

Sacrifice as Satisfaction, Not Substitution: Atonement in the *Summa Theologiae*

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This essay, written in response to George Sumner's article "Why Anselm Still Matters," in the Winter 2013 issue of the ATR, examines the role of sacrifice in Thomas Aquinas' version of Anselm's satisfaction atonement theory. This essay attempts to defend the concept of sacrificial satisfaction against the critiques of "nonviolent atonement" theologians, while differentiating it from penal substitutionary theories of atonement. Satisfaction, rather than being a vicarious punishment meant for humankind, is instead a vicarious offering, given in love. This sacrificial offering is not for sating the bloodlust of an angry god; it is a powerful, effectual sign of love meant to make amends and repair a broken relationship.

Orthodox Archbishop Lazar Puhalo offered this scathing castigation of the concept of Jesus' atoning sacrifice: "A god who demands the child-sacrifice of his own son to satiate his own wrath? That is *not* Jehovah. That is Molech."¹ Many current Christian thinkers, such as Mark Heim, Michael Hardin, and Brad Jersak, agree with Puhalo, and blame traditional models of atonement for perpetuating violence. Further, they believe that schemes which include Christ's sacrifice as satisfaction for sin put violence in the heart of God. J. Denny Weaver, in *The Nonviolent Atonement*, makes room for the notion of sacrifice

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¹ Quoted in Brad Jersak, "Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ," in *Stricken By God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 24.

in his “narrative Christus Victor” theory, but only so long as the sacrifice does not act as “satisfaction” for humanity’s sins.²

In response to such criticisms, traditionalists have begun to defend the conventional conception of atonement theology. An example of such a defense is the article by George Sumner in a recent issue of the *Anglican Theological Review*, entitled “Why Anselm Still Matters.”³ Unfortunately, that article, along with many like it, presents a version of the traditional Anselmian theology that is simply incongruent with Anselm’s own argument in *Cur Deus Homo*. Sumner inaccurately frames Anselm’s work in the scheme of penal-substitutionary atonement, arguing that Christ endured punishment that was intended for humanity.

This essay is a response to both of these ideas about sacrifice and atonement theology. The word “sacrifice”—in terms of Christ’s passion and death—has been demonized within ecclesial circles in the last few decades.⁴ It has been connected to a “violent atonement,” which itself has been blamed for the violence, oppression, and “cult of suffering” within Christianity. Sarah Coakley noted this trend, and suggested its correlation to “a notable intellectual retreat” from philosophical expressions of Christian belief.⁵ Like Coakley and George Sumner, I argue that a robust notion of redemptive sacrifice is worth retrieving. Unlike Sumner, though, I do not think that either the notion of sacrifice, or of satisfaction, necessitates acceptance of penal-substitutionary atonement. Further, I believe that an examination of the concept of sacrifice expressed in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* can help Christians today make sense of Anselm’s theory of satisfaction.

² J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, second edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 72–77.

³ George Sumner, “Why Anselm Still Matters,” *Anglican Theological Review* 95, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 25–35.

⁴ See Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1992); Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement: The Origin of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005); Mark S. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006); and Timothy Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵ Sarah Coakley, *Sacrifice Regained: Reconsidering the Rationality of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6.

Before we can explore how Aquinas understands Christ's sacrifice as satisfaction, we must first address what Aquinas means by satisfaction.

Aquinas, Anselm, and Satisfaction

In short, Aquinas takes Anselm's understanding of satisfaction in *Cur Deus Homo* as the template for his own system of atonement and redemption. Anselm's main argument is that, though human beings were created to live in blessed happiness with God, their sin became an obstacle to this happiness. Their sin, a lack of willing obedience to God's sovereignty, caused them to be out of joint with the harmony of God's order, and thus out of union with God. Anselm relies on the feudal images of honor and debt to express this disharmony. Human disobedience offends the honor of God, which cannot happen without consequences. Therefore, in order for God to protect God's honor, human beings must be punished (that is, suffering life without blessed happiness), *or* they must make recompense for the honor they have taken from God.

What does it mean to make recompense, though, and how does recompense function in Anselm's scheme of satisfaction? In order to understand how Anselm can claim that humanity must make amends for "offending God's honor," we must establish what he means by this term, "honor."

It is essential to note the following two points: First, in no way should one think of the "honor" of God as God's ego. Offending God's honor is not equivalent to insulting an aristocrat. In Anselm's thinking, the stakes are infinitely higher. The entirety of the universal order rests on God's honor being upheld. William Loewe points out that even within the human context much rested upon the lord's honor: "The honor of the lord proves to be far more than some private arrangement for the lord's gratification or indulgence. The lord's honor becomes identical with the good of order that renders the well-being of the members of society possible."⁶ God's honor, for Anselm, makes possible not merely the well-being of people in a society, but the well-being of every single thing that exists. Without God's honor, there

⁶ William Loewe, "Why This Story as the Story of Salvation? Anselm and the Turn to Theory," unpublished Word document (2013), 6.

is no order. There is no constancy or reliability in creation, sending everything into chaos.

