

**GOD WORKING IN US WITHOUT US?
A FRESH LOOK AT FORMATION OF VIRTUE**

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I'd like to begin by explaining the context from which this investigation emerged. This lecture represents material chopped out of my doctoral dissertation several years ago because it couldn't be worked through quickly enough that I could graduate in a timely fashion. The dissertation focused on Christian families as "domestic church" or "church of the home."¹ The chapter from which this material was cut explored domestic churches as "schools of virtue," a prominent theme in Christian writings on family life—not only in texts written for audiences who are well-versed in theology, but also those written for more popular audiences interested in the spiritual significance of their family lives. My goal was to explore this theme in light of Thomas Aquinas' classic thought on virtue.

I ran into an area of tension that was not easily resolved. On the one hand, many authors in the family spirituality genre suggest that virtues referred to in Christian tradition as "supernatural virtues" are formed through family life. In Christian tradition, faith, hope, and charity, along with other moral and intellectual virtues informed by charity, are called *supernatural virtues*. Charity is said to 'inform' all other virtues so that the various good things we do are perceived in relation to our love of God. Specific virtues become varied expressions of love for God via love of neighbor.² Authors in the field of family spirituality describe habits of faith, hope, and love, as well as habits of humility, patience, joy, trust in God's providence, habits of forgiveness, peace and justice—*informed explicitly by Christian faith and love for God*—as born and cultivated in the context of family life. They value participation in the institutional Church's sacraments, but urge readers not to confine attention to the spiritual formation that goes on within the sanctuary. The spiritual discipline of ordinary family life is not considered an alternative to official sacraments; rather, it completes them.³

¹ Now published as Florence Caffrey Bourg, Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Churches (University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

² See the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), #s 1822, 1827; see also Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica [hereafter ST] 3 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Bros., 1947, I-II 58.3; II-II 44.1).

³ See for example Ernest Boyer, A Way in the World (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Dolores Leckey, The Ordinary Way (New York: Crossroad/Continuum, 1982); Wendy Wright, Sacred Dwelling (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Maureen Gallagher, "Family as Sacrament," in The Changing Family, Stanley Saxton et. al., eds. (Chicago:

Meanwhile, I found Catholic magisterial texts which described virtues as being “transmitted through word and example” through Christian families. For instance, Pope John Paul II speaks to the connection between domestic church and virtue in a 1995 sermon on “Healthy Family Life.” He states, “Catholic parents must learn to form their family as a ‘domestic church,’ a Church in the home, as it were, where God is honored, his law is respected, prayer is a normal event, *virtue is transmitted by word and example*, and everyone shares the hopes, the problems, and sufferings of everyone else.”⁴ The Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, instructs that “Christian married couples and parents ... should *train* their children, lovingly received from God, in Christian doctrine and *evangelical virtues*,” and immediately continues, “Because in this way they present to all an example of unfailing and generous love, they *build up the brotherhood of charity*...”⁵ An alternate translation says “Married couples and Christian parents ... should *imbue* their offspring, loving welcomed from God, with Christian truths and *evangelical virtues*”⁶ and thus build up a brotherhood of charity.

Given the context of this passage, with its reference to “Christian truths” and to “building up a brotherhood of charity,” I’ve always presumed that the Council intended ‘evangelical virtues’ to be roughly synonymous with supernatural virtues. In preparation for this lecture, I consulted several theological dictionaries to double-check this presumption, and found no entry for the term ‘evangelical virtues.’ So, I sent an inquiry to the internet chat service of a professional group called College Theology Society. Several colleagues sent replies; it seems ‘evangelical virtues’ isn’t a technical theological term that could be found in a theological dictionary, but everyone seemed to agree that it can be interpreted as ‘gospel virtues’ or ‘Christian virtues.’ One colleague thought evangelical virtues would include the beatitudes; two others located a list of evangelical virtues from the website of the Roman Catholic Diocese of

Loyola Press, 1984) 5-13; William Roberts, “The Family as Domestic Church: Contemporary Implications,” in *Christian Marriage and Family*, Michael Lawler and William Roberts, eds. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996) 16-19.

⁴ John Paul II, “Healthy Family Life,” *The Pope Speaks* vol. 41, no. 1 (1996): 42-45, at 45 (emphasis added); c.f. *Familiaris Consortio* 36, 39, 38: “Thus in the case of baptized people, the family, called together by word and sacrament as the Church of the home, is *both teacher and mother, the same as the worldwide Church*.” and #43: “The family is thus ... the place of origin and the most effective means for humanizing and personalizing society: it makes an original contributions in depth to building up the world, by making possible a life that is properly speaking human, in particular by *guarding and transmitting virtues and values*.”

⁵ *Lumen Gentium* #41, in *Documents of Vatican II*, Austin P. Flannery, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), emphasis added.

⁶ *Lumen Gentium* #41, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbot (New York: America Press, 1966), emphasis added.

Orlando, which included “charity toward brothers and sisters.”⁷

I think it’s safe to presume that Council delegates shared the conviction reflected among authors in the field of family spirituality, that a key part of “Christian family life” is the effort to cultivate virtues most associated with Christian life, to build up a community of charity. In Catholic theological tradition, including the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1827), the virtues most associated with Christian life, considered virtuous in the fullest sense, are the supernatural virtues—faith, hope, and most importantly charity, and by extension all the other virtues which are informed by charity.⁸

The tension I cited earlier arises from this: expressions like “transmit by word and example,” “train” or “imbue offspring with evangelical virtues,” or even “school of virtue,” do not quite capture Aquinas’ distinctive understanding of how *supernatural virtues* are caused. Aquinas argues painstakingly that supernatural virtues—unlike a separate category of “acquired” or “natural” virtues—CANNOT be taught, learned by practice, or caused by any human agency, but must be *infused* by God alone, as an accompaniment to sanctifying grace,⁹ normally in the context of water baptism. They are lost as a consequence of mortal sin, and usually re-infused in the sacrament of penance. Aquinas says supernatural or infused virtue is something which **“God works in us without us.”**¹⁰ Aquinas does believe formation of

⁷ http://www.orlandodiocese.org/clergy_religious/deacons/formation_news.htm

⁸ Aquinas does not characteristically use the expression, “Christian virtue.” He prefers the term “perfect virtue,” which designates virtues ordering humans to Christ as their ultimate end. However, he contrasts “perfect virtue” to the virtue of pagans, which are “imperfect,” or “virtues in a restricted sense.” (ST I-II 65.2) Commentators sometimes interchange “Christian virtue” for “infused” or “theological” or “supernatural” virtue—see for instance Paul Waddell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (NY: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 122.

⁹ From the start it should be clarified that traditionally ‘grace’ and ‘virtue,’ even ‘infused’ or ‘supernatural’ virtue, are not simply interchangeable terms. Grace strictly speaking is uncreated grace, God’s presence in us as our ‘form,’ a special, stable ‘nature’ or ‘quasi-nature,’ which brings with it co-infused habits and activities. [Thomas O’Meara, “Virtues in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997), pp. 254-285, at pp. 258-262] Co-infused habits of virtue and correlated virtuous activities are the created habitual and actual effects of uncreated grace. They may sometimes be referred to as created habitual and actual graces, though from another perspective (more reminiscent of Rahner, as we shall see), “Grace is not ‘created’ as an independent reality. Rather the ‘special love’ of God must have necessarily a created and creative effect in the human being.” [Otto Hermann Pesch, “Die bleibende Bedeutung der thomanischen Tugendlehre,” cited in O’Meara, p. 260].

