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The Attributes of God



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The Attributes of God

After proving the existence of God through reason, the investigation continues to what we can know of God's *nature*, based on the results of the five ways. Reason can delineate some attributes of God, although the divine essence itself cannot be known without the light of glory, by which we hope to see God face to face in the beatific vision.

1. Simplicity of God

The first attribute considered by St. Thomas Aquinas is God's simplicity, for God's nature is absolutely simple without any composition whatever. But in our experience of the physical world, the simplest things are the lowest, and the higher we ascend in the hierarchy of being, the more complex things become. If God is completely simple, would not this make Him empty of content and richness?¹

The simple answer is that in material things complexity is better, for matter is a principle of limitation. Material things are limited to one by matter. In order to become richer, material things always need greater composition and complexity of their limited parts. Spiritual natures, however, are not limited to one as material things are. Thus greater perfection does not have to come through greater composition and complexity of parts, but rather through greater unity.

We can see this in our own experience of spiritual things. The saints have the simplest souls, directed to one end: God. Complexity in spiritual matters is a sign of imperfection and attachment to disparate ends. The same is true on the intellectual plane. The greatest thinkers are those who see the most conclusions in the simplest and broadest principles. Wisdom is not the accumulation of facts or complexity of thought, but overarching synthesis. This was the genius of Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, God knows all things through one infinite Word.

To prove the simplicity of God, St. Thomas eliminates the possibility of any kind of composition. He begins by excluding the composition of matter and form and proving that God is not a body. This corresponds to our own experience, where material reality is less noble than the soul which animates the living body. God, who is the source of all perfection, must be the most noble being. Thus the divine nature cannot be a bodily nature.

This can also be demonstrated in a more philosophical manner. It has been shown already that God is pure Act (actuality), precisely because He is the First Uncaused Cause and Unmoved Mover. If He had any passive po-

teny (potentiality) in Him, then He would not be the First Cause, but would need something else to cause His passive potency to move into act. In other words, if God had any passive potency in Him, then He would not be God. But matter is by definition a principle of potency (potentiality). It is the potency to receive a form and to become something else. It is also a principle of division, for everything material has the passive potency to be divided into parts and to receive other forms. It is clear that God cannot have any matter and must therefore be pure spirit.

However, even our spiritual soul is complex. We have different faculties (intellect and will) and different moral and intellectual habits (sciences, arts, virtues and vices, etc.). Our faculties are distinct from our operations (actions or acts), for the faculties are the potencies for our operations. This complexity in our soul always involves the composition of potency and act. None of this spiritual complexity can exist in God, for He is pure Act.

It follows that in God there is no real distinction between subject, faculty, and operation, as there is in man, since one would have to be in potency to the other. God *is* His intellect and will, and He *is* His infinite act of perfect knowing and loving. Obviously this is not the case in humans, for the person is distinct from his acts and faculties (which are parts). Acts do not encompass all that there is or could be in us.

Furthermore, every creature has a composition between *substance* and *accidents*. The substance is the whole which has being in itself, whereas the accidents have being not in themselves, but only in the whole substance. A man has the accidents of being a certain height, with a certain color of skin and hair, with a certain intelligence and temperament, but all these accidents can only exist in his person (which is his substance). Now God cannot have this composition, because accidents always have a cause and are secondary compared to the substance which they actualize. However, God is absolutely primary. He is the First Cause, uncaused from within or without, and thus can have no accidents distinct from His substance.

It is a general first principle of reason that every composition requires a cause to unite the different parts. An order requires an orderer. An effect requires a cause. However, God is the first uncaused cause, and thus He is the cause of all composition in things, but He Himself is completely uncaused, both from within and without. Thus He must also be utterly uncomposed and absolutely simple.

A surprising conclusion follows from this. Since God is simple, everything that can be attributed to God *is* God.

¹ In essence Hegel's thought proceeds in this direction, making God the *synthesis* of all reality, rather than First efficient Cause.

