




ARTICLE

God Works for Good with Those Who Love Him: The Church as a Sacrament of Providence, Predestination, and Divine Goodness

Albert Elias Robertson, OP 

Blackfriars, Cambridge, UK

Email: albert.robertson@english.op.org

(Received 29 July 2024; revised 17 October 2024; accepted 17 October 2024)

Abstract

While various parts of St Thomas' work have been suggested as places to discern a Thomistic ecclesiology, this article tries to situate the Church in a discussion of creation and the communication of divine goodness that is at the heart of the mystery of providence and predestination. Despite the assurance that God works for good with those who love him, our understanding of divine providence must begin with the frank admission of a tension between our intuition that creation must be ordered, and our experience of contingency. By understanding the Church's place within creation, in a hidden and shadowy way from Abel until its manifestation in the Lord's Paschal Mystery, we can see how God's loving purposes are worked out both in the implicit faith in a Mediator, which finds its expression in a belief in God's providential care of creation, and in the life of the visible Church where the mystery of predestination is worked out in the lives of the faithful until all is at last made manifest at the end of time. Such an ecclesiology allows us to see the fundamental importance, and mystical meaning, of the visible hierarchical Church.

Keywords: creation; divine goodness; ecclesiology; predestination; providence

It has become a convention to begin any Thomistic account of ecclesiology by saying that St Thomas has, strictly speaking, no ecclesiology and certainly no treatise entitled *De Ecclesia*. Indeed this was identified as one of the deficiencies not just of Neothomism, but of St Thomas himself, which suggested to some twentieth-century theologians that root and branch change was needed and not just the tweaking of a reading of Aquinas.¹ But despite these apparent deficiencies, efforts were made to locate an ecclesiology, especially in the twentieth century when, as Romano Guardini put it, the idea of the

¹See, for example, Hans Urs Von Balthasar who identifies the major deficiencies in Thomas' thought as the Trinity – formally excellent but playing no part in shaping the *Summa Theologiae*; his Christology – technically excellent, but separated too much from the *Secunda Pars*; and his *De Ecclesia* – 'which never did have much of any impact, either on Thomas himself or on any other theologian of his time'. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 263.

Church began to wake up in souls.² In his 1939 essay *The Idea of the Church in the Thought of St Thomas Aquinas*, Yves Congar, OP identifies the *Secunda Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* as the most likely candidate for what we might call St Thomas' ecclesiology.³ 'For St Thomas, the Church is the whole economy of the return towards God, *motus rationales creaturae in Deum*, in short, the *Secunda Pars* of his *Summa Theologiae*'.⁴ Another obvious place to look for an ecclesiology is in the *Tertia Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* and those parts that deal explicitly with Christ and in particular his headship of the Church, men, and angels in the Eighth Question, as well as his power in the sacraments from Question 60 onwards.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in Thomas' biblical commentaries, and this has helped to contextualise the other theological works, especially the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*, and has expanded what we can say about St Thomas' ecclesiology.⁵ St Paul's Epistles are ecclesiological, for all of them are written to ecclesial situations, either to particular churches or to named fellow workers in the Church, and so all of this means that we can offer a much more enriched Thomistic ecclesiology when these works are used to help the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles* come into a sharper focus. Put simply, if St Thomas writes no treatise on the Church, the closest we can come to such a vision is in his biblical commentaries, where he cannot but speak about the Church. But just as the biblical commentaries help us to bring Thomas' other works into sharper focus, so too the vision found in the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles* can give us a clearer sense of the ecclesiology found in the commentaries. It is in this back and forth that we can build something of a Thomistic ecclesiology.

A focus on the *Secunda Pars* as a site for planting a Thomistic ecclesiology captures the essential dynamism of ecclesial life, animated by the Spirit, active in the life of each individual believer who makes up the mystical body. Indeed what makes Congar's argument especially attractive in the essay cited is the way in which he brings together the life of the Church in its institutional and hierarchical and its mystical and invisible aspects, offering a very clear vision of the Church's sacramentality.⁶ This being said, a focus on the *Secunda Pars* and on moral theology as *the* place of a Thomistic ecclesiology narrows the focus to the return of the creature to God (*reditus*). What might we say about the life of the Church as it pertains to creation and God's providence and governance of that creation (*exitus*)?

I ask this question for a number of reasons. Firstly because of the relationship between the Church and Christ, for Christ is the Redeemer through whose saving work all things have been renewed, but also the Word through whom all things were made

²Romano Guardini, *Vom Sinn der Kirche* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald, 1922), p. 1.

³Yves Congar, 'The Idea of the Church in St Thomas Aquinas', *The Thomist* Vol. 1 (1939), pp. 331-359.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 339.

⁵John Yocum, 'Aquinas' Literal Exposition on Job' in Thomas Weinandy (et al.) eds., *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), p.22. C/f Jean Pierre Torrell, *St Thomas Aquinas: Volume 1, The person and his Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1996), pp.117-41.

⁶'The Church visible, the Church institutional, is the ministry of the faith and of the Sacraments of the faith, by which men are grafted into Christ and realise the Mystical Body which is the Church in its inward substance'. Congar, p. 355. This positive appreciation of the institutional and visible is something missing from his later ecclesiology.

in the beginning. We have to be able to hold together God's action of creation and redemption in such a way that we do not blur the distinction between grace and nature or the Old Covenants and the New and Eternal Covenant, while at the same time seeing the same Word working in both.