See Aquinas’ disputed question *On the Virtues in General*, John Reid, O.P., trans. (Providence College Press, 1951—hereafter *VG*) art. 2 ad. 2: “The definition of virtue, once it is correctly understood, does not apply to grace. For, although grace belongs reductively to the first species of quality, it is not an operative habit, as virtue is, because it is not immediately ordered to operation. It is rather like a character (*habitus*) which bestows a certain spiritual, Divine being on the soul, and is presupposed by the infused virtues as their root and principle. Grace is to the essence of the soul what health is to the body.”

¹⁰ ST I-II 55.4. James Keenan comments, “In the *Prima secundae*, Thomas distinguishes the acquired from the infused virtues, a distinction that required a radical change in Augustine’s definition of virtue as ‘a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us without us.’ On

supernatural virtue enlists human agency and free cooperation, in that human activity may *dispose* us to receive supernatural virtues, or dispose to undergo an “increase” in them once these virtues are infused by God. And yet, Aquinas very deliberately and insistently distinguishes “disposing” from “causing.” It seems his overriding concerns are to maintain the premise that these supernatural virtues are truly a gift of God, beyond merely natural human capacities, and to highlight the necessity of sacraments of baptism and penance.

Aquinas’s distinction between disposing and causing is preserved in the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* at #1254, which states, “*Preparation* for baptism leads *only* to the *threshold* of new life. *Baptism* is the *source* of that new life in Christ from which the entire Christian life springs forth” (emphasis added).¹¹ Reading the current *Catechism* side by side with Aquinas’ *Summa*, one sees how both sources present the sacraments as the key locus for infusion of the supernatural virtues.¹² Aquinas apparently *presumed* Christian family life to be the normal setting where supernatural virtues develop. For instance, similar to magisterial statements cited previously, Aquinas remarks that being reared from childhood in things pertaining to Christian life allows one to more easily persevere therein.¹³ Yet, his theological categories are conceived such that life in a Christian household, and ongoing relationship with a larger church community, do not figure into his explanation of supernatural virtues formed by “God working in us without us.” In the natural order, humans are considered social creatures, and parental education is basic to the structure of God’s creation; in the supernatural order, appearance and disappearance of virtues need not adhere to natural patterns.¹⁴

the suitability of this definition Thomas notes the restrictiveness of the phrase, ‘which God works in us without us.’ He writes, ‘If we omit this phrase, the remainder of the definition will apply to all virtues in general, whether acquired or infused.’ Thomas, therefore, explicitly rejects Augustine’s assumption that all virtues are the work of God and distinguishes the human from the ‘superhuman’ virtues.” [*Goodness and Rightness in Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologiae* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1992), p. 94] This means Aquinas also departs from Augustine’s position that the virtues of pagans (which Aquinas calls natural virtues) are actually vices in disguise. On this theme, see Brian J. Shanley, “Aquinas on Pagan Virtue,” *The Thomist* vol. 63 (1999): 553-577, esp. p. 563: “Where Augustine could only see the dichotomy of perfect virtue and sham virtue, Aquinas recognizes a third kind of virtue—true but imperfect.” Bonnie Kent notes that Aquinas drew his definition from Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, the standard theological textbook of that era—see “Habits and Virtues,” in Stephen J. Pope, ed., *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002): 116-130, at 119.

¹¹ See parallel discussion of the sacrament of penance in the *Catechism* at #1446.

¹² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ## 1265-1266; *ST* III 69.4 & 6.

¹³ *ST* III 68.9.

¹⁴ *ST* II-II 24.10: “The Philosopher [Aristotle] says, in reference to friendship, that *want of intercourse*, i.e., the neglect to call upon or speak with one’s friends, *has destroyed many a friendship*. Now this is because the safe-keeping of a thing depends on its cause, and the cause of human virtue is a human act, so that when human acts cease, the virtue acquired thereby decreases and at last ceases altogether. Yet this does not occur to charity,

And so, there is tension between that part of the developing theological tradition which considers Christian families or domestic churches as schools of virtue, and that part of the tradition which has insisted that the supernatural virtues are caused by God alone through sacraments of baptism and penance. Until theologians address this tension, they have neglected some fundamental questions for any discussion of Christian families as schools of virtue. Can Christian virtue be taught, or not? Do Christian families teach only natural virtues, and not virtues that are distinctively religious or Christian? If God “works in us without us” to create the most important virtues for Christian living, then does it really matter whether Christian individuals have an ongoing mentoring relationship with domestic churches or parish communities?¹⁵ At a time when human cooperation with God is more fully appreciated in sacramental theology, and furthermore, when God’s presence and grace outside observable structures of the Church are more fully acknowledged in sacramental theology and ecclesiology, I believe we must at least revisit—and perhaps re-present—links between church, sacrament, grace, and supernatural virtue. What I have in mind is an exploration of supernatural virtue “in context.”

Authors who use expressions like “family is a school of virtue” or “parents should train their children in evangelical virtues and build up the brotherhood of charity” are *trying to articulate an important truth of religious experience*, but given the way virtue has been understood in the tradition running from Aquinas through the *Catechism*, more theological precision is needed. In my dissertation, after going round and round about the issue with my faculty committee (who did not all agree with each other), I employed Aquinas’ category of human efforts “disposing” us to receive or increase in grace and supernatural virtue, as a means to explaining Christian families as schools of virtue. This allowed for a human factor involved in virtue’s formation, but such that the gratuitous quality of charity was not compromised. It was the quickest and least controversial way to resolve the tensions I saw in the tradition—tensions which a few other virtue ethicists, such as Jean Porter and also Bonnie Kent, have also pointed out.¹⁶ I was not completely satisfied with this approach, but at the time, my dissertation

because it is not the result of human acts, but is caused by God alone, as stated above.”

¹⁵ As noted by Kevin Irwin in a survey of contemporary sacramental theology, “One difficulty is to determine how preparation and follow-up to sacraments is related to the actual celebration of the sacrament. If programs so emphasize catechumenate and mystagogia (or adaptations of them for other sacraments) then one can legitimately ask about the meaning of the sacrament itself. Theologically this asks the question of sacramental efficacy.” [“Sacramental Theology: A Methodological Proposal,” *The Thomist* vol. 54 no. 2 (April 1990): 311-342, at p. 340]

¹⁶ Jean Porter writes, “Since the work of [De]Lubac and Rahner, theologians within this tradition have been increasingly reluctant to argue for sharp distinctions between the natural and supernatural. ... [I]t is clear that the account of grace and the supernatural that informs Aquinas’ theory of the virtues would have to be subjected to the most searching reexamination in light of subsequent theological work before his theory of the virtues could

director—a very practical mother of 5 who knew I needed to get out of school and earn a real salary—suggested that I could return to the material later, after my committee had signed off on the dissertation. So, I took her advice, and this lecture represents my efforts to follow through on it.

As it happened, another chapter of my dissertation explored the idea of domestic church in connection with the concept of “church as sacrament,” using Karl Rahner as my primary source. Although Rahner didn’t write much on virtue, he helped me think about the larger context wherein supernatural virtue forms, in connection with sacramental practice. Those of you who are familiar with Rahner’s work know he draws heavily from Aquinas, but he finds Aquinas’ sacramental theology lacking because it is largely detached from any theology of Church.¹⁷ In fact, the *Summa* does not have a section devoted specifically to ecclesiology. It struck me that Aquinas likewise neglects to situate his treatment of supernatural virtue in the context of a theology of church or of church membership, and that this could explain the tension I’d identified when working on my chapter on domestic churches as schools of virtue.