God *is* His justice, as He *is* His mercy, as He *is* His wisdom, truth, love, etc. For this reason, Christ could say: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” God does not simply *have* truth and life, as we do, but He *is* the Truth and the Life. A further consequence of this identity of God with His attributes is that His attributes themselves are ultimately one. For example, God’s Truth is His Beauty, and His mercy is really identical with His justice. We cannot fully grasp this because in our human experience, attributes like justice and mercy are always distinct.

2. Essence and Existence Are One in God

St. Thomas’ fourth way of demonstrating the existence of God also showed that God was *Being by essence*, and the cause of all other things which *participate* in being. Created things *have* being, which they receive from God according to their capacity. This means that there are two principles in all created things: the *being* they receive, and their *essence* which receives, limits, and determines the grade of being that they receive. To use an inadequate but helpful analogy, the essence in creatures is like a container which receives being within a certain limit or mode of being. This means that all creatures are composed of essence and existence (act of being), in addition to their other forms of composition.

God, however, does not *have* being, but *is* being. This means that He is the fullness of all being, and every perfection of being is in Him without any limitation. God does not receive being in any limited container, for He is the First Cause and cannot receive anything. *God’s essence is to be the fullness of being*. However, although this is a logical conclusion, human reason cannot understand fully what it means to be the fullness of being.

St. Thomas demonstrates that the essence of God is His being in the *Summa of Theology*, I, q. 3, a. 4, with three arguments. First of all, using the general principle given above, if God is composed of essence and being, then His being will be received by the essence, and will require a *cause* of the composition. If God received His being, He would be *caused* by something outside His essence. But God is the Uncaused Cause. Therefore it is impossible that He receive His being, for if He did, He would not be God, but a creature. The very Source of Being cannot receive being from without! It follows that God *is* His being by essence.²

2 See *ST I* q. 3, a. 4: “First, whatever a thing has besides its essence must be caused either by the constituent principles of that essence (like a property that necessarily accompanies the species--as the faculty of laughing is proper to a man--and is caused by the constituent principles of the species), or by some exterior agent--as heat is caused in water by fire. Therefore, if the existence of a thing differs from its essence, this existence must be caused either by some exterior agent or by its essential principles. Now it is impossible for a thing’s existence to be caused by its essential constituent principles, for nothing can be the sufficient cause of its own existence, if its existence is caused. There-

Secondly, in all creatures, essence is related to the act of being as potency (potentiality) to act (actuality). A nature or essence is something that *can be*, but must receive the *act of being* from God in order to *actually be*. However, God is pure act. Therefore, His essence cannot be distinct from His act of being.³

Third, St. Thomas’s fourth way demonstrates that every creature *participates in being* (as also in goodness, beauty, truth, and unity) in various grades. This participation has its source in God, who is *being by essence*. To say that God is being by essence is to say that His essence is His being, that essence and being are one in God. However, essence and being are really distinct in all creatures who *participate* in being, and whose being is finite and limited.⁴ St. Thomas also points out that this philosophical truth was revealed by God in Sacred Scripture:

Therefore the very existence of God is His essence. This sublime truth was taught by the Lord to Moses (Ex 3:13-14) “If they say to me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them? ‘Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: HE WHO IS hath sent me to you’”: showing this to be His

fore that thing, whose existence differs from its essence, must have its existence caused by another. But this cannot be true of God; because we call God the first efficient cause. Therefore it is impossible that in God His existence should differ from His essence.”

This first argument begins with a general principle: that which is not essential to a thing, must be caused, either by something else or by the essence itself in the case of proper accidents, such as the ability to laugh. Thus if the being of God is not His essence, it is necessary that His being be caused either by something else or by His own essence. It is impossible that His being be caused by something else, because He would not then be the First Cause – He would not be God. It is also impossible that His being be caused by His own essence, because nothing can cause itself. Not even God is *causa sui*. Nothing can give what it does not have. Nothing can move itself from potency into act, without an anterior act. An essence can give itself being only if it already had being before having being, which is absurd.