A second reason is to offer an account of God's saving action, both before the Incarnation and to those of our own time who have not heard the Gospel. While the latter is beyond the focus of this particular essay, the former can help us to shed light on the latter. There are a number of different points at which we can say the Church was founded – Pentecost, Calvary, the calling of the first disciples, the election of Israel – and while Augustine looks to Abel as the founder of the heavenly city, I would suggest that we should think of the Church as the visible and spiritual institution by which God's desire to share his life with us comes to fruition, and so having existed since creation itself. Anyone who is saved is saved through Christ and his Church, and so the Church must be present somehow in order to bring about that plan.

How then can we hold *exitus* and *reditus* together in a Thomistic ecclesiology? In what follows I will give an account of the Church rooted in St Thomas' theology of divine providence, governance, and predestination. In doing so, I wish to show how we can understand the Church not only as the return of rational creatures towards God that we find in the *Secunda Pars*, but also God communicating divine goodness to creatures and guiding all of creation to its proper end. In this account, the life of the Church takes on a more central role, being both the way that God communicates goodness and providentially guides creation, and the way in which the rational creature attains the supernatural end – lost in Original Sin – through membership of Christ's body, formed through grace and the life of the sacraments. In doing so, I will show how the Church holds together both creation and redemption, for it is the Body of Christ, the Word through whom all things were made, and by whose life-giving Passion, all things are remade.⁷ Having given an account of Thomas' understanding of creation and providence, I will outline how the Church can be thought of as a sacrament of divine providence, and finally show the way that the visible Church displays God's saving purposes.

This approach will not constitute a definitive 'Thomistic ecclesiology', but I hope that a consideration of St Thomas' account of providence, drawing on the scriptural commentaries, will add another dimension to an already rich picture.

1. Providence, the communication of divine goodness, and the Church

An account of divine providence must begin with the frank admission of a tension between our intuition that creation must be ordered and our experience of contingency. St Thomas himself admits this tension when, writing in the Prologue to his *Commentary on Job*, he says that it often feels as if our world is simply governed by contingency and chance as the first philosophers thought. It is only '... by a more profound

⁷Through creation, God speaks the Word, a Word that is both expressive and also creative, for in the Word is implied the operative idea of what God makes (*ST*, I, q. 34, a. 3), which is the desire to communicate some likeness of the divine perfection and goodness (*ST*, I, q. 44, a. 4). In order to restore creation, that same Word becomes Incarnate (*ST*, III, q. 3, a. 8).

diligence in their contemplation of the truth, [that] later philosophers [showed] by evident proofs and reasons that natural things are set in motion by providence'.⁸

For St Thomas providence is an intrinsic part of what it means for something to be created by God, for '... creating and conserving are the same action, differing only in that conserving presupposes things present'.⁹ God is in all things neither as essence nor as accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it works.¹⁰ While for creatures there is a distinction between potency and act, in God there is no such distinction: God is infinite actuality as he reveals to Moses at the burning bush, making HE WHO IS the name most properly applied to God.¹¹ Infinite actuality contains all perfections, and since goodness and being are interchangeable, God is pure actuality and goodness.¹² Using a Dionysian principle that the good is diffusive of itself, we can say that in creation God wills to communicate goodness in creation, calling into existence creatures who participate in God's infinite being and goodness.¹³ Here it is important to point out that the necessary distinction between God and creatures is not a *separation*, for God is the cause of being in such a way that God conserves what has been created through the creature's participation in infinite being: '... all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation'.¹⁴ In this sense, creation is an emanation – or as St Thomas puts it in *Prima Pars* Question 44 a procession of creatures from God. This is clearer in Aquinas' *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, where creation is understood as an orderly bestowal of being upon creatures. These creatures have ordered capacities that seek their perfection and so are ordered towards striving for their proper good which is their end.¹⁵ This is what it means for goodness to have the aspect of an end, for all things desire the good which is inscribed in them in creation and thus to reach their perfection.¹⁶

This account of creation helps us to see a little more clearly why the providential ordering of creation towards its end is not something extrinsic to the creature. St Thomas begins the question on the providence of God by reiterating that all of the good that is in the creature has been created by God, and that this good is not only as regards the very fact of their existence but also as regards their ordering towards an end, and especially their last end which is the divine goodness. Providence is the ordering, in the divine mind, of all things to their proper end, in much the same way that the virtue of prudence in the creature properly orders the acts towards the end of life. But since God cannot order anything to any other end, for God is the final end, providence is the ordering of all creatures to their last end, which is God.¹⁷ Hence, providence does not come as something outside the creature, like a directing hand, but the guiding principle by which creatures seek their end, yearn for their fulfilment, and

⁸*Commentary on Job*, Prologue.

⁹David Burrell, 'Aquinas's Appropriation of the *Liber de causis*', in Fergus Kerr (ed.) *Contemplating Aquinas: On the Varieties of Interpretation* (London: SCM, 2003), p. 82.