The second point is that, though humans sin when they take honor from God, Anselm is careful to make clear that God cannot lose honor:

When [a rational] being desires what is right, he is honoring God, not because he is bestowing anything upon God, but because he is voluntarily subordinating himself to his will and governance. . . . But when a rational being does not wish for what is right, he dishonors God, with regard to himself, since he is not willingly subordinating himself to God's governance, and is disturbing, as far as he is able, the order and beauty of the universe. *In spite of this he does not harm or besmirch the honor of God to the slightest extent.*⁷

The change is entirely on our part; God remains unchanged. We have taken from God, but God has not lost anything. We have rocked the order of the universe, and yet the order stands undisturbed.

Sin cannot hurt God; it hurts humans. The need for satisfaction is not to exact vengeance, but to restore harmony. Nevertheless, Anselm insists that, for God's justice to mean anything, human sin must be dealt with. Given that fact that something must be done, God's provision for satisfaction, *rather* than a punishment, shows God's great mercy. Satisfaction is not identical to punishment, but is instead an alternative to it. Thus, Jesus' death was not a punishment he endured in our place; it was a freely offered sacrifice of obedience to restore a relationship broken by human sin, which had prevented us from being in harmony with the divine order. Far from "satiating" God's wrath, Jesus' sacrifice-as-satisfaction is a lovingly bestowed gift that allows us to overcome the hurdle that separates us from God.

Still, if compensation is necessary, does this mean humanity compensates God? If not, who is compensated through Jesus' sacrifice? Here it is important to remember that, though Anselm's message has been distorted over time, satisfaction is emphatically *not* an economic model of atonement—words such as "recompense," "satisfaction," "compensation," though they sound transactional, should not

⁷ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 288, emphasis added.

be viewed through the lens of debt and payment. Instead, as Daniel Bell helpfully points out, Christ's satisfaction exists completely in the world of donation and gift. Bell references David Hart's argument that because the notion of satisfaction

belongs not to an economy of credit and exchange, but to the Trinitarian motion of love, [Christ's sacrifice] is given entirely as a gift, and should be seen as such: a gift given when it should not have needed to be given again, by God, and at a price that *we*, in our sin, imposed upon *him*. As an entirely divine action, Christ's sacrifice merely draws creation back into the eternal motion of divine love for which it was fashioned.⁸

Thus, rather than compensating God, in the sense of making restitution to God for any damage our sin has caused God, Christ's satisfaction "makes amends" by nullifying the evil of our sin. His act of pure, unselfish obedience and love allows us to participate in the divine life as God has always intended. In other words, it is not God who is satisfied in Anselm's scheme, but our *relationship* with God that was fractured by human sin.

Why then does Anselm use the language of debt and payment? Anselm says that in making recompense "it is not sufficient merely to repay what has been taken away: rather he ought to pay back more than he took, in proportion to the insult which he has inflicted."⁹ In the context of Anselm's larger argument, the idea of "taking away" or "inflicting insult" cannot apply to God. Though we have taken and inflicted, God has not lost anything or felt the insult. It may be that Anselm relies on such transactional language to emphasize the magnitude of human sin against God, showing that, because even the absolute best humans can give is only the bare minimum expected of them, there is no way for them to compensate for more than they have taken.

In brief, the problem is this: Human beings are obliged to make recompense for their sin, but because it is not within their power, they cannot do it. God is the only one who is great enough to give adequate

⁸ D. Bentley Hart, "A Gift Exceeding Every Debt: An Eastern Orthodox Appreciation of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*," *Pro Ecclesia* 7, no. 3 (1998): 348, quoted in Daniel M. Bell, "Sacrifice and Suffering: Beyond Justice, Human Rights, and Capitalism," *Modern Theology* 18, no. 3 (2002): 346.

⁹ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, 283.

recompense, but because God is the “offended party,” God should not do it. Therefore, there needs to be a God-man to accomplish satisfaction. His perfection is sufficient to provide recompense, but because of his human nature he can meet the obligations of his human sisters and brothers who are in need of atonement.