3 *Ibid.*: “Secondly, existence is that which makes every form or nature actual; for goodness and humanity are spoken of as actual, only because they are spoken of as existing. Therefore existence must be compared to essence, if the latter is a distinct reality, as actuality to potentiality. Therefore, since in God there is no potentiality, as shown above, it follows that in Him essence does not differ from existence. Therefore His essence is His existence.”

4 *Ibid.*: “Thirdly, because, just as that which has fire, but is not itself fire, is on fire by participation; so that which has existence but is not existence, is a being by participation. But God is His own essence, as shown above (3) if, therefore, He is not His own existence He will be not essential, but participated being. He will not therefore be the first being--which is absurd. Therefore God is His own existence, and not merely His own essence.”

The third argument is based on the difference between being through participation and being by essence. If something is not what it is by its own essence, it is such by participation with another principle. Therefore if the being of God is not His essence, God would have to be by participation in another principle. But this is impossible, because thus God would not be the first being. Therefore it is necessary to say that God is being by essence, and His essence *is* His being.

proper name, He who is. But every name is given to show the nature or essence of something. Hence it remains that the very existence or being of God is His essence or nature.⁵

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 213 develops this insight:

The revelation of the ineffable name ‘I Am who Am’ contains then the truth that God alone IS. The Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and following it the Church’s Tradition, understood the divine name in this sense: God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone *is* his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is.

It is clear that only God can be by essence His own being, an infinite being that contains all perfections of being without limit. In all creatures essence and being are really distinct, for every being whose essence is its own being necessarily exists in and of itself, in virtue of its own essence. But only God necessarily exists in and of Himself, without being caused. Therefore only God is His own being by essence. That is to say, it is contradictory to think that a creature *is* its own being like God. If that were so, it would have to be uncreated and exist through its own essence.

All creatures by definition *have* their being from another, and thus they are not their own being, but receive it from God. Their being is received by their essence as the act of their essence. For if something is limited and does not have all perfection of being, as is the case with creatures, that means that its being is received in another principle that limits being to certain perfections and not to others. The principle that limits being is the *essence*, which determines a *concrete way of being*. It is evident that the essence that receives, limits, and determines being is really distinct from the being that is received, limited, and determined by that essence.

The essence of creatures determines a finite way of being. The essence of God is infinite, identical to all the infinite perfection of being. Certainly God has an essence—His divine nature—but that essence does not limit His divine being. The essence of God is His divine being itself, without any limits.

In conclusion, the real distinction between essence and act of being (existence) in all creatures is the most radical distinction between God and creatures, and is therefore a very important foundation of Christian philosophy. This fundamental truth about God and creatures also has profound spiritual implications that should serve to build up our humility. Our being is utterly dependent on God, from whom it is received. Everything we have is a finite, infinitesimal share or participation in the infinite ocean and abyss of the perfection of being that is God. He alone *is* His being. We receive but a finite drop. It is in this sense

⁵ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, book I, chapter 22.

that we should understand the words spoken by our Lord to St. Catherine of Sienna: “I am He who is; you are she who is not.” St. Paul also emphasizes the gift nature of our being in 1 Corinthians 4:7: “What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?”

3. Goodness of God

It is easy now to show that God has all perfection and is the supreme goodness, for every goodness and perfection is a perfection *of being*. Since God is the fullness of being without any limitation, it follows that He is the fullness of goodness and perfection without any limitation. His fullness of being is at the same time the fullness and abyss of goodness that is infinitely loveable and worthy of praise.

A foundational principle of metaphysics is that being and goodness always go together. Evil is simply defect, or the lack of being that ought to be present. Moral evil is the lack of right order (charity) that ought to be present in moral acts. Thus it is a lack of the fullness of being that ought to be in the act. There are tremendous consequences that flow from this simple truth. If God is the supreme Goodness and the source of all participated goodness, it follows that God is the source of every moral value and of the moral law, and of all *happiness*, which is *repose in the good*.