¹⁰ST, I, q. 8, a. 1, *resp.*

¹¹Exodus, 3:14; ST, I, q. 2, a. 3, *sed contra*; q.3, a. 4; q.13, a.11. See also Janet Soskice, *Naming God: Addressing the Divine in Philosophy, Theology, and Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

¹²ST, I, q.5, a. 1.

¹³*Ibid.*; I, q. 19, aa. 1 & 2.

¹⁴ST, I, q. 44, a.1, *resp.*

¹⁵Burrell, p.80.

¹⁶ST, I, q. 5, a. 4; q. 44, a. 4, *resp.*

¹⁷ST, I, q. 22, a. 1, *resp.*

attain their perfection. This also helps us to see why there is no competition between a free creature and the Creator, why providence in no way suggests that God acts like a kind of puppet master. Although providence extends to all creatures because God is the First Cause – the efficient cause of all that is through his creative will – providence is not reduced to efficient cause, but rather principally concerns final causality.¹⁸

All things are subject to divine providence, because the causality of God, who is the First Cause, extends even to individual and corruptible principles.¹⁹ But God's providence is not such that it robs the creature of the dignity of being a genuine cause. Far from being puppets on a string, God's providential ordering of creation, which seeks to communicate the divine goodness, gives the creature real causal power, which dignity redounds to the Creator.²⁰ This dignity is seen most clearly in God's creative will, whereby God knows Himself, and thereby knows each creature, and speaks the Word which is expressive of himself and of creatures.²¹ By speaking the Word, God communicates goodness to creation which through the very act of creation God declares to be good.²² Everything that exists in creation is brought into existence to communicate the divine goodness, and divine providence is the plan by which God brings this ordered creation to its final fulfilment in Himself, who is both its source and its end. We speak of creation as *the created order* precisely because of this relationship to the Creator, for each thing is created in accordance with reason, and acts in accordance with its own reason,²³ and hence we can come to some knowledge of God through the created order.²⁴

It is at this point that we can begin to explore the Church's role in the communication of divine goodness. The Church is visibly manifested as it comes forth from the side of Christ on the Cross, and as the Spirit is poured upon it at Pentecost, but seen under the aspect of divine goodness and creation, the Church exists from the beginning with God's desire to share his goodness and being with creatures. This is not to say that the Church is creation, but rather that the Church is the sacrament by which God's desire to communicate his goodness is realised. Here we find what was proclaimed in *Lumen Gentium* but in a slightly different key. God's eternal plan to unite all things is not frustrated by the Fall; God calls people in each succeeding generation, eventually forming a Chosen People which stands both as a type of the Church, and as the nascent

¹⁸In making this argument I rely on the insightful essay by Rik Van Nieuwenhove 'Providence, Divine Causality, and the Gratuitousness of Love: A Thomist Perspective' *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 104, Issue 1114, pp. 796-817. Providence is not some kind of omni-causality for God really does endow creatures with the dignity of causal power within the created order. Equally while God's providence extends to individuals, and '... although God knows the total number of individuals, the number of oxen, flies and such like, is not pre-ordained by God per se' (*ST*, I, q. 23, a. 7). In this sense, the universe is indeed providentially governed, but not in such a way that contingency is excluded. A focus on final causality helps us to avoid this focus on efficient causality, which makes God the omni-cause and reducing providence to a kind of occasionalism.

¹⁹*ST*, I, q. 22, a. 2, *resp.*

²⁰*ST*, I, q. 22, a. 3, *resp.*; *ScG*, III, 66.

²¹*ST*, I, q. 34, a. 3.

²²Genesis 1: 4; 10; 12; 18; 21; 25; 31.

²³Augustine, Question 60, in *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2008). In this sense, there is an intimate relationship between providence and the divine ideas.

²⁴Psalms, 19:1; Romans, 1:19ff; *ST*, I, q. 2, aa. 2 and 3.

reality that will be brought to fruition in Christ. The Church begins with Abel, and continues with all those in each generation who look forward in hope to salvation and seek to live in friendship with God through wisdom.²⁵ While St Thomas deals with the sacraments of the Old Law and their efficacy in lengthy questions at the end of the *Prima Secunda*, he also deals in passing with those among the Gentiles who received a revelation of Christ like Job and the Sibyl. These people were not saved without faith in a Mediator, for although they did not believe explicitly, they had implicit faith through a belief in divine providence, ‘... since they believed that God would deliver mankind in whatever way was pleasing to Him ...’.²⁶ Providence is rooted in the intuition that this world is ordered by some intelligent being whom we call God, a belief that St Thomas outlines in the Fifth Way; and also that the imperfections and contingency that we find in the world around us will eventually come to an end as all things are brought to their perfection. This is the kind of experience of imperfection – the gradation of things – that is at the heart of the Fourth Way.²⁷ While to early philosophers the world look to be ruled by contingency,

... by a more profound diligence in their contemplation of the truth, later philosophers showed by evident proofs and reasons that natural things are set in motion by providence. For such a sure course in the motion of the heavens and the stars and other effects of nature would not be found unless all these things were governed and ordered by some intellect transcending the things ordered.²⁸

The Church before its visible manifestation is that congregation who live according to the seeds of the Word which are discernible in the created order, and who believe that this same Word rationally orders all things to their end.²⁹ To nudge this even further, we might look to the appropriation of intellectual qualities to the Son, so that a contemplation of what Maximus the Confessor calls the *logoi*, which are refractions of the Logos discernible in the creation, is an implicit faith in the rational order and finality of creation as an expression of divine goodness, which can be understood as implicit faith in the Word.³⁰

At this point, it is important to make clear the distinction between the Church as it exists before the Incarnation and after it. We cannot say that salvation comes through some abstract belief in nature, for this would be tantamount to pantheism. Moreover, the sacraments of the Old Law differ from those of the New Law precisely because they

²⁵For the Church beginning with Abel, see Augustine, *City of God*, XV, 1; *Sermon 341*, §11. *c/f* Wisdom, 7:27–28.