Aquinas affirms almost all of Anselm’s argument. Although he is emphatic that Christ’s passion and death can (and should) be seen as efficacious for salvation in a variety of ways, he affirms the centrality of Christ’s sacrifice as giving satisfaction on humanity’s behalf. Unlike Anselm, who insists that it was necessary that God demand satisfaction, Aquinas argues that God could just as easily forgive our sins without it.¹⁰ If God had chosen to forgive sin without satisfaction, God would not have acted unjustly, because sin is committed against God’s self, and it wrongs no one to overlook a trespass against one’s own person. God chose this scheme of atonement because it best fulfilled both God’s justice and God’s mercy.¹¹

Simply to forgive sins without any kind of satisfaction or punishment would be to ignore them. That is tantamount to saying sin does not matter. In fact, Aquinas says, sin does matter, because sin is what keeps us from receiving God’s love, from being in union with God. To pretend that sin has not happened—to fail to address the evil of sin—would be like telling the mother of a murdered child that her baby was not really dead. Sin and evil do exist, and though God is not changed or hurt by them, they have real effects.

Here it is absolutely critical to note that neither Anselm nor Aquinas asserts a theory of penal-substitutionary atonement, such as those espoused later in the tradition. Anselm explicitly states that sin must be dealt with *aut poena aut satisfactio*, either by punishment or satisfaction, not both.¹² Hence, Christ’s passion and death is not the punishment he suffered that should have been ours, just as the slain animal did not stand in for the worshiper in Hebrew sacrificial rites—a point which we will discuss later in the essay. For now it is enough to say that, for Aquinas, Christ’s passion and death is not punishment,

¹⁰ *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas* III. q. 46, art. 2, reply 3. Online edition © 2008 by Kevin Knight; www.newadvent.org/summa.

¹¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 46, art. 1, reply 3.

¹² Charles Hefling, “A Perhaps Permanently Valid Achievement: Lonergan on Christ’s Satisfaction,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 10, no. 1 (1992): 55.

but instead it both symbolizes and constitutes the perfect love that satisfies for human sin.

Though Aquinas generally favors satisfaction over substitutionary atonement, Eleonore Stump points out that there are parts of Aquinas' other works, such as the *Compendium Theologiae*, which seem to support penal-substitution. She quotes Aquinas as follows:

He [Christ] willed actually to suffer that He might satisfy for our sins. He endured for us those sufferings which we deserved to suffer in consequence of the sin of our first parent. Of these the chief is death, to which all other human sufferings are ordered as to their final term. . . . Accordingly Christ willed to submit to death for our sins so that, in taking on Himself without any fault of His own the punishment charged against us, He might free us from the death to which we had been sentenced, in the way that anyone would be freed from a debt of penalty if another person undertook to pay the penalty for him.¹³

What is interesting here is that Christ did not suffer any punishment that every other human does not already suffer. Death happens to every human; it is the "punishment charged against us . . . in consequence of the sin." The suffering Christ endured was not in our place—it was alongside us. According to Anselm and Aquinas, Christ, on account of his sinless life, was not bound to die. He chose to die, just like the rest of us. His life, unlike ours, was not already owed to God, so his sacrifice was a superabundant gift offered as satisfaction for the sins of humanity. His sacrifice freed us from "the death to which we had been sentenced." This death does not refer to the death of the body, which all of us continue to suffer, but rather the ultimate penalty—continued alienation from God. The relationship between God and us is broken by our sin, and unless the problem of sin can be resolved, sin will always be an obstacle between us. Christ's sacrifice eliminates that obstacle, bringing us with him into union with God.

Stump asserts that the main difference between Aquinas' conception of satisfaction and the retributive penal-substitution models is that while the latter concern placating the rage of the offended party, the former concerns "the soul of the offender [becoming] at

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, 227. Quoted in Eleonore Stump, "Atonement According to Aquinas," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas Morris (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 61–91.

peace with the one offended.”¹⁴ By way of explanation, she gives the analogy of a mother, Anna, and her son, Nathan. Anna loves flowers, Nathan loves playing soccer, and although Anna has told him time and again not to play soccer near her flower beds, Nathan does just that, and ends up trampling all of her flowers. The little boy runs into the house quickly, offers a half-hearted apology, and runs back outside to play. Stump says this lack of contrition on Nathan’s part shows two things: (1) he does not love what his mother loves—the flowers—and (2) he does not love his mother as she would like him to, because he did not care about the flowers for her sake. These two realities create a distance between mother and son, and make her sad.

Stump argues that Nathan’s initial action, as well as his lack of concern for the pain he caused his mother, shows that there is a disharmony of will and love between them. Nathan could, though, try to fix what he has done. This effort would show true sorrow over his actions, and would be, in Aquinas’ terms, Nathan’s satisfaction for his sin. He would have restored the harmony between himself and his mother.