Every person asks questions in some form about the good. What is of highest value? What is the complete goodness of human life? What is happiness? These are questions that ultimately point to God as the source of all goodness and the infinite Good in person. Christ made reference to this in His dialogue with the rich young man recorded in the synoptic Gospels. The young man calls Him good master and asks about the good life, or the way to eternal life, and Christ answers that only God is good. John Paul II spoke of this in his letter to the Youth of the World, *Dilecti Amici* 4:

Only God is good, which means this: in him and him alone all values have their first source and final completion; he is “the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end”. Only in him do values and their authenticity and definitive confirmation. Without him—without the reference to God—the whole world of created values remains as it were suspended in an absolute vacuum. . . . Why is God alone good? Because he is love.

4. Infinity of God

The fact that God is the fullness of being proves also that He is infinite. For all creatures, even angels, are limited by the fact that they receive being within a given receptacle, which is their particular essence or nature. This essence is necessarily finite, which gives them certain perfections, but not others. But since God’s essence is identical with His being, His being is not limited by any receptacle or container and must therefore be infinite.

The infinity of God obviously has great implications for humility. God's infinity means that there is an *infinite* gap between the goodness of God and that of the greatest of His creatures. There is a much greater similarity between the being and goodness of an amoeba and St. Michael the Archangel, than there is between St. Michael and God. The Fourth Lateran Council profoundly stated (DS 806): "Between the Creator and the creature so great a likeness cannot be noted without the necessity of noting a greater dissimilarity between them." In other words, while there is a certain similarity between God's goodness and that of creatures which gives us some knowledge of God by *analogy*, nevertheless, there is a greater dissimilarity, for God's goodness is infinite while that of even the most exalted creature is finite. Thus God's essence remains hidden to us, even though we know truths about Him. For example, we know the truth that God is good. However, God's goodness infinitely surpasses the goodness that we know in the created world. Thus we cannot naturally grasp the infinite extent of God's goodness.

5. Oneness of God

Although it is a revealed truth and the foundation of Israel's faith, natural reason can also know that God is one. We have seen that God is all perfection of being by essence, unlimited and infinite being and goodness. However, it is impossible that all perfection of being be present in two separate individuals, because a distinction between them must mean that one of them has something that the other does not, and thus one would lack the perfection of being and not be God.

In human experience the multiplicity of beings is caused by two things: the division of matter into different individuals, and the difference of perfection that marks different species and individuals. In the material world, there can be many members of the same species because the divisibility of matter makes possible the multiplicity of bodies, all endowed with the same type of soul or form. In purely spiritual beings there can only be one member in each species, because there is no matter to multiply them. Thus every angel is its own species, each of which has its own place in the hierarchy of natural perfection. Obviously, God cannot exist in a plurality of individuals because of the division of matter, for the divine nature is purely spiritual. Secondly, there cannot be a multiplicity of gods on the basis of a difference of perfections because God is absolutely perfect, the supreme goodness. There can only be one Supreme Goodness.

St. Thomas proves the oneness of God in *ST I*, q. 11, a. 3, as follows:

This is proved from the infinity of His perfection. For it was shown above (q. 4, a. 2) that God comprehends in Himself the whole perfection of being. If then many gods existed, they would necessarily differ from each other. Some-

thing therefore would belong to one which did not belong to another. And if this were a privation, one of them would not be absolutely perfect; but if it were a perfection, then one of them would be without it. So it is impossible for many gods to exist. Hence also the ancient philosophers, constrained as it were by truth, when they asserted an infinite principle, asserted likewise that there was only one such principle.