²⁶ST, II-II, q. 2, a. 7, *ad* 3.

²⁷ST, I, q.2, a. 3, *resp.*

²⁸Aquinas, *Commentary on Job*, Prologue, §1.

²⁹Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 46.

³⁰Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 7, 1077C–1081C. This would explain the eagerness of the Apologists to co-opt philosophers as Christians, and the openness of the Christian faith to the insights of pagan philosophy. However, the contemplation of the seeds of the Word that we find in Justin Martyr has been used in recent times to account for the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians and those outside of the visible structure of the Church. This is certainly persuasive but should not be used as a way of explaining how any religious sentiment can be the basis of salvation, especially after the visible manifestation of the Church. Justin makes clear that such knowledge is imperfect (*First Apology*, 13) and is also clear that it is the Logos who has sown this seed, not an anonymous deity.

lack the causal power found in the sacraments of the Church. The rites and ceremonies of the Old Testament did not confer justifying grace, rather ‘... they merely signified faith by which men were justified’.³¹ In just the same way the implicit faith in the Logos that finds expression in a faithful trust in God’s providential ordering of all things is not the same as explicit faith in the saving power of the Son. This all means that there is a difference in the life of the Church as it is expressed in the inchoate body of the Old Testament and those in every generation who became friends of God through wisdom, and the one visibly manifested in the New Testament. The difference is Christ who in his Incarnate life constitutes the Church as a visible society, which exercises his power in its governance and its sacraments, and which reveals in its history – and especially in the lives of its saints – the fullness of the divine plan for the communication of divine goodness which had been manifested in Christ and brings people to a supernatural end.

2. The Church as a sacramental sign of divine providence

Although St Thomas is clear that the Incarnation was, on the account of Sacred Scripture, a remedy for our sins,³² he offers ten motives for the Incarnation, five for the furtherance of good, and five for the removal of evil.³³ Indeed the whole question on the fittingness of the Incarnation is situated within a discussion of the communication of divine goodness. Citing St John Damascene, Aquinas says that the Incarnation makes known invisible realities through visible means, for in the Incarnation we come to know the goodness, wisdom, justice, and power of God.³⁴ Citing once again the principle that the essence of goodness is to communicate itself to others, it was most fitting for the communication of divine goodness for God to take to himself a human nature and begin to exist in time.³⁵

While retaining the primary motive for the Incarnation being saving us from our sins, this does not exclude other goods, including the communication of divine goodness, and this especially by Revelation in Christ by which the hidden counsels of God are revealed to us. What is more, the various motives for the Incarnation do not have to be chosen over the exclusion of others, even if St Thomas wants to keep one at the forefront because of the witness of Scripture. What is more, these motives often interweave, so that the forgiveness of our sins frees us from the obstacles that hinder us from attaining our last end, a share in God’s own life.³⁶

By making possible our final end, our redemption effected through the life, death, and resurrection of the Incarnate Word belongs to God’s providential care of creation and expresses his desire to share his goodness maximally with us, his creatures. Daria Spezzano makes clear this link between creation and redemption:

The entire graced journey of the human person to beatitude is properly understood as a particular manifestation of God’s goodness, willed in the plan of divine

³¹ST, III, q. 62, a. 6, *resp.*

³²ST, III, q. 1, a. 3, *sed contra.*

³³ST, III, q. 1, a. 2, *resp.*

³⁴ST, III, q. 1, a. 1, *sed contra.*

³⁵ST, III, q. 1, a. 1, *resp.*

³⁶ScG, IV, 54.

wisdom for that individual. Thomas places it within the larger context of the communication of divine goodness, which is the *ratio* of creation and the effect of divine love.³⁷

Here we should briefly deal with the question of the relationship between natural and supernatural ends. Providence directs the human creature to attain a good proportionate to human nature, an end that is attainable with natural powers, while predestination moves the creature towards a supernatural end that exceeds all proportion and faculty of created nature.³⁸ Such predestination has what St Thomas calls an imposition of necessity,³⁹ and this means that predestination is not in the subject in the way that providence governs the individual. In providence, the creation acts in ways that are proportionate to their nature to attain a natural end, but in explaining predestination Thomas uses the passive verb *perducitur* and the participle *transmissa* to explain how the creature is led and carried or transmitted by God to their supernatural end.⁴⁰

But while the actions are different here, one acting in accordance with nature, the other coming from the human creature with divine help and aimed at the supernatural end, the communication of divine goodness still stands behind both. St Thomas draws this correlation in his *Commentary on Romans*:

For just as God willed to communicate his natural goodness to others by imparting to them a likeness to his goodness, so that he is not only good by the author of good things, so the Son of God willed to communicate to others conformity to his sonship, so that he would not only be the Son but also the firstborn among sons.⁴¹

This correlation helps us to see that the call to a supernatural end does not mean that we are dragged there passively. We undertake actions that have a supernatural character, genuinely ours and coming from who we are as we are perfected through grace and conformed to the image of the Son.

