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Man Elevated to Share in the Divine Life

Talk #1

Man's Supernatural End



© **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

Man's Supernatural End: The Vision of God

In this lecture series we shall continue our study of Christian Anthropology, focusing on the supernatural order to which we have been elevated by grace, which is a sharing in the life of God. The supernatural order is synonymous with the order of grace.

The first thing we have to consider with regard to the supernatural order is our supernatural end: the beatific vision, which is a sharing in God's own happiness and inner life. Every order implies an ordering of means to an end. The supernatural order is the ordering of human life to our supernatural end—communion with the Blessed Trinity—through supernatural means established by God, which are principally the Incarnation, grace, the Church, and her sacraments.

Man Elevated to a Supernatural End; Twofold End of Rational Creatures

At the heart of the Catholic faith is the fundamental doctrine that we have been created for a supernatural end. When God made Adam and Eve at the beginning of human history, He elevated them to the supernatural order, and destined them to share in His own beatitude, on the condition of their fidelity.

The term “supernatural” is used in contradistinction to “natural,” which signifies what belongs to our nature as rational animals and is proportionate to it. Reason, for example, is natural for us, as are our emotions and passions. Supernatural, on the contrary, is what transcends our nature and is immensely disproportionate to it, being above it. The supernatural refers to what rightly belongs to God alone, and is infinitely disproportionate to any creature. If we apply this distinction to the end or goal of human life, the term “supernatural end” is thus used in contradistinction to a natural end which would be proportionate to the powers of human nature. A supernatural end presupposes a natural end which it transcends. The supernatural end therefore will transcend the proportionality of human nature and its native powers, and be proportionate to God alone.

The very term “supernatural end” is itself mysterious, for it is certainly surprising that a creature can receive an end above that which is proper for its own nature. The mystery is deeper still, however, for our supernatural end is not simply above human nature, but above angelic nature and above anything that could be due to any created nature, for it consists in a participation in God's own eternal end: the beatitude of the inter-Trinitarian life. How can a creature come to share in the beatitude proper to God Himself? This is a supreme mystery. We believe it but we cannot rightly grasp what we believe.

It is impossible to rightly understand man's supernatural end without first considering man's natural end. Irrational animals only seek particular goods and are satisfied by them, for their nature is incapable of seeking anything higher. The knowledge of beasts is limited to their senses (external and internal), which only know *particular* goods, to which all their appetites are directed. Horses, for example, naturally seek to run, eat, procreate, neigh, and suchlike, and they desire nothing more than this.

The human intellect, on the contrary, grasps universal concepts, including the universal good. The movement of the will naturally follows on the intellect, in that it loves and desires the goods conceived by the intellect. Since we naturally grasp good in a universal and unlimited way, we naturally desire to possess the good in all its breadth and extension. Hence no particular finite good can ever fully satisfy the human will, just as no knowledge of finite creatures alone can ever fully satisfy the human intellect.

This means that only God can fully and properly satisfy the unlimited aspiration of the human will. Therefore, God must be the objective final end of every human being, in which alone true beatitude can be found. This means that beatitude must consist in the greatest union with God that we can attain.

We naturally seek to be immersed in beauty, but no finite beauty satisfies this aspiration. We naturally seek to love and be loved, but again, no finite love will satisfy. We naturally desire to understand the ultimate reason and meaning of all things, but no finite understanding will satiate the mind. We naturally seek justice, and ardently desire to see it established, but no finite and temporary justice will do.

A beautiful expression of this unlimited aspiration of the human heart is given by Plato in the *Symposium*, in which the priestess Diotima speaks to Socrates about the vision of *Beauty in itself*. She arouses the desire to see God, identified with the Idea of Beauty, by leading her listeners to ascend from physical to moral beauty, until they arrive at the very Idea of Beauty:

“And if, my dear Socrates,” Diotima went on, “man's life is ever worth the living, it is when he has attained this vision of the very soul of beauty. And once you have seen it, you will never be seduced again by the charm of gold, of dress. . . . But if it were given to man to gaze on beauty's very self—unsullied, unalloyed, and freed from the mortal taint that haunts the frailer loveliness of flesh and blood—if, I say, it were given to man to see the heavenly beauty face to face, would you call his,” she asked me, “an unenviable life, whose eyes had been opened to

the vision, and who had gazed upon it in true contemplation until it had become his own forever?"¹

Aristotle also, in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, speaks of a natural desire to know God. Whereas Plato presents it as a desire to see Beauty and Goodness itself, Aristotle (and St. Thomas after him) presents it as a natural desire to know the First Cause of all things, who is God—the First Truth, from which all being, truth, and goodness derive. The formulations of Plato and Aristotle complement each other.