The clearest link between church membership and virtue Aquinas indicates is in his treatment of baptism, which, among its effects, imprints a *character* that makes one a member of the church (that is, “deputes us to worship according to the rite of the Christian religion”)¹⁸ and infuses grace and correlated virtues.¹⁹ The link is stronger (though still discussed only briefly) in articles on *infant baptism*, for instance, in the claim that faith required for reception of baptism and its effects is provided by the Church, and in remarks that being reared by Christian parents in things

be reformulated in contemporary terms.” (“The Subversion of Virtue,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 1992)

Bonnie Kent states, “Twentieth-century authors are usually more prone to reveal their doubts about infused moral virtues by mentioning this aspect of Thomas’s ethics only in passing or even altogether ignoring it. The policy of silence is especially pronounced among philosophical authors who seek to abstract Thomas’ moral philosophy from his moral theology and treat it independently. I think it is safe to say that Thomas would have frowned upon this practice.” (“Habits and Virtues,” *op. cit.*, p. 129 note 32)

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963), pp. 9-10. One author who pieces together Aquinas’ theology of membership in the church from writings on Old and New Law, grace, and sacraments (but not virtue) is Colman O’Neill, O.P., “St. Thomas on Membership in the Church,” *The Thomist* vol. 27 (1963), pp. 88-140.

¹⁸ *ST* III 63.2

¹⁹ *ST* III 69.4. On the relationship between grace and supernatural virtue as effects of baptism, see Robert Reginald Masterson, O.P., “Sacramental Graces: Modes of Sanctifying Grace,” *The Thomist* vol. 18 no. 3 (July 1955), pp. 311-372, esp. pp. 311-333; Charles Schleck, C.S.C., “St. Thomas on the Nature of Sacramental Grace,” *The Thomist* vol. 18 (1955), pp. 1-30 and 242-278; and Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), chapter 5.

pertaining to Christian life allows one to more easily persevere therein.²⁰ To repeat what was stated previously, Aquinas apparently *presumed* Christian family life and ongoing Church membership as the normal context wherein supernatural virtues form; however, these do not figure *explicitly* into Aquinas' explanation of how virtues are "infused" or caused through sacraments. This explanation is needed if we are to treat supernatural virtue "in context."

Rahner also found that sacramental theology gave inadequate consideration to God's grace at work beyond the 7 ritual sacraments, in what he calls the "liturgy of the world."²¹ He finds intermingled in Christian tradition two models of grace, one which "implicitly assumes that grace can be an unmerited gift of God only if it becomes present and where it becomes present in a world to which it is mostly denied,"²² and a second model, which he prefers, which assumes that "it is not necessary for the world to normally be deprived of grace in order for grace to be a gift."²³ Rahner takes his cue from a statement Aquinas makes in discussing angels as possible ministers of the sacraments: "*God has not attached his power to the sacraments in such a way that he could not also impart the effects of sacramental grace without the sacraments themselves.*" (ST III 64.7) Rahner remarks, "Now, taking this as our starting point we can adopt an approach to the entire theology of sacraments which is the opposite of that usually envisaged."²⁴

By extension, I propose that taking this as our starting point, we can revisit the idea that

 ST III 68.9.

²¹ "[F]or Rahner, the world and its history are the primary and original form of liturgy. The liturgy of the world is not just *a* liturgy, in the sense of it being one of a variety of possible examples of liturgy. It is not merely a particular realization of a universal idea of liturgy, nor is it liturgy in an analogous sense of the term. The liturgy of the world is the most basic and complete form that liturgy takes; it provides the original content for the notion of liturgy. ... The dynamic process of God's self-communication and our acceptance of it, *as this process is experienced in daily life*, is the original experience of liturgy. Every type of explicit worship is a symbolic manifestation of this original form of worship, the liturgy of the world." [Michael Skelley, "The Liturgy of the World and the Liturgy of the Church: Karl Rahner's Idea of Worship," Worship vol. 63 (1989)]

²² Rahner describes these two models on several occasions. See, for instance, "On The Theology of Worship," Theological Investigations vol. 19 (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 141-149.

²³ As summarized by Michael Skelley, The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 58. Skelley continues, "We do not need to think that the experience of grace must be something foreign and unfamiliar, something given only to a few on relatively rare occasions, for it to be remarkable. Grace is not less of a gift because it is universally available. The fact that the self-gift of God is lavished on us so extravagantly does not make grace any less marvelous, extraordinary, unexpected, or undeserved. The self-communication of God will still be a gift, no matter how profligate God might be with it. If anything, the gratuity of grace is enhanced by the generosity of God."

²⁴ Rahner, "Introductory Observations on Thomas Aquinas' Theology of Sacraments in General," Theological Investigations vol. 14 (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 149-160, at p. 158.

supernatural virtues are infused through baptism and penance, and attempt to articulate the relationship between (1) the effects of these sacraments, (2) God's ongoing gracious work in the Church as "basic sacrament," and (3) God's work in our everyday lives, which Rahner calls the "liturgy of the world." Moreover, we can take a second look at the relationship between "supernatural" and "natural" virtues over the lifetimes of individuals.²⁵ All this will be necessary if we are to understand supernatural virtue in context.

My approach will have several elements. First, I will reconsider infused virtue as one of the effects of baptism. I will propose that, allowing for miraculous/exceptional cases, supernatural virtues need not be suddenly infused in baptism (or penance), in an "all or nothing" sense, in order for these sacraments to be interpreted as their symbolic cause. Second, I will propose that human agency *cooperates with God's initiative* in causing the ongoing formation of supernatural virtue. Specifically, I will suggest that human agency may be understood as a secondary, instrumental, ministerial, or mediating cause enlisted by God in formation of supernatural virtue—comparable to the role Aquinas assigns to sacraments and their ministers as

²⁵ The relationship between acquired and infused virtues as they develop—both over the lifetime of individual Christians, and as habits characteristic of Christians as a church community—remains largely unexplored in *ST* and *VG*, and still debated among commentators. However, there is agreement that for Thomas the difference between natural virtue (which must be learned) and supernatural virtue (which cannot be learned, but rather must be infused as an effect of grace) is an important one.

According to Jean Porter, "Thomas makes it clear that a life of moral rectitude does not give rise to any exigency for grace, so that in fairness God would have to meet us halfway, so to speak, with the infusion of the theological virtues (I-II 109.6). Without God's altogether unconstrained offer of Himself in grace, the virtuous unbeliever is actually as far from true happiness as the worst of sinners. ... In fact the existence of [acquired] moral virtue within a particular subject is not even a temporal precondition for God's gift of charity, since God infuses the cardinal virtues together with the theological virtues in any case (I-II 63.3). And since the infused cardinal virtues differ specifically from the acquired cardinal virtues, in that the former are directed through charity to a supernatural end (I-II 63.4), it is difficult to say whether, for Thomas, naturally acquired moral rectitude has any relevance at all to the life of grace." ["Desire for God: Ground of the Moral Life in Aquinas," *Theological Studies* 47 (1986), pp. 48-68, at p. 62]

Of course, Porter is not the only interpreter of Aquinas, and some, like Thomas O'Meara, consider that she deals inadequately with the relationship between natural and supernatural and with the infused virtues in particular. "Jean Porter comes to recognize that there are infused moral virtues but does not take the next step and relate closely infused and acquired virtues, corresponding to the real natural end of humanity included in the supernatural destiny, as Aquinas did." ["Aquinas and the Virtues," *op. cit.*, pp. 257, 267] Nevertheless, he also warns against a Pelagian interpretation of virtue, and says "The activities of acquired virtue ... are for Aquinas infinitely distant from divinization in virtue by the Spirit." (p. 257) How these two sets of virtues can be both "closely related" and "infinitely distant" remains unclear in this essay.