The Church, made visible in the Paschal Mystery of the Son, has a particular role in manifesting the communication of divine goodness. This is done principally through the sanctification of the faithful: the sacraments find their efficacy in Christ's Passion,⁴² which frees us from sin, and opens the way to heaven.⁴³ However, here I want to explore a little more fully how the visible Church sacramentally reveals the mystical body. If it is in the Incarnation and the life-giving Paschal Mystery that the communication of divine goodness comes to its greatest realisation, the Church visibly constituted now takes on a new role in creation: as Christ reveals the communication of divine

³⁷Daria Spezzano, *The Glory of God's Grace* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia University Press, 2015), p. 46.

³⁸ST, I, q. 23, a. 1, *resp.*

³⁹ST, I, q. 23, a. 1, *ad. 1.*

⁴⁰Roger Nutt, 'Divine Goodness, Predestination, and the Hypostatic Union', *New Blackfriars*, Volume 99, Issue 1079, pp. 84–96.

⁴¹*Commentary on Romans*, Chapter 8, Lecture 6, §706.

⁴²ST, III, q. 64, a. 3; *Commentary on Matthew*, Chapter 16, Lecture 2, §1387.

⁴³ST, III, q. 49, aa. 1–5.

goodness in the greatest way, the Church, united to Christ as a body is to its head, continues the Lord's work through the sacraments of the New Law, which are causal signs of God's grace,⁴⁴ and thus revealing sacramentally the mystery by which all things are ordered to their end in God and brought to their completion and fulfilment through the visible work of sanctifying the faithful. We should obviously proceed with some caution here because the mystery of predestination is known only by God,⁴⁵ and we must be clear that in the life of the Church we reside in the *corpus permixtum*, awaiting the eventual separation at the end of time. But the Church helps us to think through the mystery of predestination because of the kind of mystery it is. Predestination is not a riddle to be solved, rather we have to wait with prudent hope for its realisation because the wonder of predestination is that it is only attainable through its realisation in history.⁴⁶ If the metaphysics of creation form the basis for the metaphysics of the new creation, the Church is the architectural structure where this is all realised in history.

This vision certainly seems to be at the heart of the conciliar vision expressed in the documents of Vatican II. *Gaudium et Spes* describes the Church as having '... a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit'.⁴⁷ Amidst the confusion and disintegration of humanity, the Council Fathers reiterated the fraternity of all peoples, based on their common destiny.⁴⁸ It is in Christ we find the answer and goal of history, both our own biographies and the history over which God has providential care,⁴⁹ and '... only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light'.⁵⁰ If we affirm Christ to be the key to all human history, the one who is the image of the invisible God, and who through His Incarnation '... has united himself in some fashion with every man',⁵¹ the Church has the task of continuing Christ's work of revealing the ultimate destiny – the proper last end – of the human creature.

In Chapter III of *Lumen Gentium*, the Council Fathers turned their attention to the Church as the People of God, those who through holy fear and right action are called throughout history and welcomed by God.⁵² Although the text itself moves very swiftly onto the election of Israel and the Covenants, Henri de Lubac remarked on the importance of this analogy, for it helps to complete the analogy of the Body of Christ by adding in the salvation-history dimension of the life of the Church.⁵³ This dimension is further expanded later in the chapter when dealing with those of other faiths and their particular histories.⁵⁴ Despite these multiple histories, the Church reveals in a sacramental way the ultimate destiny of creation:

⁴⁴ST, III, q. 62, a. 1.

⁴⁵ST, I, q. 23, aa. 6 & 7.

⁴⁶Michał Paluch, *La Profondeur de l'Amor Divin: Evolution de la doctrine de la predestination de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2004), p. 269.

⁴⁷*Gaudium et Spes*, §3.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, §10.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, §22.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²*Lumen Gentium*, §9.

⁵³Henri de Lubac, interview conducted by Angelo Scola: *De Lubac: A Theologian Speaks* (Los Angeles: Twin Circle Publishing, 1985), p. 8.

⁵⁴*Lumen Gentium*, §16.

[The Church's] end is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God Himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by Him at the end of time, when Christ, our life, shall appear, and creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God.⁵⁵

Preaching the Gospel and the handing on of the apostolic life are the means by which this end is achieved, and will continue until the end of time,⁵⁶ when the Church will attain its full perfection and the created order is perfectly reestablished in Christ.⁵⁷

Yet even though Redemption as a particular work of divine goodness has made possible the attainment of our last end, which had been frustrated through Original Sin, this end remains something of a mystery to us. In Christ and his Church we know where we are going, for we have someone who not just points the way, but who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.⁵⁸ Yet the vicissitudes of life often make this end difficult to discern. It is, I would propose, the life of the Church that acts in a sacramental way to both reveal and realise God's desire to bring all things to their final end. By living an ecclesial life we live the mystery of predestination, and prudently contemplate its realisation. I will now look at the way that the visible hierarchy of the Church, as found in Thomas' biblical commentaries, helps us to see the Church as a sacrament of divine providence.