St. Thomas also shows the oneness of God from the unity of the world:

Thirdly, this is shown from the unity of the world. For all things that exist are seen to be ordered to each other since some serve others. But things that are diverse do not harmonize in one order, unless they are so ordered by something that is one. For many things are brought together into one order better by one agent than by many: because one is the per se cause of one, and many are only the accidental cause of one, inasmuch as they are in some way one. Since therefore what is first is most perfect, and is so per se and not accidentally, it must be that the first agent which reduces all into one order should be only one. And this one is God.

In other words, the unified order of things in the world must derive ultimately from a First Cause that is One in itself. Only a first essential unity can be the ultimate cause of a derived or participated unity, such as the order manifested in the world.

It is also possible to demonstrate the oneness of God from the divine simplicity. A multiplicity of gods would have to be the same in something so as to be gods, but different in something else so as to be distinct. Thus they would have to be composed of a similar part and a distinct part. For example, if there were two or more gods, they would have to be one in essence but distinct in being, or similar in substance but distinct in accidents. However, God is completely simple without any parts. There can only be one completely simple infinite Being.

Polytheism goes against reason and against the common experience of the world. It is interesting to note that most polytheistic religions recognized some supreme god above the entire pantheon of gods to whom cult was given. Plato and Aristotle were able to prove the oneness of God using reason alone, but they admitted other lesser divinities or demi-gods, which would correspond to angels.

The spiritual importance of the oneness of God is impossible to exaggerate, hence the importance of the Old Testament revelation in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." It is significant that the revelation of the oneness of God is put as the foundation of the great commandment to love God with all one's heart, mind, and soul. Only in the recognition of the oneness of God does one clearly see Him as the absolute and total source of all goodness and being, and the one and only final end, the supreme good, infinite Love, who merits all

man's love in return. Only in the recognition of the oneness of God does life gain a unity in direction to love and serve Him. The polytheism of the pagan religions inevitably viewed the gods as powers that are of interest to man for his own needs. The cult of the gods is ultimately directed to man's own benefit, and not to the love of the gods above all things. Who can imagine that Zeus and his kin could be loved with all the heart, mind, and soul of their devotees? For the gods did not claim to be *the source* of all goodness and being, infinite love, and thus infinitely loveable, but quite the contrary. It follows that polytheism logically makes true charity with regard to God (love of God above all things for His own sake) incomprehensible and impossible. The same thing is true today of New Age religiosity. The worship of cosmic powers and forces is always directed to self, and can never provide the basis for true charity.

6. Omnipresence of God

St. Thomas treats the omnipresence of God in *ST I*, q. 8. In the first article he explains that God is in all things as the cause of their being.⁶ If God were not present in me as the cause of my being, which He upholds and sustains at every moment, I would sink immediately into nothingness, for being does not belong to my essence, but is something received. This is a humbling thought!

Medieval authors distinguished different senses of God's presence in creation. God is said to be present everywhere "by essence, presence, and power." He is present by essence in that He gives being to all things, as explained above. He is said to be in all things "by presence" in that all things are perfectly known by Him. Every act and movement of our heart is known by God more perfectly than we know it ourselves. We are always in God's presence, and a constant awareness of this truth is fundamental to growth in the spiritual life.

Finally, God is present in all things "by power" in that everything is subject to His governance and all being lies open to God to do with it as He wills. This power is especially manifest in God's miracles and supernatural interventions. For example, the substance of bread and wine lies open to the power of God who can change it into

⁶ *ST I*, q. 8, a. 1: "God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it works. For an agent must be joined to that wherein it acts immediately and touch it by its power. . . . Now since God is very being by His own essence, created being must be His proper effect; as to ignite is the proper effect of fire. Now God causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being; as light is caused in the air by the sun as long as the air remains illuminated. Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it, according to its mode of being. But being is what is innermost in each thing and most fundamentally inherent in them. . . . Hence it must be that God is in all things, and most intimately."

the Body and Blood of Christ. St. Thomas explains these three senses of the presence of God in *ST I*, q. 8, a. 3:

But how He is in other things created by Him, may be considered from human affairs. (a) A king, for example, is said to be in the whole kingdom by his power, although he is not everywhere present. (b) Again a thing is said to be by its presence in other things which are subject to its inspection; as things in a house are said to be present to anyone, who nevertheless may not be in substance in every part of the house. (c) Lastly, a thing is said to be by way of substance or essence in that place in which its substance may be.