Complete happiness, therefore, can only lie in knowing and loving infinite Goodness, Beauty, Truth, and Love, which is God. It is equally clear that this perfect happiness can never be accomplished in this life, if only because the temporary nature of this life precludes a perfect happiness, which must consist in a stable possession of the complete good. Complete happiness must be something that cannot be lost: eternal contemplation of God.

Granted that the object of beatitude is God, this raises the question of how we attain to union with Him. Since God is pure spirit, it is clear that man can only attain to God through his spiritual operations of *knowing and loving Him*. This means that beatitude must necessarily consist in a *loving contemplation of God*. Plato and Aristotle were able to grasp this, and here lies one of their noblest achievements.

Two Forms of Contemplation of God; Natural Desire to See God

In what kind of contemplation of God does beatitude consist? St. Thomas explains that contemplation of God can be of two kinds: natural and supernatural, the former known by philosophers, and the latter made known through divine Revelation.

Natural and philosophical contemplation of God consists in knowing and loving God through His works of creation. By *analogy* with the things He has made, we can know something of God, while acknowledging that He is infinitely greater and more beautiful than His greatest works. This kind of loving contemplation, if possessed in a stable and uninterrupted way after this life (freed from the constraints of this mortal life in a state like that of Eden), in the company of friends who share this contemplation, would be the highest kind of happiness that unaided human nature can achieve.

Nevertheless, such contemplation would necessarily be imperfect, for it would not satisfy *all* human aspirations, but only those proportionate to human nature. What would be missing? By our natural intellectual power, we can never contemplate the essence of God, the Supreme Good, Beauty, and Truth, of which every created good is

1 *Symposium* 211d-e, translated by Michael Joyce, in *Plato: Collected Dialogues* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), 563.

an infinitely distant shadow. We can know that He exists, and can contemplate His attributes as seen through the mirror of creation,² but nature could never attain to seeing God *as He is*. Thus an intimate friendship with God would be impeded by our natural “exile,” our natural inability to “see” our beloved Creator due to the infinite gap between our natures.

Since those who contemplate God recognize that He infinitely transcends His works, they would like to know God directly in Himself, if such a thing were possible. Knowing that God exists and that He is known by us imperfectly through creatures, the soul necessarily would like to know Him by a higher supernatural contemplation, face to face, as He is in Himself, even though such a contemplation is utterly beyond the power of human reason. For this reason St. Thomas speaks of a “natural desire to see God.”³

In *SCG* III, ch. 50, and in *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8, St. Thomas demonstrates that there can be no *absolutely perfect happiness* without the vision of God, because he shows that the rational creature (whether man or angel) has a natural desire to see God, to know His essence, to know *who* God is in Himself, to contemplate His intrinsic glory, to know the Love by which and for which the world was created. For this reason, the vision of God alone constitutes the essence of perfect beatitude, in which every natural desire comes to rest.

In *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8, St. Thomas asks whether man's final and perfect beatitude lies in the vision of God. To show that this is the case, he examines our natural desire to know, and where it leads. The reasoning is relatively simple: Once a given effect is known, we experience wonder and seek to know its cause, as with an eclipse of the sun. This process of seeking to know the causes of effects, spurred on by wonder, will not reach a point of rest until we arrive at the knowledge of the existence of the very First Cause. However, simply to know that something exists without knowing its essence is an imperfect knowledge, for the proper object of the intellect is the essence of things. And this lack will be felt all the more deeply the more profound, universal, and primary is that cause. Therefore, knowledge only of the existence of a First Cause, without knowledge of its essence, does not yet satisfy the desire of our mind. And if we can grasp that God has created the world freely to manifest His goodness,⁴ we naturally want to know the essence of that intrinsic Goodness. St. Thomas's conclusion is that every mind has a natural desire for the vision of the essence of God, and can only fully rest in that vision.

2 See 1 Cor 13:12: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.”

3 See Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010).

4 As Plato was able to grasp; see *Timaeus* 29e.

St. Thomas takes it for granted that it is somehow possible for man to attain to a *simply perfect* beatitude, and not just to a *proportionately perfect* beatitude that is perfect for a creature such as man, although *imperfect*, simply speaking. His perspective is really theological, presupposing that God has ordained us to a simply perfect beatitude, and that we are capable of it. In other texts, St. Thomas states that the presupposition of the possibility of perfect happiness belongs to *faith*: “Faith . . . affirms it to be possible for man to be united to God in perfect enjoyment, in which beatitude consists.”⁵ Reason alone would lead us to expect a limited or imperfect happiness proportionate to our nature, for we are limited and imperfect beings.