3. Order in the Church

While ecclesiology has focused on questions of communion in the decades since the Second Vatican Council, especially in regards to ecumenical relations, the visible order and hierarchy of the Church are essential to Catholic ecclesiology, both in terms of the ordering of some people towards particular ministries – which are more than mere offices held for a time, some of which come with an ontological character – and also the way in which the lives of the saints reveals an ordered hierarchy of apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins, etc. Such order is also at the heart of divine providence, not just simply in the reasoned ordering of the creation – the passage of times and seasons, for example – but also, as I outlined above, the ordering of things to their end. The ordering of human society also points towards and anticipates the visible and institutional life of the Church, where the just and rational ordering of society anticipates the order of the visible Church. In salvation history, this is most obviously seen in Exodus and the ordering of the people in the wilderness.⁵⁹ The Church in its visible and institutional structures displays the order of God's creation to its end. Of course this does not mean that those who have received ordination are among the elect, nor should we conflate the hierarchy of order with the hierarchy of holiness, but one theme which comes out strongly in Thomas' biblical commentaries is that the degrees of holy order, as well as the orders of grace and charism, offer us an insight into God's providential care of the Church and the world, even when that world seems to be ruled by contingency.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, §9.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, §20.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, §48.

⁵⁸John, 14:6.

⁵⁹Exodus, 18:14–26.

For St Thomas, the diversity of ecclesiastical offices and vocations within the Church is linked to the beauty and ordering of creation. Commenting on John, 6:44 and the mystery of election and predestination, Thomas speaks in words similar to those which he uses to speak of God's work in creation. God becomes something of an artist or master craftsman who, like someone building a house setting particular stones in particular places, sets particular men and women into place within the house of the Church.

So God, for the completion of the universe, draws certain ones in order that his mercy may appear in them; and others he does not draw in order that his justice may be shown in them. But that he draws these and does not draw those, depends on the pleasure of his will. In the same way, the reason why in his Church he made some apostles, some confessors, and others martyrs, is for the beauty and completion of the Church. But why he made Peter an apostle, and Stephen a martyr, and Nicholas a confessor, the only reason is his will.⁶⁰

This is not just a mystery of predestination – why some are ordered to the display of God's mercy, and other ordered to display God's justice – but also the mystery of degrees of order and degrees of eventual glory.

Because Thomas is commenting on Scriptures, it becomes impossible for him to avoid speaking of the institutional ordering of the Church, which for St Paul in *particula* was understood in analogy to the living organism of the body where each member uses their particular spiritual gifts, charisms, and ministry for the good of the whole body and all the members.⁶¹ With this focus, we can perhaps see why any attempt to de-emphasise the institutional and visible Church is wrong, for something of the visible structure of the Church manifests the glory of divine order, revealing the beauty of the mystical body. Rather than being dismissed as a merely sociological entity, the structure makes visible God's wise ordering of the creation.

In his *Commentary on Romans*, St Thomas sets forth an understanding of the Body of Christ that flows from Christ by the Spirit of unity. So while the mystical body brings members of the Church together into the invisible spiritual unity of faith, hope, and love,⁶² it also creates a visible solidarity between those who have received these spiritual gifts and graces:

So, too, in the mystical body one who has received the gift of prophecy needs the one who has received the gift of healing, and so on for all the others. Hence, as long as each believer uses the grace given him to help another, he becomes the other's member: bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2); as each has received a gift, employ it for one another (1 Pet 4:10).⁶³

The basis of mutual solidarity within the body is found in the mutual reliance members have one for another, but also the fact that these ministries all derive from the

⁶⁰ *Commentary on John*, Chapter 6, Lecture 5, §938.

⁶¹ *c/f* Romans, 12:1–8; 1 Corinthians, 12:27–31; Ephesians, 4:11–16.

⁶² *Commentary on Romans*, Chapter 12, Lecture 2, §974.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, §975.

same source. This common origin is made clearer in his *Commentary on the First Letter to the Corinthians*. Here Thomas uses the analogy of the water of the river which flowed through Eden and divided into four.⁶⁴ It is the Spirit which animates the life of the Church, but there is still a need for different ministries in the Church, and so occasions for the various manifestations of the Spirit in service and operation, and all of this diversity redounds to the beauty and perfection of the Church.⁶⁵

The final passage where St Paul uses the body and parts image to speak of the Body of the Church is found in Ephesians 4. Commenting on this passage, Aquinas focuses more on what the different functions and offices mean. Apostles are put first in the list because they have a privileged share in all of Christ's gifts; a fullness of grace and wisdom regarding the revealed mysteries, they were given the grace of preaching, and were privileged with care over the Lord's flock.⁶⁶ From this apostolic life and authority flow three ecclesiastical categories: prophets who foretold the coming of Christ; evangelists, who preach the Good News and commit it to writing; and the pastors and doctors who teach the people everything that pertains to good conduct, and tend and care for the Lord's flock.⁶⁷ These gifts bear fruit, some of which is more proximate (service of others, perfection of Christians, conversion of unbelievers), but the more remote reason for all of these gifts is our final end in the Resurrection, which will not only be the resurrection of our own bodies, but also the full and visible perfection of the Church, which will be perfected spiritually in a manner similar to the physical perfection of Christ's natural body.⁶⁸