(a) Now there were some (the Manichees) who said that spiritual and incorporeal things were subject to the divine power; but that visible and corporeal things were subject to the power of a contrary principle. Therefore against these it is necessary to say that God is in all things by His power. (b) But others, though they believed that all things were subject to the divine power, still did not admit that divine providence extended to these inferior bodies. . . . Against these it is necessary to say that God is in all things by His presence. (c) Further, others said that, although all things are subject to God's providence, still all things are not immediately created by God; but that He immediately created the first creatures, and these created the others. Against these it is necessary to say that He is in all things by His essence.

Therefore, God is in all things by His power, inasmuch as all things are subject to His power; He is by His presence in all things, as all things are bare and open to His eyes; He is in all things by His essence, inasmuch as He is present to all as the cause of their being.

However, God is present to the spiritual creature in a state of grace in a special way, different from the other three modes of presence. He is present to the justified soul through the theological virtues as the object of faith, hope, and charity. He is present thus as the *beloved* of the soul. This is how the Trinity is said to dwell in the soul as in a temple.⁷

7. Immutability of God

From the fact that God is pure Act, it follows easily that He must be immutable. For if God is pure Act with no passive potency, then He cannot change, for all change is a movement from potency to act. Indeed if God were to change, there would have to be a cause of His change, and thus God would be caused, which is impossible. The immutability of God was recognized by the great classical philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. The latter explicitly

⁷ St. Thomas explains this in *ST I*, q. 8, a. 3: "God is said to be in a thing in two ways; in one way after the manner of an efficient cause; and thus He is in all things created by Him; in another way he is in things as the object of operation is in the operator; and this is proper to the operations of the soul, according as the thing known is in the one who knows; and the thing desired in the one desiring. In this second way God is especially in the rational creature which knows and loves Him actually or habitually. And because the rational creature possesses this prerogative by grace . . . He is said to be thus in the saints by grace."

recognized that God was pure Act, from which His immutability follows.⁸

Furthermore, every change implies some distinction of parts and thus composition, such as that between substance and accident, potency and act, matter and form, or essence and existence. Everything that changes must be composed, for in every change something is lost and something is acquired, while the subject itself remains. For example, in accidental changes the *substance* remains while one *accident* is lost and another acquired. In substantial changes, the *matter* remains while one *form* is lost and another acquired. But God is completely simple. Therefore He cannot change. Also, since God is infinite Perfection and infinite fullness of Being, He cannot possibly acquire anything distinct from what He already is. St. Thomas explains this in *ST I*, q. 9, a. 1:

First, because it was shown above that there is some first being, whom we call God; and that this first being must be pure act, without the admixture of any potentiality, for the reason that, absolutely speaking, potentiality is posterior to act. Now everything which is in any way changed, is in some way in potentiality. Hence it is evident that it is impossible for God to be in any way changeable. Secondly, because everything which is moved, remains as it was in part, and passes away in part; as what is moved from whiteness to blackness, remains the same as to substance; thus in everything which is moved, there is some kind of composition to be found. But it has been shown above (q. 3, a. 7) that in God there is no composition, for He is altogether simple. Hence it is manifest that God cannot be moved. Thirdly, because everything which is moved acquires something by its movement, and attains to what it had not attained previously. But *since God is infinite, comprehending in Himself all the plenitude of perfection of all being, He cannot acquire anything new, nor extend Himself to anything to which He was not extended previously.* Hence movement in no way belongs to Him. So, some of the ancients, constrained, as it were, by the truth, decided that the first principle was immovable.