In Stump’s analogy, the offender (Nathan) does not show proper contrition because he does not actually feel sorry for the pain he has caused (Anna’s sadness). What if, though, the offender truly does feel sorry for his actions? Does he still need to make satisfaction for his sins? I would argue that satisfaction is even more necessary in this case—again, not for the sake of the offended party, but for the peace of the offender. Let’s say that Nathan really does feel sorry for hurting his mother’s flowers—and he really wants to restore the harmony in their relationship. Simply saying sorry would probably not fulfill his need to “make amends” to his mother. Even if Anna forgives him, and is satisfied with his apology, Nathan himself would not be content until he has made a meaningful gesture that would not only represent, but restore and deepen his relationship of love with his mother.

Stump’s analogy corresponds to our own relationship with God. The sin we commit against God, according to Aquinas, is our failure to follow God’s eternal law¹⁵—not loving what God loves, and not loving God enough to care for what God loves. We put other things ahead of the good; we submit to, participate in, and perpetrate evil.

¹⁴ Stump, “Atonement According to Aquinas,” 65.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IaIIae. q. 71, art. 6.

In other words, “human sin has pride and selfishness at its root,”¹⁶ and its chief effect is to degrade our souls in such a way that union with Divine Goodness is impossible. For both Anselm and Aquinas, Christ’s satisfaction, by making amends for human sin, restores and elevates our souls, allowing us to live in harmony with God. Christ makes satisfaction by way of his sacrifice on the cross, which Aquinas understands through the dual lenses of ancient Hebrew sacrifices and the sacraments of communion and penance.

Aquinas’ Definition of Sacrifice

Aquinas’ discussion of “sacrifice” fits into his larger discussion of humankind, human acts, and the Old Law. After establishing the inherent goodness of the Old Law, Aquinas addresses the fittingness of its ceremonial precepts—he asserts that they are duly ordained for the worship of God. He separates them into four subdivisions: sacrifices, sacred things, sacraments, and observances. As for sacrifices, they are meant “to honor God,” and although they do not contain Christ, they foreshadow him.¹⁷ Along with sacraments and sacred things, sacrifices are considered to be dedicated to divine worship. This worship, according to Aquinas, has a twofold dimension: both internal and external. Because human beings are both spiritual and embodied creatures, our worship of God must encompass both of these aspects. “The sacrifice that is offered outwardly represents the inward spiritual sacrifice, whereby the soul offers itself to God according to Psalm 50:19, ‘A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit.’”¹⁸ In other words, sacrifice fills a vital need in our spiritual life—the outward expression of inward devotion.

Aquinas then expands the scope of his discussion, defining sacrifice as part of religion, and religion within the context of justice. Justice is the virtue by which beings are given what is due to them. Hence, religion gives God what is due God: proper reverence. Aquinas affirms that religion (in general) and sacrifice (in particular) are “of the natural law,” as evidenced from the fact that they have been

¹⁶ Stump, “Atonement According to Aquinas,” 70.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IaIIae. q. 101, art. 4, reply 2.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae. q. 85, art. 2, response. The quotation from Psalm 50:19 is from the Vulgate; in the New Revised Standard Version it is Psalm 51:17.

practiced universally among people from the beginning of time.¹⁹ What Aquinas means by natural law is not that sacrifice comes naturally to people, although he argues that indeed it does, but that it is of the divine law, which humans can perceive through their logic alone:

Natural reason tells man that he is subject to a higher being, on account of the defects which he perceives in himself, and in which he needs help and direction from someone above him: and whatever this superior being may be, it is known to all under the name of God. Now just as in natural things the lower are naturally subject to the higher, so too it is a dictate of natural reason in accordance with man's natural inclination that he should tender submission and honor, according to his mode, to that which is above man.²⁰

In other words, sacrifice is the way that human beings orient themselves properly to God—they show “submission and honor” to the divine. This orientation is for the sake of union with God—in fact, any act done for the purpose of clinging to God should be considered a sacrifice. Thus, a sacrifice is ultimately meant, not for appeasing an angry God, but for coming together in holy fellowship with God.²¹

Sacrifices are concrete, embodied acts—“sensibles” in Aquinas’ parlance—because this is the way human beings interface with the divine. Human beings naturally signify meaning using sensible signs because that is how we ourselves make sense of the world.²² These signs, though, are given meaning only insofar as they are endowed with such meaning by the worshiper. For example, a gift of flowers could stand for a variety of things—an apology, gratitude, sympathy, desire, love—depending on the shared meaning behind the act of giving.²³ Animals were used for sacrifice in certain periods depicted in the Old Testament because the animal had cultural significance for the worshiper and acted as an appropriate sign of subjection to God. Similarly, blood was a potent symbol of life force, which early

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae. q. 85, art. 1.

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae. q. 85, art. 1, response.

²¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae. q. 85, art. 3, reply 3.

²² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae. q. 85, art. 1, response.