Here we see once again the importance of providence, not simply because the operations and services are appropriately directed towards our neighbours, aiding in their own ordering to and attainment of the end, but also with the focus on the beauty of this diverse ordering. God's providential rule draws all things to their final end, but there are diverse ways of attaining that end. In each person God bestows different gifts, and the Church tests the gifts, discerns the vocations, and in doing so, brings to fulfilment the divine plan of wisdom for each individual, manifesting God's glory. This in many respects mirrors the diverse distinctions in the wider created order, which redound to God's glory.

Hence we must say that the distinction and multitude of things come from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.⁶⁹

⁶⁴*Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, Chapter 12, Lecture 1, §721.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, §722.

⁶⁶*Commentary on Ephesians*, Chapter 4, Lecture 4, §211.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, §212.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, §216.

⁶⁹ST, I, q. 47, a. 1, *resp.*

Importantly, this diversity and ordering of grace suggests the ways in which my argument seeks to supplement or complement that of Congar, which focuses on the life of grace in the *Secunda Pars* as the privileged location of an ecclesiology. The work of God must be known in a variety of vocations, and ecclesial diversity which is made clear when Thomas treats of the distribution of grace in the *Prima Secundæ*:

Hence the first cause of this diversity is to be sought on the part of God, Who dispenses His gifts of grace variously, in order that the beauty and perfection of the Church may result from these various degrees; even as He instituted the various conditions of things, that the universe might be perfect. Hence after the Apostle had said (Eph 4:7): *To every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the giving of Christ, having enumerated the various graces*, he adds (Eph 4:12): *For the perfecting of the saints ... for the edifying of the body of Christ.*⁷⁰

Aquinas also offers us insights when we consider office of the bishop within the institutional and visible Church. In our contemporary situation the role of a bishop has been somewhat denuded, often reduced to the task administration. St Thomas helps us here for not only does the visible Church reveal the spiritual meaning of the Mystical Body, but particular roles within the life of the Church have a spiritual meaning that we have now by and large lost. The Church is the institution, the body, which through spiritual warfare, holy teaching, and the pursuit of virtue all things are brought to their end, and the bishop has a particular role to play.

St Thomas describes the episcopate as a state of perfection, similar to consecrated life. But while a consecrated religious undertakes the way of life of their particular institute to grow in perfection, the bishop must be one who has reach that state of perfection, and his task is to communicate holiness through teaching, governance, and sacramental ministry.⁷¹ While St Thomas has relatively little to say of bishops in the *Summa*, there is much more to say when he engages with the Scriptures in his commentaries, particularly as regards teaching and governing, and the bishop's role as mediator.

For the purposes of this argument I will focus attention on 1 Timothy, which St Thomas describes as instructing the prelates of the Churches '... on the foundation, construction, and government of ecclesial unity'.⁷² In his providential care and governance of the created order, God is the supreme power, but within the creation there are various other powers who are secondary causes within the creation.⁷³ We can see a clear reflection of this in the life of the Church, so just as there are many different ranks of saints, so to the degrees of sacred order reflect God's action of governing the created order through various different forms of cause and power. In his *Prologue* to 1 Timothy, Thomas outlines how all power is established in God: firstly, because God is the source

⁷⁰ST, I-II, q. 112, a. 4, resp.

⁷¹The prelate is to live the apostolic life, one which excels in contemplation, but is also one that is devoted to apostolic labour (ST, II-II, q. 182, a. 1). Moreover, having been raised to the office of bishop, the prelate is raised to a higher state of perfection where he must be free from sin and free for righteousness (ST, II-II, q. 183, a. 4), and for the active perfection of those entrusted to them by laying down their lives for their sheep.

⁷²Commentary on Romans, Prologue.

⁷³STI, I, q. 22, a. 3, resp.

of all power; second, because God should direct the use of all power; and third, because all power is established according to God's plan (*dispositio*).⁷⁴ This phrase is used by Thomas as a description of providence in the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa*,⁷⁵ and in article two of question twenty-two. The terms *providentia* and *dispositio* are used interchangeably. This surely means more than simply that the institution of the episcopate falls within God's providential plan, and even that the choice of particular men for that office is providentially governed; rather, bishops themselves have a role in ordering all things to their final end, by mediating God's power in a particular way. Of course this is true of all rational creatures in general, but St Thomas' theology of the episcopate, which sees the role as an active *status perfectionis* (state of perfection), where the bishop has the task, different from the rest of the Christian faithful, of bringing all of his subjects to perfection of supernatural charity.⁷⁶ In Chapter Three of 1 Timothy, Paul cites the virtues needed in one who is to be advanced to the episcopate, among which is to be *sōphrona*: prudent, sober, self-controlled. The Vulgate text on which St Thomas is lecturing translates this word as *prudenter* - prudent - which is useful for St Thomas' purposes because it makes clear the bishop's role as ruler: '... because prudence rules all the virtues, and a bishop is chosen to rule others ...'.⁷⁷ We have already seen that St Thomas speaks of providence as God's prudence (i.e. God prudently willing things to their final end which is God) in *Prima Pars* question twenty-two article one. The Scriptural text used both in his commentary on 1 Timothy and in the article in the *Summa* comes from Matthew, 24:45: *Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?* The visible hierarchy of the Church, but especially bishops, are called to be ministers of divine goodness by the perfection of the Christian faithful to their end in God. Thomas makes this even more explicit when he deals with Christ as head of the Church in question eight of the *Tertia Pars*. Responding to the question of whether it is proper to Christ to be head of the Church St Thomas distinguishes between the two ways that the head can influence the body; firstly, through intrinsic influence, which St Thomas likens to the life of grace. Secondly, through a certain exterior guidance, which St Thomas says can belong to others, and in a particular way to bishops. It is Christ's headship of the Church in general which enables others to be head with reference to particular places and times.⁷⁸

