own power of defectibility.

Predestination according to Luther and Calvin

Luther, Calvin, and Jansenius also maintain a doctrine of predestination, which, however, differs from the Catholic understanding in two very significant ways.

First of all, they maintain a *double predestination*: the just are predestined to heaven while the *reprobate are predestined to hell*. This symmetrical view of double predestination is a consequence of their denial of free will after the Fall. If man has no free will to cooperate or resist grace, the work of salvation or condemnation is logically the work of God alone, who freely gives efficacious grace to some, and denies sufficient grace to others. The reprobate are lost because God hardens their hearts, *not giving them the graces they need for salvation*.

4 See Deut 7:6–8.

In his work, *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther implies that God predestines some to hell:

Now, the highest degree of faith is to believe that He is merciful, though He saves so few and damns so many; to believe that He is just, though of His own will He makes us perforce proper subjects for damnation, and seems (in Erasmus' words) "to delight in the torments of the poor wretches."⁵

Calvin explains his view as follows:

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death.⁶

Secondly, the original Protestant view of predestination to heaven differs from the Catholic view in that our free cooperation with God's work is also denied.

The Lutheran and Calvinist thesis of double predestination was condemned in the Council of Trent, Decree on Justification, canon 17:

If anyone says that the grace of justification is shared by those only who are predestined to life, but that all others who are called are called indeed but receive not grace, as if they are by divine power *predestined to evil*, let him be anathema.

Predestination and God's Antecedent and Consequent Will

We saw last week that it is useful to distinguish between God's antecedent and consequent will. God's consequent will is always realized, because it is God's complete will that takes all the circumstances into account, which here concerns the response (resistance or correspondence) of our free will.

⁵ *On the Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of De Servo Arbitrio (1525); Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (London: James Clarke & Co, 1957), 101. See also 317: "By the light of grace, it is inexplicable how God can damn him who by his own strength can do nothing but sin and become guilty. Both the light of nature and the light of grace here insist that the fault lies not in the wretchedness of man, but in the injustice of God; nor can they judge otherwise of a God who crowns the ungodly freely, without merit, and does not crown, but damns another, who is perhaps less, and certainly not more, ungodly. But the light of glory insists otherwise, and will one day reveal God, to whom alone belongs a judgment whose justice is incomprehensible, as a God Whose justice is most righteous and evident—provided only that in the meanwhile we believe it."

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. 3, ch. 21, no. 6, p. 610. See also Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, § 2, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke & Co., 1961), p. 58: "God, by his eternal goodwill, which has no cause outside itself, destined those whom He pleased to salvation, rejecting the rest; those whom He dignified by gratuitous adoption He illumined by His Spirit, so that they receive the life offered in Christ, while others voluntarily disbelieve, so that they remain in darkness destitute of the light of faith."

It follows that God's universal salvific will is an antecedent will, independent of or abstracting from God's foreknowledge of man's correspondence with grace. Predestination to glory, or reprobation, on the contrary, are acts of God's consequent will, which takes into account the condition of the rational creature, and his correspondence with or persistent resistance to grace. It follows that predestination logically includes foreknowledge of man's actual resistance or correspondence to grace.

St. Thomas explains this point masterfully in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, book III, chapters 159–161. He begins by posing a powerful objection:

Since one cannot be directed to the ultimate end except by means of divine grace, without which no one can possess the things needed to work toward the ultimate end, such as faith, hope, love, and perseverance, it might seem to some person that man should not be held responsible for the lack of such aids. Especially so, since he cannot merit the help of divine grace, nor turn toward God unless God convert him, for no one is held responsible for what depends on another. Now, if this is granted, many inappropriate conclusions appear.

St. Thomas solves the difficulty by making a crucial distinction. The work of salvation must begin with the grace of God. However, man can block the effect intended by that grace through his own resistance. Therefore, it is not absurd for God to reprobate man who does not have grace, precisely because he has resisted God's gratuitous gift, and for that very reason does not have grace so as to be saved:

To settle this difficulty, we ought to consider that, although one may neither merit in advance nor call forth divine grace by a movement of his free choice, he is able to prevent himself from receiving this grace: Indeed, it is said in Job [21:34]: "Who have said to God: Depart from us, we desire not the knowledge of Your ways"; and in Job [24:13]: "They have been rebellious to the light." And *since this ability to impede or not to impede the reception of divine grace is within the scope of free choice, not undeservedly is responsibility for the fault imputed to him who offers an impediment to the reception of grace. In fact, as far as He is concerned, God is ready to give grace to all; "indeed He wills all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth,"* as is said in 1 Timothy [2:4]. But those alone are deprived of grace who offer an obstacle within themselves to grace; just as, while the sun is shining on the world, the man who keeps his eyes closed is held responsible for his fault, if as a result some evil follows, even though he could not see unless he were provided in advance with light from the sun.⁷

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.

⁷ SCG III, ch. 159, n. 2

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.”⁸

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.”⁹ The Council speaks of this gift as “the great and special gift of final perseverance.”¹⁰

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 concerning 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.¹¹

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*

8 Denz. 183.

9 Denz. 806.

10 Denz. 826.

11 Session 6, Denz. 825-26.

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.

St. Francis de Sales on God’s Universal Salvific Will

St. Francis de Sales explains the ramifications of God’s universal salvific will with eloquence and clarity. In the course of a discussion on the gift of final perseverance, he writes:

First he willed, with a genuine will that even after the sin of Adam all should be saved, but in a way and with means suited to the condition of our nature; that is, He willed the salvation of all who would give consent to the graces and favors which He would prepare, offer, and distribute for this purpose. Now among those favors, He willed that the call be first, and that it be so tempered to our freedom that we at our good pleasure could accept or reject it. And to those whom He foresaw would accept, He willed to give the sacred movements of repentance; and to those who would follow those movements, He decreed to give holy love; and to those who would have love He planned to give the means needed to persevere; and to those who would use these divine helps, He decreed to give final perseverance and the glorious happiness of His eternal love. . . . Without doubt, God prepared heaven only for those whom He foresaw would be His. . . . But it is in our power to be His: for although the gift of being God’s belongs to God, yet this is a gift which God denies to no one, but offers to all, and gives to those who freely consent to receive it.¹²

Since it is “in our power to be His,” we must fight the Christian combat and pray for the gift of perseverance to the end.

12 *Treatise on the Love of God* 3.5.