²³ John Goldingay, “Old Testament Sacrifice and the Death of Christ,” *Atonement Today: A Symposium at St. John’s College, Nottingham*, ed. John Goldingay (London: SPCK, 1995), 3–4.

Hebrews believed belonged to God alone. Later, in his discussion of Christ's passion, Aquinas will examine the various ways in which the image of Christ's crucifixion tapped into and embodied meanings understood within his Jewish tradition.²⁴

After defending the proper place of sacrifice within the natural law, Aquinas continues his definition of sacrifice. He contrasts it with oblations, arguing that although a sacrifice is an oblation, an oblation is not necessarily a sacrifice. This is because in a sacrifice, something must be *done* to the offering in order to make it sacred (*facit sacrum*). The act of sacrifice consists of more than the animal given, but encompasses the ritual in which the animal is set aside for holy purposes. For instance, although first fruits of a harvest can be given to God, this is not a sacrifice, but only a gift. A gift of an animal, though, is a sacrifice, because the animal must be killed and either eaten or burned whole.²⁵

Furthermore, a gift of external possessions is only third on the list of "man's goods," the principal of which is the soul. We offer our souls to God through the sacrament of baptism, by which they are changed into sacred things. The second good is the body, which we make sacred and offer to God by means of martyrdom, abstinence, and continence. In other words, like the animals sacrificed to God in the ancient Judaic rites, our souls and bodies are not only gifts, but are transformed into sacred offerings (sacrifices) by the external acts performed on or by them.

For Aquinas, the term "sacrifice" is not just a synonym for a gift, but truly means what it says—something changed and set aside as sacred in order to show reverence to God. Thus, while Aquinas affirms that it is essential for a sacrifice to represent the internal disposition of the worshiper, the external act itself—the sacrifice—is *constitutive* of that reverent disposition. Without the proper spirit, a sacrifice is an empty gesture, but it is the act of sacrifice itself that creates a proper spirit within us.

To sum up Aquinas' argument so far: sacrifice—in which a gift is transformed and set apart as holy—is part of the Old Law, but its worth is intelligible even through natural reason. This is because the worship of God through sensible acts is a natural expression of our internal devotion. Furthermore (and most importantly), the sensible

²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 46, art. 4.

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae. q. 85, art. 3, reply 3.

act of worship *creates and intensifies* the internal experience of love within us.

It is important to note that Aquinas does not pull this conception of sacrifice out of nowhere. He follows a long strand of tradition, attested to in the New Testament and the Old Testament, which affirms the act of sacrifice in the service of internal worship of God. Aquinas himself references the book of Hebrews and the first and third chapters of Leviticus:

Now man is required to offer sacrifice for three reasons. First, for the remission of sin, by which he is turned away from God. Hence the Apostle says (Hebrews 5:1) that it appertains to the priest "to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins." Secondly, that man may be preserved in a state of grace, by ever adhering to God, wherein his peace and salvation consist. Wherefore under the old Law the sacrifice of peace-offerings was offered up for the salvation of the offerers, as is prescribed in the third chapter of Leviticus. Thirdly, in order that the spirit of man be perfectly united to God: which will be most perfectly realized in glory. Hence, under the Old Law, the holocaust was offered, so called because the victim was wholly burnt, as we read in the first chapter of Leviticus.²⁶

Current scholarship supports Aquinas' interpretation of Old Testament sacrifice. Philip Jenson notes that much about the system of Levitical sacrifices and how it should be interpreted is uncertain, but some aspects seem clear to scholars. For instance, there were different kinds of sacrifices to accomplish different tasks. (1) A sin offering (or purification offering) was sacrificed in order to purify the offerers of inadvertent defilement, so as to make them clean for sacred duties. "By purifying the offerer . . . the sin offering [made] possible the continued dwelling of the holy God with the sinful man."²⁷ (2) A whole-burnt offering was sacrificed in order to express the offerer's complete devotion and submission to God. Through it the offerer showed "the desire to love God with all his heart, soul, and might."²⁸ The whole-burnt offering is thought to have been the most important sacrifice in

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 22, art. 2, response.

²⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, "The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice," in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), 83.

²⁸ Wenham, "Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice," 82–83.

the Levitical system.²⁹ (3) A peace offering was sacrificed in which a portion was burned for God, but (unlike the other sacrifices) the rest was cooked and eaten by the community. Gordon Wenham refers to this sacred meal as “a joyful barbecue.”³⁰ The Passover lamb was an example of a peace offering. More than the other sacrifices, the peace offering enacted the union of God with God’s people. In this meal, God literally had a place at the table, partaking of the food that was shared by the community of the chosen.