For more on the difference between Aquinas' grace or gift-centered theory of virtue and achievement-centered presentations such as Aristotle's (as well as attempts to explain the relationship of acquired and infused virtues) see Porter, "The Subversion of Virtue: Acquired and Infused Virtues in the *Summa Theologiae*," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1992), pp. 19-41; Waddell, *op. cit.*, chs. 5 and 8; Cessario, *op. cit.*, ch. 5; Shanley, *op. cit.*, and Renée Mirkes, OSF, "Aquinas on the Unity of Perfect Moral Virtue," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 71, no. 4, pp. 589-605.

causes of grace.²⁶ Rather than something which “God works in us *without us*,” I prefer to describe supernatural virtue as something **“God works in us *with us*.”** In other words, even if we allow for exceptional cases where charity (=friendship with God) MIGHT be formed or lost in a sudden manner that departs from the pattern of friendships in the natural order, we need not presume friendship with God CANNOT be formed (or lost) in a manner comparable to human friendship. Indeed, if charity entails love of God via love of neighbor, we can assume cultivation of charity is usually tied up with cultivation of human love and friendship, and matures to include love of strangers and even enemies. (Indeed, the enemies and strangers who most challenge us to grow in charity sometimes live under the same roof!) Finally, my approach to the “context” of supernatural virtue presumes that unity among Christians indicated by their shared baptism—at whatever age—and their common relationship with the Church at large (in varying degrees of explicitness, intensity, and consistency) ought to influence the way we explain “infusion” of supernatural virtue.

An Overview of Aquinas on Supernatural Virtues and their Formation

For the benefit of theological novices in the audience, we need a summary of Aquinas’ thought on how supernatural virtues are formed and increased. He says they are first given in *baptism*.²⁷ This is so even though baptized infants perform no acts of virtue to evidence virtuous habits because of an “impediment on the part of the body” comparable to that of a sleeping person,²⁸

²⁶ ST III 64 arts. 1 & 3.

²⁷ John Patrick Reid's notes to VG (op. cit., pp. 159-160) review different theological opinions on the doctrine of virtue infused at baptism, especially in the case of infants, which circulated in Aquinas' day and shortly thereafter:

As early as 1201, theological opinions concerning the infusion of grace and the virtues were officially recognized by the Church. In that year the great Pope Innocent III enumerated three opinions in this regard: (1) Faith, Charity, and the other virtues are not infused into infants at Baptism, because the babes do not exercise any consent (recall St. Thomas' own statement: "Infused virtue is caused in us by God, without any action on our part, but not without our consent."; (2) Through baptism, sin is forgiven them, but no grace is conferred on infants; (3) Both sin is forgiven and virtues are infused, so that the infants possess the latter as habits, but do not enjoy their use until they reach the age of discretion." Innocent does no more than state the three opinions which in his day enjoyed varying favor; he does not go on to declare his own mind in this particular matter.

Pope Clement V, together with the Fifteen Oecumenical Council of Vienne (1311-1312), took up this question and declared on it unequivocally. Condemning errors of Peter John Olivi, concerning the effects of baptism in infants, Clement stated that, in virtue of the universal efficacy of the Death of Christ, which is applied equally to all who are baptized, the opinion which hold that in baptism grace and the virtues are conferred on both infants and adults is the more probable opinion, as being in harmony with the teachings of the saints and of contemporary theologians. Clement adds that the Council also approves of this stand.

For further attention to Aquinas' belief that habits of virtue are infused equally in infants and adults at baptism, consult Masterson and Shleck, op. cit.

²⁸ ST III 69 arts. 4, 6:

and in Christian adults, infused virtues often exist in the presence of acquired vices, which render the exercise of these virtues difficult or inconsistent.²⁹ His argument depends on two premises: first, grace, salvation, and union with Christ through baptism are essentially linked; second, the grace given in baptism effects a new life for the soul, and must bring with it virtues needed to order the powers of soul according to a supernatural orientation.³⁰


When grace and charity are infused, says Aquinas, they effect a decisive change of the state of the soul. Further *increase* in charity is a matter of intensity in the soul's participation in its new nature or form.³¹ His choice of the terms 'increase,' 'greater hold on the soul,' and 'more perfect

Some of the early writers held that children do not receive grace and virtues in Baptism, but that they receive the imprint of the character of Christ, by the power of which they receive grace and virtue when they arrive at the perfect age. But this is evidently false, for two reasons. First, because children, like adults, are made members of Christ in Baptism; hence they must, of necessity, receive an influx of grace and virtues from the Head. Secondly, because, if this were true, children that die after Baptism, would not come to eternal life; since according to Rom. vi. 23, 'the grace of God is life everlasting.' And consequently Baptism would not have profited them unto salvation.


Now the source of their error was that they did not recognize the distinction between habit and act. And so, seeing children to be incapable of acts of virtue, they thought they had no virtues at all after Baptism. But this inability of children to act is not due to the absence of habits, but to an impediment on the part of the body: thus also when a man is asleep, though he may have the habits of virtue, yet is he hindered from virtuous acts by being asleep.

In replies to objections, Aquinas adds other arguments. Obj. 1: "Faith and charity depend on man's will, so that the habits of these and other virtues require the *power* of the will which is in children; whereas acts of virtue require an *act* of the will, which is not in children." Obj. 3: "[C]hildren believe, not by their own act, but by the faith of the Church, which is applied to them—by the power of which faith, grace and the virtues are bestowed on them."

For more on Aquinas' understanding of childhood, see Christina L. H. Traina, "A Person in the Making: Thomas Aquinas on Children and Childhood," in Marcia J. Bunge, ed., The Child in Christian Thought (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001): 103-133.

 ST I-II 65.3 ad. 2. Jean Porter clarifies, "Those who have received charity possess all the theological and [supernatural] cardinal virtues by infusion, since as we noted above, all the cardinal virtues are infused together with charity (I-II 65.3). This does not mean that all those who are justified by God's grace are paragons of goodness, however. The infused cardinal virtues may be potentially present in an individual, who none the less has difficulty exercising them because of the effects of past bad habits, or some other similar cause. Indeed, one of the most important differences between the acquired and infused cardinal virtues is precisely that the latter, unlike the former, can be truly possessed even by those who consistently experience some difficulty in exercising them." [Moral Action and Christian Ethics (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 163]

³⁰ We should also attend to penance, which restores charity lost through mortal sin. ST III 89.1: "Sins are pardoned through penance, as stated above. But there can be no remission of sins except through the infusion of grace. Wherefore it follows that grace is infused into man through Penance. Now all the gratuitous virtues flow from grace, even as all the powers result from the essence of the soul, as stated in the Second Part. Therefore all the virtues are restored through penance."