Perhaps someone might object that God could cause Himself to change. However, for Him to change even through Himself, He would have to be in potency for the change. Furthermore, the change would be either for the better or for the worse. If for the better, than He would not have been the fullness of being beforehand, and so would not have been God. If for the worse, then He would not be the fullness of being afterwards, and would cease to be God. Furthermore, nothing can cause itself absolutely (animals can only move themselves by having one part act on another), for it would have to be in act and potency in the same way at the same time.

⁸ The philosopher most famous for denying the immutability of God is Hegel, who saw God as pure becoming through history. Hegel essentially held that history perfects God, and we ourselves perfect God through our acts. God comes to self-consciousness in human history, and especially in Hegel's philosophy! This view actually ends up divinizing the dialectical process of history, as is clear in Hegel's pupil Karl Marx.

The truth of God's immutability is revealed in the Old and New Testaments. In Malachi 3:6, God says: "I am the Lord, and I change not." In James 1:17 it is written: "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow of change." But one might object that Scripture also speaks of God as "repenting" or changing His mind about past actions, as in Genesis 6 when He is said to repent having made man in the time of Noah. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden after their sin also seems like God altered His plan or changed His mind. The simple answer to this kind of objection is that from all eternity God had foreseen and permitted the sin of Adam and Eve and that of pre-diluvian humanity, and from all eternity He had decreed a just punishment for their transgressions. Scripture speaks a language using human concepts familiar to us from our experience so that we can understand what is infinitely above us. These concepts are used *analogically* and mysteriously, and they must be understood by being elevated to the divine sphere.

Another interesting objection to God's immutability concerns prayer, for if His will is unchangeable then why do we bother to pray for things and beseech God to hear us? St. Thomas poses this question in his treatise on prayer, *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 2:

In order to throw light on this question we must consider that divine providence disposes not only what effects shall take place, but also from what causes and in what order these effects shall proceed. Now among other causes, human acts are the causes of certain effects. It follows that men do certain actions not that they may thereby change the divine disposition, but that by those actions they may achieve certain effects according to the order of the divine disposition; and the same is to be said of natural causes. And so is it with regard to prayer. For we pray not that we may change the divine disposition, but that we may beseech that which God has disposed to be fulfilled by our prayers. In other words, "that by asking, men may deserve to receive what almighty God from eternity has disposed to give," as Gregory says.

Reply OBJ 1: We need to pray to God, not in order to make known to Him our needs or desires but that we ourselves may be reminded of the necessity of having recourse to God's help in these matters.

Reply OBJ 2: As stated above, our motive in praying is not that we may change the divine disposition, but that, by our prayers, we may obtain what God has appointed.

It is part of God's plan that certain effects be realized through certain causes. Prayer is a very important cause, and thus God has decreed that certain gifts be tied to it. God has eternally willed to grant certain superabundant graces (beyond the sufficient grace that is given to all) in response to prayer that would not have been granted without it. For example, many extraordinary gifts of grace as well as healing and other temporal benefits were given through the prayers of saints. Those prayers did not change

God's eternal plan, but were eternally appointed to be the means of bringing about those superabundant gifts in the world. Since the saints were acting freely in cooperation with God, they could have failed to make those ardent prayers, in which case the superabundant gifts would not have been given.

This doctrine has great importance for the spiritual life, for if we neglect to pray as we should, then the whole mystical Body of Christ, and indeed the whole world, suffers because of it and will not receive graces that would have been given in response to such prayer. God ties the superabundance of His graces to the merit of our prayers and intercessions because He wills us to cooperate in His plan of salvation, and thus He conditions His gifts partly on our cooperation. We can cooperate with God's plan not only through our acts of virtue, but also through our good desires expressed in the form of prayer.