All three of these sacrifices express, not so much the placating of an angry God, but the earnest desire of a people to be in communion with God, just as Aquinas asserts in his own discussion of sacrifice. As Christian Eberhart notes, the Hebrew term for sacrifice, *korban*, means “that which is brought near.” The term “captures the dynamic movement of sacrificial material toward the sanctuary and ultimately toward God . . . who resides there.”³¹

Sin offerings are given because it is not possible for the defiled to be in the presence of the undefiled; whole-burnt offerings are given because people cannot truly be in union with God unless they embrace their own place in the order of the universe, and the absolute supremacy of God over that order; finally, union with God must be experienced and enjoyed—through the peace offering—for it to be a reality.

Some scholars have argued that the sacrifices were meant to be substitutionary in the sense that the animal “stood in” for the sinner, because the offerer placed a hand upon the animal before slaughtering it and giving it to the priest to pour out the blood. Other scholarship, though, suggests that this was not the case. Instead, the placement of the hand expressed ownership of the animal, solemnizing the act of giving over the animal to God.³²

The gift of an unblemished, innocent animal belonging to the sinner acted as a potent gesture of reconciliation and continued union

²⁹ Philip P. Jenson, “The Levitical Sacrificial System,” in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1995), 28–29.

³⁰ Wenham, “Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice,” 83.

³¹ Christian Eberhart, “Sacrifice? Holy Smokes! Reflections on Cult Terminology for Understanding Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart (Atlanta, Ga.: Society for Biblical Literature, 2011), 23.

³² Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004), 24.

with God. No matter how perfect the sacrificial victim was, however, without proper reverence—“right spirit”—the sacrifice would be in vain. Aquinas asserts this, and biblical scholars affirm it as well. As one writer put it, “Without the [right] attitude, the sacrifice would be meaningless; without the sacrifice, the attitude would be a mere head-trip.”³³

So it is that Aquinas’ understanding of Old Testament sacrifice aligns with current scholarship, which itself affirms that Israelites did not offer sacrifices to God in order to avoid punishment from God, nor did they see the animals offered as a sort of proxy for themselves. Rather, the Israelites sought by their offerings to turn away from sin and dedicate themselves wholly to God, in order to be in relationship with God, which constituted perfect joy.³⁴

Of course, just as Aquinas affirms the Old Law is but a foreshadowing of Christ, so he also argues that animal sacrifices are incomplete. If the sacrifice of animals were sufficient for total communion with God, there would be no need for Christ. Aquinas does not completely denigrate the sacrifices under the Old Law, but maintains that their chief value was in foreshadowing the true sacrifice, that of Christ himself. It is here that Aquinas’ high sacramentality asserts itself—sacrifice is closely related to sacrament, but it remains imperfect. This is because a sacrament “contains Christ,” while a sacrifice does not.³⁵ A sacrament contains Christ, though, only because of Christ’s original and perfect sacrifice on the cross. Thus, Aquinas must address the fittingness of Christ being both priest and sacrificial victim.

Christ as Priest and Victim

Aquinas has already discussed the value of sacrifice in and of itself, as well as the fittingness of satisfaction for sins. Now he advances his argument, discussing how Christ’s priesthood and victimhood should be understood in the framework of salvation. He sets the groundwork for his discussion of the priesthood of Christ by first defining the nature of priesthood. The primary purpose of a priest, according to Aquinas, is to stand between God and the people, to act as mediator

³³ Goldingay, “Old Testament Sacrifice and the Death of Christ,” 4.

³⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 18; see also Eberhart, “Holy Smokes!” 23; Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus*, in *Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 2002), 27–28.

³⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IaIIae. q. 101, art. 4, reply 2.

between them.³⁶ Thus, the priest himself becomes a type of sacrifice, for in order to perform this office, he must be ritually cleansed and set apart for sacred purpose.

The priest acts as mediator by carrying out certain duties, namely (1) connecting the people to God by offering up prayers of the people to God; (2) connecting God to the people by giving sacred things—that is, the Law—to the people from God; and (3) repairing any brokenness in the relationship between God and the people by making satisfaction to God (“in a manner”³⁷) for the sins of the people. Here Aquinas follows Hebrews in arguing that the priest is ordained “to offer up gifts and sacrifices for sin” (Heb. 5:1). Sacrifice, then, is effectual in making satisfaction, and, furthermore, it is proper to the office of priest to make this satisfaction on the people’s behalf.³⁸

Aquinas, once again following Hebrews, argues that Christ, in his human life, acted as priest because he accomplished these things for God’s people. In describing how Christ acted as a priest, though, Aquinas focuses exclusively on Christ’s death on the cross, and argues that, through his death, Christ was not only priest, but victim, being at once “victim for sin, victim for a peace-offering, and a holocaust.”³⁹