 ST II-II 24.5, ad. 3. "The infusion of charity denotes a change to the state of *having* charity from the state of *not having* it, so that something must needs come which was not there before. On the other hand, the increase of charity denotes a change to *more having* from *less having*, so that there is need, not for anything to be there that was not there

participation,' as contrasted to 'gradual infusion,' is in keeping with his understanding of sanctifying grace, which, as a 'second nature,' or 'form' cannot be given incompletely or partially. One either has or does not have grace, charity, and correlated virtues.

Though he gives every indication that sanctifying grace and its correlated virtues are normally dependent upon water baptism, Aquinas allows for exceptional cases of "baptism by blood" and "baptism of desire," which are also described as "baptism of the Spirit."³² Aquinas says baptism of the Spirit is actually the first cause, or source of efficacy, of water baptism. Baptism of the Spirit provides the same grace and infused virtues as water baptism.³³ But baptism of the Spirit is not a sacrament, says Aquinas, because a sacrament is a kind of sign.

In considering whether human activity can serve even as a *secondary cause* of supernatural virtues, Aquinas rejects the idea.³⁴ Elsewhere he entertains the idea that God might enlist human activity to cause these virtues, but suggests God in fact has opted for an infusion method in order to manifest his power.³⁵ Aquinas maintains his careful distinction of divine and human causes in discussing loss of charity. Unlike natural or acquired virtues, charity is not necessarily lost by a human's ceasing to perform acts of charity. This being said, Aquinas admits that cumulative venial sin, or failure to practice acts of charity, create a contrary "disposition" which makes loss of charity

before, but for something to be more there that previously was less there. This is what God does when He increases charity, that is He makes it to have a greater hold on the soul, and the likeness of the Holy Ghost to be more perfectly participated in by the soul." C.f. VG art. 11. Here we should bear in mind the etymological link between "having" and "habit."

³² ST III 66. 11

³³ See ST III 69.4, on the baptism of Cornelius "and others like him."

¶ ST I-II 63.3. The rejection occurs in Aquinas' introduction to the idea of infused moral virtue. The objection argues that "whatever can be done by secondary causes is not done immediately by God except perhaps miraculously. ... But intellectual and moral virtues can be caused in us by our own acts. ... Therefore it is not fitting for them to be caused in us by being infused." Aquinas responds that the acquired virtues "are not proportioned to the theological virtues. Hence we need other virtues that are proportioned to them, caused immediately by God."

¶ ST I-II 51.4 asks, "Are any habits infused in man by God?" Aquinas replies, "God can produce the effects of secondary causes without the secondary causes themselves, as we have pointed out. (ST I 105.6) Consequently, just as God, in order to manifest His power, sometimes produces health without a natural cause even though it could be caused by nature, so also to manifest his power, He sometimes infuses into man habits which can be caused by a natural power. For example, He gave to the Apostles the knowledge of Scripture and of various tongues, which men can acquire by study or custom, though not so perfectly."

Thus, James Keenan observes that "In the medieval view, they [the infused virtues] were infused as suddenly as St. Catherine of Siena 'learned' Latin—that is, overnight." ["How Catholic are the Virtues?" America vol. 76 no. 20 (June 7, 1997), pp. 16-22, at p. 17] He continues, "Today, we may describe the infused virtues with a little more appreciation of time and human exigency." Unfortunately, the popular format of Keenan's essay does not lend itself to a scholarly examination of how Aquinas might be reinterpreted this way.

through mortal sin more likely.³⁶

An Assessment of Aquinas on Infused Virtue

In comparison to previously cited sources which describe Christian families as “schools of virtue,” Aquinas' never says that faith, charity or any supernatural virtue is “transmitted,” “trained,” or “imbued” by human words, example, or discipline. These words imply causality, and Aquinas is very careful and insistent in arguing that God's grace is the sole cause of supernatural virtue; thus his fixation on the phrase “which God works in us without us”³⁷—which is which is not replicated in contemporary texts on theology and spirituality of family life.

Natural and supernatural virtue are different not simply because of their separate causes, but also in the way they are caused. Charity and correlated virtues are given and lost suddenly, decisively, in single acts. In contrast, acquired habits form and decline more incrementally, not in single acts.³⁸ Even though charity is described as a sort of friendship with God, Aquinas says it is not caused and decreased gradually, as human friendships are, because it has a different source.³⁹

¶¶ ST II-II 24.10: “[C]harity can by no means be diminished, if we speak of direct causality, yet whatever disposes to its corruption may be said to conduce indirectly to its diminution, and such are venial sins, or even the cessation from practice of works of charity.”

¶¶ ST I-II 63.2; VG art. 2. Interesting for our purposes is a comparison to Aquinas' *De Magistro* (“The Teacher,” from question 11 of *De Veritate*), especially article 1. (Source: *De Magistro*, in *The Philosophy of Teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Mary Helen Mayer, trans. Milwaukee, Bruce Publishing Co., 1929. Here Aquinas treats God, human teachers, and human learners as distinct efficient causes in the process of education, whether by instruction or discovery. Virtue, speculative, and habitual knowledge (but not supernatural virtue *per se*) are cited as developing through these cooperating causes. [For detailed commentary on Aquinas' categories of causality in relation to education, see Anthony Gulley, *The Educational Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (NY: Pageant Press, 1961)]. In *DM*, God is said to teach interiorly and principally, while human agents teach exteriorly as secondary causes. “Just as a doctor, although he works exteriorly while nature alone works interiorly, is said to cause healing, so man is said to teach, although he announces exteriorly while God teaches interiorly ... Augustine, in that he maintains in the *De Magistro* that God alone teaches, does not mean to deny that man teaches exteriorly but to insist that God alone teaches interiorly.” (art. 1 ad. 7 & 8).

Cooperation of divine and human efficient causes described here is similar to Aquinas' discussion of multiple causes in the work of sacraments. Specifically, the idea that human teachers are secondary efficient causes of learning by “announcing exteriorly while God teaches interiorly” is akin to Thomas' premise that “sacraments cause grace by signifying it”—a premise at the heart of Rahner's sacramental theology. I believe this framework could explain formation and increase of supernatural virtue, such that its gratuitous nature is not compromised. One need not resort to a strict distinction of human “disposing” and divine “causing.” Moreover, this framework could successfully explain formation of supernatural virtue “in context”—in relation to the Church as “basic sacrament,” the 7 ritual sacraments, and the God's gracious work in the “liturgy of the world.”

¶¶ ST I-II 51.3.

¶¶ ST II-II 24.10: “The Philosopher says, in reference to friendship (*Ethic.* viii.5) *that want of intercourse*, i.e., the neglect to call upon or speak with one's friends, *has destroyed many a friendship*. Now this is because the safe-keeping of a thing depends on its cause, and the cause of human virtue is a human act, so that when human acts cease, the virtue acquired thereby decreases and at last ceases altogether. Yet this does not occur to charity, because it is not the result of human acts, but is caused by God alone, as stated above.” Later, in article 12, reply obj. 2, Aquinas cites St. Peter as one who lost charity suddenly through mortal sin in denying Christ, and then soon recovered it.

The difference stems from Aquinas' desire to preserve the principle that sanctifying grace and charity are caused by God alone.⁴⁰ Thus, appearance and disappearance of these virtues need not adhere to patterns which natural habits follow in their growth and decline. It seems Aquinas considers this system a fitting manifestation of God's power.