Moreover, Michael Sirilla draws our attention to the ways St Thomas's theology of the episcopate brings the bishop's role as perfecter to the fore. Building on the Dionysian scheme of ecclesiastical offices and duties where deacons purge, priests illumine, and bishops perfect, Aquinas explicitly states that the bishop's proper task is the perfection of the faithful.⁷⁹ Such perfection is not only brought about through the sacraments, something that they share with their collaborators the priests, but

⁷⁴Commentary on 1 Timothy, Prologue, §1.

⁷⁵ST, I, q. 22, a. 1.

⁷⁶For these insights into Thomas' theology of the episcopate, I am indebted to the work of Michael Sirilla. See Michael Sirilla, *The Ideal Bishop: Aquinas's Commentaries on the Pastoral Epistles* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017).

⁷⁷Commentary on 1 Timothy, Chapter 3, Lecture 1, §98.

⁷⁸ST, III, q. 8, a.7.

⁷⁹Sirilla, p.20. A similar point is made in Thomas' Commentary on 1 Corinthians where he says that Paul's principle task in Corinth was to preach - teaching being proper to the apostle, and therefore their

also through the preaching and teaching. Thomas has high standards for episcopal preaching, tasking bishops with the role of uncovering spiritual mysteries veiled in the sacraments.⁸⁰

It must be said that this vision of the episcopacy is quite an elevated one, and especially at a time when the failings of those within the hierarchy of the Church are all too visible, it might seem too elevated. But despite this, I think the image of the episcopate outlined above has two important contributions to the contemporary situation. Firstly, a richer vision of the episcopate can only be a good thing when the role of the bishop is almost entirely reduced to administration. Opening up the spiritual meaning of the episcopacy is no bad thing. Secondly, at a time when the institutional structures of the Church are often undervalued, and opposed to more organic visions, St Thomas helps us to see the importance of the visible, institutional, and hierarchical structure, and the mystery that it reveals. In a Thomistic ecclesiology the visible and institutional always holds mystical meaning, just as creation displays the traces of its maker.

4. Conclusion

I have tried to offer an account of the role of the Church which is rooted within the created order. Just as the gift of grace requires the gift of nature – there must be the first gift of nature in order for it to be perfected – the same principle runs through the life of the Church. God wishes to share a life of communion with us, and this desire was not frustrated by the Fall of our first parents but was achieved in each succeeding generation. For the people of Israel, this faith found its expression in the hope of a redeemer, and rites that, while not conferring justifying grace, were occasions for a growth in holiness and expressions of faith in a coming Messiah. For those outside of Israel, implicit faith took the form of trust in the providential order of nature, and the God who stood behind and within this providential order. Although the Church becomes visibly manifest in the Lord's Paschal Mystery, the Church was present in the world through Israel and its worship, and before and outside of Israel, in the life of righteous people who through an implicit faith in the Word believed that all things are ordering to an end, and had faith that God would bring this about. God's providential care is key to the life of the Church precisely because the Church is that Body by which God is bringing all things to their end. With the Incarnation the Church takes on a new life, united to the Word not simply as the Creator but as the Redeemer who brings the elect to their supernatural end through the life of the Church itself. The visible manifestation of the Church makes clear the way in which the order and unity of the Church are not some historical accident or sociological phenomena, but the way in which God shows us that he is drawing all things to Himself. To live an ecclesial life is to live *in medio ecclesia*, and from this point of view to prudently contemplate God revealing the mystery of his will in Christ as this plan unfolds through history, and to participate in this mystery in life in the Church. Such a vision can help us particularly in an ecclesial situation where our futures often seem less certain. The Church assures

successors. Baptism was undertaken by those who cooperated in his ministry (*Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, Chapter 1, Lecture 2, §39).

⁸⁰*De Veritate*, q. 9, a. 3, *corpus*.

us of God's provident care, and that in everything God is working for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.⁸¹ We can be sure of this, because the Church shows us that this is what God has always been doing.

⁸¹Romans, 8:28.

Cite this article: Albert Elias Robertson, 'God Works for Good with Those Who Love Him: The Church as a Sacrament of Providence, Predestination, and Divine Goodness', *New Blackfriars*, 106 (2025), 85–100. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2024.83>