At first blush, this characterization of Christ’s passion and death does seem to affirm the much criticized concept of “redemptive violence.” Aquinas seems to think it was Christ’s torture and death that pleased God enough to forgive humanity’s sins. This is far from the case. In addition to the fact that Aquinas has already insisted that the sacrifices under the Old Law were efficacious only insofar as they were made with the proper disposition of due reverence, he also explicitly states as much here—“For it [Christ’s manhood] acquired then the actual holiness of a victim, from the charity which it had from the beginning.”⁴⁰ Christ’s life was a sacrifice because it was perfect, and it was perfect because of the divine love Christ embodied from his birth. “Christ obtained a result from His passion, not as by virtue of the sacrifice, which is offered by way of satisfaction, but by the very devotion with which out of charity He humbly endured the passion.”⁴¹

³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 22, art. 1, response.

³⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 22, art. 1, response.

³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 22, art. 1, response.

³⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 22, art. 2, response.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 22, art. 2, reply 3.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 22. art. 4, reply 2.

Christ's suffering was not effective in and of itself, but rather as the sign of his love, devotion, and humility. It is important to note, though, that Aquinas still maintains that Christ's passion and death did accomplish something in the scheme of redemption—acting as satisfaction for human sin—because his sacrifice was constitutive of his love. The physical act of suffering and dying on the cross not only represented Christ's love of God, it intensified that love. Without the physical act of the passion and death, Christ's love would be imperfect—in the sense that it would be unfinished, incomplete. Aquinas says, “The fact that Christ's manhood was holy from its beginning does not prevent that same manhood, when it was offered to God in the Passion, being sanctified in a new way—namely, as a victim actually offered then.”⁴² In other words, not only did his love lead to the cross, but the cross is what perfected his love.⁴³

This is not to say that Christ's sacrifice created love where there was no love before. In some ways, Christ's entire life was a fitting sacrifice, because he devoted himself in perfect love to serving God's people and ushering in the kingdom of God. His suffering and death on the cross had “a special effect,” according to Aquinas, “because of the nature of the work.”⁴⁴ Through the sacrifice of his own body, Christ enacted and made substantial, not only his devotion, humility, and obedience to God, but also God's love and care for humanity. In this way, Aquinas can assert that Christ in his sacrifice could act as both satisfaction for human sins and as mediator—a priest—between God and humanity.

Like Augustine before him, Aquinas insists that Christ is not a figure of Old Testament priest and victim, but rather, it is the other way around—the sacrifices depicted in the Hebrew Bible were but a foreshadowing of the True Sacrifice, Christ himself.⁴⁵ Christ is the True Priest and True Victim, Aquinas says, because his was a “voluntary enduring of the Passion . . . coming from charity [that is, love].”⁴⁶ This argument has much in common with a modern theory of atonement, the “Perfect Penitent” scheme put forward by C. S. Lewis. He writes:

⁴² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 22, art. 2, reply 3.

⁴³ See Hebrews 2:10.

⁴⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 48, art. 1, reply 3.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 48, art. 3, response.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 48, art. 3, response.

Now repentance is no fun at all. It is something much harder than merely eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death. In fact, it needs a good man to repent. And here comes the catch. Only a bad person needs to repent: only a good person can repent perfectly. The worse you are the more you need it and the less you can do it. The only person who could do it perfectly would be a perfect person—and he would not need it.⁴⁷

Lewis makes explicit what Aquinas implies throughout the *Summa Theologiae*: that Christ was able to make satisfaction on our behalf because he was the only one who could truly repent—he was the only one who had the kind of love that properly grieves because of sin. His will and God’s will were perfectly united, to the point that he turned fully toward God with his entire being. As much as we have attempted to repent and give ourselves utterly to God through the old sacrifices, we could only achieve a shadow of what Christ achieved through his sacrifice—we “see through a glass darkly”; Christ, “face to face.” Thus Christ was the perfect priest to repent on our behalf, and the perfect sacrifice to offer on our behalf.

How is it, though, that the sacrifice of one man, God-man though he may be, can bring us back into union with God? Aquinas answers this question through his understanding of the Christian sacraments, and how they connect the church (as the body) to Christ (as the head).

Sacrifice and Sacrament

Aquinas’ ecclesiology is fundamental to understanding how the sacrifice of Christ affects those who believe in him. For Aquinas, Christ is the head of the church, which is the “mystical Body” of people throughout time “united to [Christ] by glory.”⁴⁸ The head is connected to the body, and what the head does affects the body. Likewise, the satisfaction for sin and merited grace achieved by Christ through his passion and death benefit his body, the church.