Nowhere are these points clearer than in Aquinas' treatment of infant baptism. However, his distinction in this context between habits and acts is unsettling, given his insistence in other contexts that virtues are *operative* habits. This means they aren't simply dispositions or capacities or possibilities for action, but *in fact move one to act well*.⁴¹ As Aquinas sees it, the ordering of the soul given by the supernatural virtues in baptized children remains inactive for years, presumably till the "perfect age" or "age of discretion." The inactive habits of a sleeping virtuous adult do not, in my estimation, provide a convincing comparison, for the 'impediment on the part of the body' is much more temporary and, to the extent the agent chooses when to sleep, within his or her control.

Aquinas' conception of infused virtue may appear less problematic in cases of adult baptism, but significant concerns remain.⁴² There is not consensus among commentators as to whether

⁴⁰ In *VG* art. 2, an objection (#18) is raised that supernatural virtues are at least increased by human acts, and things are generated, nourished, and increased by the same causes, so therefore the traditional definition "*which God works in us without us*" is not appropriate. Aquinas replies, "Just as acquired virtues are increased and fostered by the (same sort of) acts which caused them, so the infused virtues are increased by the action of God, by Whom they are caused. Yet our own acts may dispose us for the increase of charity and the infused virtues. Thus, to receive an increase of charity from its source, a man prepares and disposes himself by doing what lies in him, in order to receive this charity from God. Even further than this, our acts can merit an increase of charity, inasmuch as they presuppose charity, which is the principle of merit. ... Hence it is clear that charity and other infused virtues are not actively increased by our acts, but only dispositively and meritoriously. They are actively increased by the action of God, Who perfects and conserves the charity which He has previously infused."

ST I-II 55.2; recall Porter, *Moral Action and Christian Ethics*, cited at note 29, above. In the question of whether virtue is an operative habit, Aquinas considers the objection (#3) that it might suffice for virtue for the soul to be "ordered to God, as likened to Him, but not as ordered to operation." Aquinas responds, "Since the substance of God is His action, the greatest likeness of man to God is in respect of some operation. Therefore, as we have said above, happiness or beatitude by which man is made most perfectly conformed to God, and which is the end of human life, consists in an operation."

⁴² Consider Jean Porter's reaction to Aquinas' treatment of infused virtues in Christian adults:

Aquinas does not offer a satisfactory account of the relation of the infused to the acquired virtues in the history and character of the individual whose virtues they are. As we have already noted, Aquinas insists that the infused virtues are bestowed on the individual without any regard to her antecedent abilities or efforts. Indeed, because they direct their subject to a supernatural end, they cannot be traced to natural causes at all. But if that is the case, what becomes of the naturally acquired habits of virtue possessed by the individual who converts (or repents) in maturity, when her character is already formed, at least to some degree? Are they simply superseded by the infused virtues, or do the latter express themselves by somehow incorporating the acquired habits of the subject into their own unfolding?

It may well be that Aquinas could give an account of the relation of the acquired virtuous

infused virtue [1] replaces acquired virtue (in cases of adult baptism); [2] substitutes for acquired virtue (in cases of infant baptism); [3] exists simultaneously with acquired virtue as a second, parallel set of habits, perhaps operating together on the same acts, perhaps relegated to separate activities; or [4] incorporates and transforms acquired virtue, perfecting or elevating it to new possibilities.

The idea that those baptized in infancy never acquire natural virtues, while instead infused virtues gain increasing hold on their souls, might seem to logically follow from the premise that sanctifying grace decisively reorients the soul according to a new 'supernatural' form. But, as Porter suggests, this 'substitution' model, applied to adult converts as a 'replacement' model, seems to undermine their physiological and psychological integrity, for natural virtues appear suddenly replaced while natural vices still exert a corrupting influence. This model also leaves us to wonder why natural, acquired vices seem to interfere with exercise of infused virtue in adults who were baptized as infants. Does it make sense to say these adults have natural vices but not natural virtues?

The 'two parallel sets of habits' model finds support in Aquinas' insistence (in most contexts) that natural and supernatural virtue incline to specifically different acts.. For instance, comparing natural and supernatural temperance, Aquinas says, "In the eating of food ... the mean established by human reason is that food should not harm the health of the body nor hinder the activity of thinking, whereas according to the rule of divine law man should 'chastise the body and bring it to subjection' (I Corinthians 9:27), by abstaining from food, drink, and the like. Hence it is plain that infused and acquired virtue differ in kind, and for the same reason the other virtues do also."⁴³ A variation says that acquired virtues suit us for earthly citizenship, for service to the common good in society, while infused virtues form us for heavenly citizenship and knowledge of the fullness of truth.⁴⁴ This model is somewhat undermined by occasional statements which suggest the two sorts

habits of an individual to the infused virtues, which are bestowed on her from without, that would preserve both the complete gratuity of the latter and the continuity and integrity of the individual's personality. But to my knowledge, he does not even raise this problem, much less address it. It may be that he simply assumes that, normally, those who receive the infused virtues will first receive them as infants at baptism and will then experience the unfolding of these virtues as they mature, without acquiring the cardinal virtues by natural means at all. In any case, any effort to appropriate his substantive theory for contemporary purposes would need to offer some account of the relation of the acquired to infused virtues in the case of the individual who possesses both. ["The Subversion of Virtue," *op. cit.*, p. 38]

⁴³ ST I-II 63.4.

⁴⁴ VG art. 9: "Even for man himself there are various kinds of goods, according to various considerations. For the good of man as man is not the same as his good insofar as he is a citizen. The good of man as such is that his reason be perfected by knowledge of the truth and that his lower appetites be subjected to the rule of reason, for man is human

of virtues may incline Christians and pagans to activities which are observably similar, but different (from a perspective which can only be appreciated with the eyes of faith) because of the agent's ultimate motivation.⁴⁵

While the 'parallel habits' model could be applied to persons baptized at any age, it also seems to compromise the integrity of persons involved. Specifically, the earthly-heavenly citizenship explanation bespeaks a dichotomy between sacred and secular worlds which the Second Vatican Council called "The most serious error of our age."⁴⁶ This two-tiered model fails to emphasize how individuals operate in sacred and secular spheres simultaneously. It further suggests that our ultimate human fulfillment is supernatural perfection of our *rational* capacities and pursuit of truth *only*. But are we not *social* creatures as well as rational ones? Is service of the common good any less essential to our ultimate human fulfillment and to citizenship in God's kingdom? We know that Aquinas describes charity as love of God through love of neighbor; he says love of neighbor is "specifically the same act whereby we love God;" it is "love of the same object under a different aspect."⁴⁷ If this is so, the "two sets of habits" model—distinguishing earthly and heavenly citizenship—seems inappropriate for the possessor of charity and correlated virtues. Perhaps there is another way to think about earthly and heavenly citizenship. If we claim charity and other infused virtues must show themselves in activity, this *need not* mean that *all* acts inspired by charity are materially different from acts of natural virtue (though many may be, depending on one's surrounding culture). It would be sufficient that acts of supernatural virtue be distinguished as expressions of love for God, in a way that could be appreciated with the *eyes of faith*.

The 'elevation' or 'transformation' model better preserves continuity in personalities of adult

precisely as he is rational. However, the good of man as citizen is that he serve, in society, the interests of the common good. ... Now a man is not only a citizen of an earthly state, but he is also a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem, where the Lord rules, where the angels and all the saints are the citizens, whether they reign in glory and are at rest in their true country, or whether they are as yet pilgrims on earth ... Clearly, those virtues which a man has insofar as he is a citizen of this heavenly city cannot be acquired by him through his own natural powers. Wherefore, they are not caused by our acts, but infused into us by the gift of God. On the other hand, the virtues which a man has according to his human nature, or as he is a member of this earthly city, do not exceed the powers of human nature. Consequently, a man can acquire them by his own natural powers, as is clearly the case." C.f. ST II-II 23.7.