It follows that there are two kinds of beatitude: natural and supernatural, of which the latter is known by faith alone. St. Thomas speaks of this distinction in a great many texts. For example, he writes:

Man by his nature is proportioned to a *certain end for which he has a natural appetite*, and which he can work to achieve by his natural powers. This end is a certain contemplation of the divine attributes, in the measure in which this is possible for man through his natural powers; and in this end even the philosophers placed the final happiness of man.

But there is another end to which man is prepared by God which exceeds the proportionality of human nature. This end is eternal life which consists in the vision of God in His essence, an end which exceeds the proportionality of any created nature, being connatural only to God alone.⁶

Likewise, he writes: “It should be considered that there is a *twofold good for man*; one which is proportional to his nature, and another which exceeds the capacity of his nature.”⁷

*Both man's natural and supernatural end lie in the loving contemplation of God.*⁸ Man can have no other end than God, because no finite goodness or truth can satisfy man's intellect and will, which are faculties open to unlimited goodness and truth. The difference between the natural and the supernatural end lies in the *way in which God is contemplated: by our natural powers* in the case of our natural end, and *by the light of glory* in the beatific vision in the case of our supernatural end. Our connatural end has been *elevated and immeasurably perfected* by our supernatural end.

Nevertheless, it is not idle or useless to speak about a connatural end for man in theology, for this notion of an

5 In *SCG* III, ch. 153, n. 3 (#3251). See also *ST I-II*, q. 3, a. 2, ad 4: “However, a perfect beatitude is promised to us by God, when we shall be as the angels in heaven.” See also *Comp. theol.*, I, ch. 201, in which the Incarnation is cited as a motive of credibility for the possibility of a perfect beatitude consisting in the vision of God.

6 *De veritate*, q. 27, a. 2.

7 *De Virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 10.

8 See St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 62, a. 1; *In I Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1; *In II Sent.*, d. 4, q. 1, a. 1; *De Veritate*, q. 14, a. 2.

end that corresponds to our nature *as such*, is absolutely necessary to distinguish the natural and the supernatural orders, and to show the gratuitousness of our supernatural end. For the vision of God is gratuitous in the full sense of the word, precisely because it immeasurably transcends our connatural end, which is the highest end that human nature could achieve through its own creaturely powers.

A purely natural contemplation of God as Creator, whom we know analogically through the mirror of creation, is not such as to provide complete rest to our natural desire to know, and would not constitute *perfect beatitude*. It would constitute only an *imperfect beatitude*. This imperfect beatitude is our natural end.

Since man is a finite creature infinitely below God, it is fitting and proportionate to him to know God through finite creatures. The fact that a natural beatitude would not satisfy the desire to “see God” does not mean that a natural contemplation of God would leave man frustrated and unhappy, for he would recognize that it is beyond the natural reach of all created intellects to see God face to face. No upright rational being pines away or suffers for lack of disproportionate and naturally impossible things.⁹ St. Thomas explains this by using the example of a child who would like to fly. What child wouldn't? However, children do not suffer because of their inability to fly, for they recognize that it is not part of human nature. Likewise, a peasant does not suffer for not being the emperor, unless he thought he was the rightful heir.

Some have objected that the notion of an imperfect beatitude is absurd, and that the existence of a true natural desire to see God necessarily implies that man can only have a supernatural finality, the vision of God. Many have even maintained that this is the view of St. Thomas himself.¹⁰ However, if this is the case, why does St. Thomas insist on maintaining that beatitude is twofold: natural and supernatural?

Is it absurd to speak of an imperfect beatitude, and to distinguish it from perfect beatitude? St. Thomas Aquinas did not think so. Beatitude refers to the full actualization of the intellectual creature, in which our faculties attain their highest object, and our aspirations come to rest. St. Thomas's thesis is that this can happen in two ways: (a) *in accordance with the proportionality of our nature* (natu-

9 Satan suffers in this way, desiring to rival God, which is absurd and impossible.

10 See, for example, Dennis Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1997), 513-514, 529. For a response to Bradley, see Steven Long, “Man's Natural End,” *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 211-237. Earlier in the twentieth century, the principal proponent of this view denying the possibility of a natural end was Henri de Lubac S.J., in *Surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1946), especially 467, 483-494. He later refined his position in *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1998).

ral beatitude), and (b) *transcending the proportionality of our nature* (supernatural beatitude). In the first case it is *relatively perfect*, perfect in proportionality with our nature. In the second case it is *absolutely perfect*, perfect like God's beatitude, of which it is a supernatural participation.¹¹ Supernatural beatitude is immeasurably higher than natural happiness.