The necessary prerequisite for a person to be made part of Christ is the sacrament of baptism. For Aquinas, the sacraments and the

⁴⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 54–55.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 8, art. 3, response.

church are inseparable—the sacraments make the church, and the church administers and safeguards the sacraments. Baptism is the inaugural sacrament, whereby

a man is incorporated in the Passion and death of Christ, according to Romans 6:8: “If we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall live also together with Christ.” Hence it is clear that the Passion of Christ is communicated to every baptized person, so that he is healed just as if he himself had suffered and died. Now Christ’s Passion, as stated above (Question 68, Article 5), is a sufficient satisfaction for all the sins of all men. Consequently he who is baptized, is freed from the debt of all punishment due to him for his sins, just as if he himself had offered sufficient satisfaction for all his sins.⁴⁹

Baptism unites us with and in Christ, makes us members of his body, and thus Christ’s sacrifice is imputed to us as if we had accomplished it ourselves. It is essential for the cleansing of sin because through it we are able to partake of the atonement made on our behalf.

Similarly, the sacrament of eucharist confers the same benefits to those who partake of it. Aquinas notes that eucharist “is both a sacrifice and a sacrament,” because it is both offered and received. In the eucharist, we commemorate Christ’s passion and death, thereby uniting ourselves to him in his sacrifice, but also receiving the grace that he merited through that sacrifice. The eucharist, in other words, “works in man the effect which Christ’s passion brought into the world.”⁵⁰

It is Aquinas’ understanding of the sacrament of penance that gives the greatest insight into his concept of sacrifice and satisfaction. In baptism we are “born again in Christ.”⁵¹ Being “in Christ” allows us, through penance, to recapitulate sacramentally the passion of Christ. Aquinas writes that in penance “the power of Christ’s Passion operates through the priest’s absolution and the acts of the penitent, who co-operates with grace unto the destruction of his sin.”⁵² The penitent cooperates by identifying with the suffering and death of Christ; this identification is essential for cleansing personal sin. For

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 69, art. 2, response.

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 79, art. 1, response.

⁵¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 84, art. 5, response.

⁵² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 84, art. 5, response.

Aquinas, Christ's passion and death atone for sin on a cosmic scale, but they also open up the possibility for the efficacy of penance on an individual level, thus drawing sinners back into relationship with God. Analogous to both Old Testament and Christ's sacrifice, the "matter" of the sacrament are the "words and deeds" by which the sinner "shows his heart to have renounced sin"⁵³—but the external acts are in service to, and compelled by, the internal spirit. The acts of penance "signify the holiness which [the sacrament] confers."⁵⁴ Thus, the sacrament both represents the sinner's grief over sin, but also—by cooperation with grace—actually renders the sinner clean.

Conclusion

The notion of Christ's passion and death on the cross "for our sins" is one of the earliest in Christian understanding. Early Christian thought, attested in the Pauline epistles, understood this notion through the imagery of Jewish sacrificial rituals. Anselm, Aquinas, and countless church liturgies have also employed the idea and images of sacrifice to make sense of Christ's passion and death. Though many scholars have begun to malign such imagery as violent and oppressive, I believe an understanding of Christ's work on the cross as "sacrifice" is worthwhile, and worth retrieving. By recognizing Christ's sacrifice as inherently relational and sacramental, we gain a more accurate idea of Anselm's theory of atonement. Satisfaction becomes not the appeasement of an angry god, but a superabundant gift offered in obedience and love for the purpose of restoring a relationship broken by humanity.

In short, as embodied creatures we make meaning through embodied acts. The ritual of sacrifice is just such an act. Sacrifice allows us to be reconciled to God because it honors God, and orients us to God in a posture of humility and devotion, which is necessary in order to have a relationship with God. Furthermore, sacrifice is satisfaction for the sin that blocks us from accepting God's love.

Unfortunately, our sacrifices will always be imperfect. We can never have complete repentance, nor can we fully satisfy for our sin. Because of our fallen nature, we will never have the kind of sorrow we ought to feel over our sins, and we will never be able to offer to

⁵³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 84, art. 1, response.

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III. q. 84, art. 1, response.

God more than we already owe. We need both a perfect priest and a perfect victim to sacrifice on our behalf—Jesus Christ is that one, and he is perfect by his love.

We must be careful not to conflate sacrifice and satisfaction with punishment. In his death on the cross, Christ did not suffer punishment instead of us—after all, many others were crucified, and everyone dies. Rather, his passion and death accomplished two things. First, the sacrificial offering of himself—a perfect victim—imputed his own holiness onto humanity. Second, his act of sacrifice in humility and love—perfect priesthood—served as fitting amends for humanity's disobedience and hatred. Far from putting violence in the heart of God, Christ's free gift of himself on the cross is God's gracious mercy to us, opening the way for us to true love and happiness.