¶ ST I-II 65.2: "[T]he moral virtues, inasmuch as they are productive of good works ordered to an end which does not surpass the natural capacity of man, can be acquired by human actions. And acquired in this way they can be without charity, as has happened with many pagans. But insofar as they are productive of good works in relation to a supernatural last end, and thus truly and perfectly attain the nature of virtue, they cannot be acquired by human acts but are infused by God. Moral virtues of this kind cannot exist without charity."


⁴⁶ *Gaudium et Spes* #43.

⁴⁷ ST II-II 25.1 & 26.7.

converts, in keeping the Thomistic principle that "grace perfects nature." But if elevation or infusion occurs suddenly, as implied by Aquinas' discussion of baptism, that principle seems called into question. Moreover—and here is the elephant in the room that commentators don't often acknowledge—this model is difficult to apply to the vast majority of Christians baptized in infancy, who at that time had no established habits to be elevated.

Further questions present themselves if we consider persons introduced to Christianity as adults—not uncommon in interfaith marriages, or where individuals with no formal religious affiliation marry a Christian spouse, perhaps with a large extended family of believers. The sharing of everyday life with a family of Christians—including some overtly religious activities, but proportionately few—will sometimes lead people to gradually embrace Christian faith and receive sacraments of initiation.⁴⁸ If the transforming event of infused virtue occurs during water baptism and not before, we are hard-pressed to explain what appears to be increasing exercise of Christian virtue among adults in a mode of informal inquiry into Christianity or formal preparation for baptism, a process that often extends for years. If such persons experience the elevating effect of infused virtue through Baptism of the Spirit, prior to water baptism, then what will be the effect of baptism with water? Will there be any additional advantage so far as infused virtue is concerned?

Actually, Aquinas answers this question affirmatively, using the example of Cornelius in the Book of Acts: "[B]efore Baptism Cornelius and others like him receive grace and virtues through their faith in Christ and their desire for Baptism, implicit or explicit: but afterwards when baptized, they receive a yet greater fulness of grace and virtues."⁴⁹ Thus, in the Summa, there is a sense in which baptism of adults and infants seems not to have completely the same rationale and effects. Infants receive grace and supernatural virtues through infusion at baptism; adult converts receive something different—an *increase* in these virtues. This is unsettling, if we consider that baptism (and presumably its effects) is supposed to be one of the most important things Christians share *in common*. Given that the Summa lacks a section devoted to ecclesiology, little is said about

 This point is almost, but not quite, captured in the U.S. Bishops' Follow the Way of Love (1994) p. 8: "Baptism brings all Christians into union with God. Your family life is sacred because family relationships confirm and deepen this union and allow the Lord to work through you. The profound and ordinary moments of daily life—mealtimes, workdays, vacations, expressions of love and intimacy, household chores, caring for a sick child or elderly parent, and even conflicts over things like how to celebrate holidays, discipline children, or spend money—all are the threads from which you can weave a pattern of holiness." The bishops suggest union of Christians with each other and with God is first achieved in baptism and subsequently confirmed and deepened by shared life. I contend that in many cases a pattern of holiness and union with God and fellow Christians is first established through shared family life and, somewhere along the way, confirmed and deepened through baptism. This can be true for both childhood and adult baptism.

⁴⁹ ST III 69.4. See also ST III 68.3, on whether baptism should be deferred, and ST III 69.8 on whether baptism has the same effect in all.


shared features of supernatural virtue among *all* baptized members of the Church, *as well as* persons journeying toward baptism. Thus, it is difficult to articulate a model of the relationship between natural and supernatural virtue applicable to all faith journeys.

When all is said and done, it is ironic that water baptism doesn't seem to infuse *operative* habits of supernatural virtue in *anyone*—not in adult converts, because they already possess these virtues through Baptism of the Spirit; and not in infants, because of their “bodily impediment.”

A Proposed Reinterpretation of Supernatural Virtue, Sacraments, and Church Membership

Aquinas could not have anticipated developments in ecclesiology and sacramental theology witnessed in the 20th-century. We must expect these developments to impact upon our understanding of supernatural virtue, for Aquinas sees the Church's sacraments as the key locus of their infusion. One might say the challenge of describing formation of “supernatural virtue” can be traced to tension, identified by Rahner, between two models of grace's activity: one which implicitly assumes that grace can be an unmerited gift of God only if it becomes present in a world to which it is mostly denied; the other which assumes it isn't necessary for the world to be normally deprived of grace in order for grace to be a gift. Elements of both models can be found in Aquinas, and while this fact is generally recognized, theologians are not in agreement on how to interpret it.⁵⁰

Extended to our consideration of supernatural virtue as an effect of grace, this tension is manifested between charity *infused* and lost in isolated acts, and, on the other hand, charity *increased* with the aid of practice, much like natural virtues. It is manifested between Aquinas' account, which considers that God's power is fittingly displayed only if supernatural virtue is infused without secondary human causes, and recent authors who suggest supernatural virtue is “transmitted,” “imbued,” or learned by word and example within Christian families. The tension is lurking in Aquinas' insistence that works of natural and supernal virtue move agents to *specifically*

 Lack of complete consensus further complicates the incorporation of Rahner as part of the Thomistic tradition. This can be seen in a comparison of Porter and O'Meara. Following her remarks about Aquinas' unsatisfactory account of how acquired and infused virtues are formed and integrated in the character of a given agent, Porter identifies the underlying source of difficulty: “As his distinctions between the acquired and infused virtues indicate, Aquinas's theory of the virtues, together with his whole theory of morality, presupposes sharp distinctions between the natural and the supernatural. ... It is clear that Aquinas' understanding of grace and its relation to the natural order has become extremely problematic today. Since the work of Lubac and Rahner, theologians within this tradition have been increasingly reluctant to argue for sharp distinctions between the natural and supernatural. ... [I]t is clear that the account of grace and the supernatural that informs Aquinas' theory of the virtues would have to be subjected to the most searching reexamination in light of subsequent theological work before his theory of the virtues could be reformulated in contemporary terms.” (“The Subversion of Virtue,” *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39).

O'Meara likewise recognizes that one's understanding of infused virtue depends on one's interpretation of the nature/supernature distinction and the principle that “grace perfects nature,” and says theology's ongoing challenge is to express their interplay in contemporary language. But, unlike Porter, he claims, “De Lubac and Rahner knew, however, that some distinction between the two orders is unavoidable.” (*op. cit.*, p. 280) For a detailed review of alternate interpretations of Aquinas and Rahner on the nature/grace issue, see George Vandervelde, “The Grammar of Grace: Karl Rahner as a Watershed in Contemporary Theology,” *Theological Studies* 49 (1988), pp. 445-459.

different acts, alongside acknowledgement that good works done by virtuous pagans may not always differ materially from those of virtuous Christians. Rather, they may differ because Christians have the faith perspective needed to refer these goods to their true, supernatural end. This same tension is manifested in an account of baptism which, despite its intent to establish its necessity and its decisive effect on virtue, neglects or deals unconvincingly with many questions concerning the role of baptism vis-a-vis the moral and spiritual development of various members of the church.

Is there a way, without simply rejecting Aquinas, to resolve these tensions and nagging questions, and better articulate a relationship between church membership, sacraments, everyday spiritual life, and formation of supernatural virtue? I believe there is, and it is influenced by Rahner's conception of grace, liturgy of the world, church, and sacrament.