This means that our supernatural end—heaven—transcends and immeasurably exceeds the natural longing of the human heart. For this reason St. Paul, paraphrasing Isaiah 64:4, says that “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, it has not come up into the heart of man, what God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor 2:9). St. Thomas Aquinas understands this text to mean that the vision of God “exceeds the intellect and the will of man,”¹² and he frequently cites it to show that the vision of God is indeed a *supernatural* end, exceeding even our natural inclination.

Although there can be a natural desire in some sense for the vision of God—and natural wish, as it were, in order to rightly and efficaciously desire the vision of God, one must first believe that God has promised it to us, and be given the gift of sanctifying grace, which makes us mysteriously proportionate to God's own life. St. Thomas distinguishes between natural and supernatural inclinations. A natural inclination is one that arises from nature and is proportionate to it. A supernatural inclination arises first from faith and is proportionate only to grace, although not to nature. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:5, St. Thomas observes that God gives us both “natural and supernatural desires.” He gives us “natural desires when he gives a natural spirit belonging to human nature. . . . He gives us supernatural desires when He infuses in us a supernatural spirit, namely, the Holy Spirit.”¹³ For St. Thomas, an habitual and absolute desire for the vision of God can only be the fruit of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Without that gift, man's spirit cannot aspire so high with an innate and unconditional tendency (although one could still wish for it).¹⁴

11 See St. Thomas, *De Virtutibus*, q. 1, art. 10, ad 1: “With regard to the perfection of the end man can be perfect in two ways: one way according to the capacity of his nature; another way according to a certain supernatural perfection. And in this latter way man is said to be perfect simply speaking (*simpliciter*). In the first way he is perfect in a relative sense (*secundum quid*).”

See also *In Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus*, chapter 13, lecture 1: “That which is has everything which it should have according to its nature is said to be perfect not absolutely (*simpliciter*), but according to its nature. God, however, is absolutely perfect (*simpliciter*)...”

12 I-II, q. 5, a. 5, sed contra.

13 St. Thomas, *In II Cor.*, ch. 5, v. 5, lect. 2, Marietti n. 160-161.

14 Nevertheless, we can desire it with an elicited natural desire, which serves thus as an essential link between the natural and the supernatural orders.

The Desire to See God Expressed in the Old Testament

Although the promise of the vision of God properly belongs to the fullness of Revelation brought by the Messiah, the prophets of the Old Testament not infrequently express the desire for the full vision of the glory of God. In some sense we could say that this ardent aspiration lies at the heart of the aspirations of Israel. Through the gift of sanctifying grace, God implanted this supernatural desire in the hearts of the men and women of God of the Old Covenant.

A classic text expressing this desire is found in Exodus 33:18–23: “Moses said, ‘I pray thee, show me thy glory.’” The desire to see the glory of God is a supernatural desire aroused by Moses's deeply intimate prayer on Mt. Sinai and in the Tent of Meeting, in which he conversed with God as with a friend. What was God's response to Moses's prayer? It was a gracious refusal, for the time of full redemption had not yet come:

And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.” And the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

In other words, Moses did not receive the full vision of God that we hope to receive in heaven, but rather some angelic vision—something intermediate between the hiddenness of God in this life and the fullness of vision in heaven. In that sense it was a vision of God's back rather than of His face. The highest kind of knowledge of God in this life is knowledge of what God is *not*. He is not a body (idol); He is not divided or multiple (and thus He is one); He is not finite or limited but infinite and omnipotent; He is not ignorant, unfaithful, or unforgiving, but omniscient, infinitely faithful and forgiving; etc. But we cannot yet see *how* He is these things and *who* He is in His inner life. This knowledge of God's “back,” as it were, does not yet fully reveal God's infinite glory. Therefore, the vision of God's back does not yet satisfy completely the aspiration of the saints. Wisdom in the Old Testament says that “Those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more” (Sirach 24:21).

This hunger and thirst for the face of God is beautifully manifested in the Psalms. Psalm 42 gives classic expression to this deepest aspiration of Israel:

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God. My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continu-

ally, “Where is your God?”