Another reason why God wills us to pray even though His will is immutable is because He wants us to grow in charity, for this is the very purpose of creation. Prayer is the expression of our desires before God, and He wants our hearts to expand more and more by ardently desiring His glory and the salvation of our neighbor. For this reason He conditions the superabundance of His gifts to our prayers, so that we may be given an incentive to grow continually in charity, the fountainhead of prayer.

The immutability of God also leads to the conclusion that the divine nature is impassible, incapable of suffering or of losing any of His infinite perfection of Being.⁹ When God is offended by man, God does not change, but it is man who changes, becoming unjust towards His infinite Benefactor. In order to suffer to make reparation for the sin of humanity, God had to become incarnate and take on a human nature so as to suffer in it.

The immutability of God, like all His attributes, has great implications for the spiritual life in leading us to humility. God has no need of any benefit, for He is immutably perfect and blessed. The only thing we can give Him is the love and honor that is due to His immutable goodness, *conforming ourselves to His plan*, rather than seeking to change His plan for our benefit. Pagan polytheism sought to change the will of the gods by offering sacrifice, but Christian sacrifice seeks to offer God what is His due simply because of who He is and who we are (sinners in need of reparation). The perfect sacrifice is that of our hearts in conversion, offered together with the sacrifice of Christ. In conversion we change our hearts so that we no longer desire our will above that of God, but rather we will and love what He wills and loves.

⁹ Notice that the question of suffering in God is distinct from the question of whether there can be an eternal sorrow in God over the sin of men and angels, as there is eternal joy over their conversion. The latter question goes beyond the bounds of this work.

Our confidence in God rests on His immutability. He is a rock and firm foundation precisely because He cannot move from Wisdom and Mercy, nor can His eternal plan suffer any deviation or detriment. Whatever seems loss or failure to a human perspective is part of that immutable plan conceived by infinite wisdom and love. It might be objected that God's immutability would lead us to be fatalists or quietists who think that since God has an eternal plan, our efforts are unnecessary or even sacrilegious. This error of sloth is easily answered, for God has decreed from all eternity that the crown is to go only to those who legitimately fight in the arena of this life of trial. God's immutable and eternal plan includes our participation and intense effort.

8. Eternity of God

The immutability of God immediately implies His eternity. God's eternity does not simply mean that He has no beginning or end, but refers to the fullness of His being, which is a simultaneous possession of all good without any shadow of change.¹⁰ God is not in time because time is a measure of change.

Material things are in continuous change, and thus are in continuous time. Spiritual creatures like angels do not experience time continuously, but are nevertheless marked by temporality in some sense insofar as they are subject to change through their actions. The angels had an instant of trial in time, followed by confirmation in grace or everlasting loss of it. But God is not subject to any change whatsoever, for He possesses the incorruptible duration of the fullness of being, which is His eternity. In *ST I*, q. 10, a. 3, St. Thomas affirms that eternity is proper to God alone, although the blessed in heaven will share in His eternity in the beatific vision:

I answer that eternity truly and properly so called is in God alone, because eternity follows on immutability. . . . But God alone is altogether immutable, as was shown above. Accordingly, however, as some receive immutability from Him, they share in His eternity. Thus some receive immutability from God in the way of never ceasing to exist; in that sense it is said of the earth, "it standeth for ever" (Eccl 1:4). Again, some things are called eternal in Scripture because of the length of their duration, although they are in nature corruptible; thus (Ps 75:5) the hills are called eternal and we read "of the fruits of the eternal hills" (Deut 33:15). Some again, share more fully than others in the nature of eternity, inasmuch as they possess unchangeableness either in being or further still in operation; like the angels, and the blessed, who enjoy the Word, because "as regards that vision of the Word, no changing thoughts exist in the Saints," as Augustine says (*On the Trinity* 15). Hence those who see God are said to have eternal life; according to that text, "This is eternal life, that they may know Thee the only true God," etc. (Jn 17:3).

¹⁰ Boethius gave the classic definition of God's eternity: "Eternity is the simultaneously whole and perfect possession of unending life."