The same aspiration is found in Psalm 63:

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where no water is. I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

In these psalms we see that a foretaste of the vision of God was seen in the worship of Israel in the Temple. The glory of God was even made visible to human eyes in the cloud of glory that filled the Temple. Nevertheless, God's presence in the Temple did not completely satisfy Israel's aspiration, as we see in these psalms. On the contrary, the worship nourished and increased the desire for the face of God. Israel, especially in the later centuries, understood that full satisfaction of this desire could only come in the world to come (spoken of in Hebrew as the *olam haba*). It is the prayer of Israel, that God give the vision of His face to the righteous. Psalm 17 closes with the prayer: “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding your form” (Ps 17:15). Likewise, Psalm 11 closes with the words: “For the Lord is righteous, he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face” (Ps 121: 7).

What does it mean to behold the face of God or the form of God? This refers to what theology speaks of as the beatific vision.

The Beatific Vision and Eternal Life

What the prophets of the Old Testament express as an aspiration, is promised to us directly in the New Testament. In fact, it is the very substance of the Gospel, which means “good tidings.” The essential good tidings brought by the Messiah is the promise that we shall see God, and this vision will be the very substance of eternal life. In the beatitudes, Jesus promises: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall *see God*” (Mt 5:8). He is speaking not of a vision of the physical eye, but a perfect understanding of the mind and heart. Jesus also speaks of the beatific vision when He says, in His priestly prayer (Jn 17:3): “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” Eternal life is knowing God perfectly, as He knows Himself.

In his first letter John writes: “Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). Too know God and His glory as He knows Himself is to be made like unto God. Thus John says that we shall be like God to see Him as He is.

St. Paul speaks of the beatific vision in a magnificent passage in his praise of charity in 1 Cor 13:9-12:

For [now] our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will

pass away. . . . For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.¹⁵

In this life we can only know God through finite concepts, which fall infinitely short of the divine reality. This is true not only of philosophical ideas of God, but also of the higher knowledge given by faith, and even of the highest mystical illuminations received by the saints and prophets. Even when Moses spoke with God on Mt. Sinai, it was still as “in a mirror dimly,” as it was for mystics like St. Theresa of Avila and St. Ignatius of Loyola in their ecstasies. For this reason, John says that “no one has ever seen God” (Jn 1:18).

In the beatific vision, on the other hand, all the dim veils of our limited concepts will be taken away, and we shall see God as He is through God's own perfect Word. St. Paul emphasizes that we shall know God *even as we have been known by Him*. In other words, we shall know God without the mediation of any creature.

Revelation presents the final end as *eternal life*. The rich young man in the Gospel approaches Christ with the great question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mk 10:17; see Mt 19:16).

The very center of both the Revelation to Israel and the Gospel is a message of hope: the promise of *eternal life*, which is not just life without end, but a sharing in the eternal beatitude of God Himself. This is the full meaning of the word “Gospel,” which means “good tidings.” The promise of eternal life corresponds to the aspiration of the human heart, which naturally desires unlimited goodness and love, all the while transcending even our natural inclination. The human heart hopes for definitive and perfect happiness, which no finite thing can produce. In the words of St. Augustine: “God is the goal of our desires, He is the one whom we shall see without end, whom we shall love without weariness, whom we shall glorify without fatigue.”¹⁶

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (362) states that eternal happiness is “the vision of God in eternal life in which we are fully ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pt 1:4), of the glory of Christ and of the joy of the Trinitarian life.” It should be evident that to be able to see God face to face, to know Him as He knows Himself, is not an end that could correspond naturally to any creature, no matter how exalted his nature. To see the essence of God is proper only to God. In fact, God's own eternal beatitude lies in His infinite act of knowledge of His own infinite Goodness and His eternal act of love of that same Goodness, in which consists the ineffable interior life of the Holy Trinity, engendering the eternal procession of

¹⁵ See also Titus 2:13: “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

¹⁶ *City of God*, book II, chapter 30, n. 1.

the Son and the Holy Spirit. The beatific vision, therefore, is an absolutely mysterious participation or sharing of the rational creature in God's own divine life and beatitude.

Therefore, if God chooses to raise up a creature to share this sublime destiny, then this is a gift that is absolutely gratuitous and completely surpasses the capacities and exigencies or demands of our nature. God could have made us exactly as we are and destined us to a *natural* rather than a supernatural happiness after this life, proportioned to our nature.¹⁷ However, thanks be to God, He has seen fit to raise us to a blessedness infinitely higher than that to which our nature could aspire.

Since God has elevated man to a supernatural end, we cannot choose to rest in a purely natural end, and it would be utterly irrational and absurd to prefer a human beatitude (natural end) to a divine one (supernatural end), once we know that God has ordered us to a divine end, a partaking of the divine nature in the beatific vision.

¹⁷ This is taught by Pius XII in the encyclical of 1950, *Humani generis*, no. 26: "Others destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order, since God, they say, cannot create intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision."