*What if the most important effect of water baptism relevant to virtue is not a sudden, “all or nothing” infusion of supernatural habits within an individual, in isolation? What if it has to do primarily with the **sign** value of sacraments?* Recall Aquinas' admission that baptism of the Spirit (who is the first cause of infused virtue) does not necessarily coincide with water baptism.⁵¹ This admission rests on a presumption—that gracious activity of God's Spirit cannot be restricted to places and times where sacraments are celebrated; rather, it is revealed in sign by sacraments. Aquinas surely acknowledged this principle, but didn't make it the centerpiece of his theology of church and sacraments, as Rahner did. Nor, in my estimation, does this principle have much impact on Aquinas' presentation of infused virtue.

*Let us now consider the possibility that the case where baptism of Spirit doesn't neatly and narrowly coincide with water baptism **may be rather common, rather than exceptional**, as Aquinas suggests.* We might say water baptism, in both infant and adult cases, is the public, visible, sign—but still only a snapshot—of the invisible, gracious working of God's Spirit in the life of the recipient (past, present, and future), the effect of which is the flowering of virtue.⁵²

Following Rahner, we must remember that baptism, like any sacrament, is also a public sign and confirmation of the work of the *Church* on behalf of the world. The Church's mission is to mediate God's presence, announcing it via word, example, and ritual, and explicitly linking inchoate experience of God with the historical Jesus, thus enhancing the possibility of human response. As Rahner was fond of quoting from Aquinas, “sacraments”—whether the Church as sacrament or the

⁵¹ *ST* III 66.11.

⁵² On sacraments as signs of God's action in the past, present, and future, see *ST* III 60.3, also Rahner, “Considerations on the Active Role of the Person in the Sacramental Event,” *TI* vol. 14 (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) pp. 161-184, at 175-176.


7—“cause grace *by signifying it*.”⁵³

Rahner reminds us that the heart of the Good News is the fact—appreciated only with the eyes of faith—that God is not simply transcendent. In the Incarnation and continuing through the Spirit, God is equally, intimately present and active in creation. Once this Good News is accepted, limitless potential is unleashed for the created world to “sacramentally” mediate God's presence, power, and gifts, among which we may count the supernatural manifestations of virtue.

The supernatural element of such virtues may be understood as a gradually more explicit, intense, and integrated habit of appreciating the transcendent significance of creation and our human activities, *understood with reference to Christian revelation, which is normally made available by the Church*. God has given this Church as the community who will take responsibility for making explicitly Christian virtue *possible* (though never guaranteed, always a gift), by announcing the true significance of human life and the created world, in relation with the God revealed in Jesus Christ, and by trying to make this Good News *credible* through their witness so that people will adopt it as the central point of reference for their lives.⁵⁴ Once cultivated as a habit, this central reference point corresponds to charity as traditionally defined. The Church as basic sacrament, and domestic church as sacrament made specific, announce the Good News in word, example, and ritual, and thus can “transmit,” “imbue,” or mediate faith, hope, charity, and charity-informed justice, courage, patience, humility, etc. by making them possible and credible.

Thus, allowing for miraculous, exceptional cases, we need not insist that supernatural virtues are suddenly, narrowly, and for the first time infused in baptism, in order to say grace and baptism are their symbolic cause (the same would be true for the sacrament of penance).⁵⁵ It is appropriate, and more in harmony with contemporary ecclesiology and sacramental theology, to say the grace of baptism relevant to these virtues, captured in the sign of water in which all members have been bodily immersed, is primarily the *gift of the Church community*. *Union with Christ* is a crucial ingredient for supernatural virtue, and—miraculous/extraordinary cases notwithstanding—the path to uniting with Christ normally comes through a relationship with the Church community, or Body of Christ.⁵⁶ In baptism, the Church community reconfirms itself in its sacramental mission and addresses it, especially through sponsors and family members who ritually

⁵³ ST III 62.2 ad.1; see Rahner, “Introductory Observations,” *op. cit.*

 Without allowing ourselves to digress, we should note points of convergence with contemporary virtue ethicists, who link concepts of community, story/narrative, and virtue.

⁵⁵ For similar thoughts, see Rahner, “Considerations,” *op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁵⁶ In ST III 69.5, ad. 1, Aquinas says “Adults who already believe in Christ are incorporated into him mentally. But afterwards, when they are baptized, they are incorporated into him corporally, as it were, i.e., by the visible sacrament, without the desire of which they could not have been incorporated in Him even mentally.”

pledge their ongoing support, to a particular individual. Thus the Church community—where it takes its job seriously—is a secondary, but hardly superfluous cause of supernatural virtue. In fact, the Church community, especially at the domestic level, functions as an extension or complement of its sacraments and ministers, whom Aquinas acknowledges as instrumental efficient causes of grace.

In this light, we can reinterpret the traditional premise that in cases of infant baptism the faith needed to receive the sacrament is provided by the Church. We can say this occurs especially through the domestic church who have brought the child to be baptized and volunteered themselves for continued religious formation. If the sacrament is fruitful, mediation of grace and virtue is ongoing and cumulative, not confined to the moment of baptism. In fact, the process is not very different for adult converts, whose faith has been made possible by the Church (often represented by a domestic church—such as a Christian spouse and in-laws), and who depend on (God working through) fellow Christians for continued growth in virtue.

If we follow Rahner's lead, and interpret God's grace as unleashing its full effect only where it is explicitly recognized, we can acknowledge a distinction between maturing Christians and other persons—whether baptized or not—who have no ongoing, active relationship with the Church community, no conscious acquaintance with revealed supernatural ends and goods described in scripture, and thus nothing to move them willfully toward the moral vision and action characteristic of faith, hope, and charity.

The elevation model could be made more attractive by allowing for the effect of sacramental grace to be a *gradual*, perhaps *lifelong*, cultivation of an orientation (or, an ordering of the soul) which provides an explicitly Christian rationale and motivation, and perhaps distinctive activities, to virtues acquired either before baptism (by adult converts) or before the significance of baptism is fully appreciated (by those baptized in infancy).⁵⁷ This model upholds the conviction that baptism of Christians—and its effects, supernatural virtue among them—is one of the most important things they share *in common*. If a gradually elevating effect of grace is further interpreted, in Rahnerian fashion, with sacraments as sign of God's work already being accomplished, we can include

⁵⁷ This more nuanced conception represents a shift from that understanding of sacramental causality which tends to concentrate primarily on its *ex opere operato* effectiveness. However, it can be legitimated if the *ex opere operantis* principle is given more weight. *Ex opere operato*, Latin for “from the work worked,” is “a phrase explaining how a sacrament achieves its effect—not because of the faith of the recipient or the worthiness of the minister, but because of the power of Christ who acts within and through it.” [Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 1239] *Ex opere operantis* refers to the belief that the *fruitfulness* of the sacrament *also* depends on the *disposition* of the recipient (McBrien, 792; c.f. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1128).

The gift of a relationship with the Body of Christ is established publicly at baptism, and support for each baptized individual—toward the full flowering of a virtuous life—remains a standing offer from the Church's perspective, even if an individual—for whatever reason—does not actively pursue it. Here is an example of a grace that is given in the sacrament *ex opere operato*, independent of the worthiness of a particular minister or recipient.

catechumens and inquirers in a unified schema.

The development of mature, explicitly Christian virtue is never guaranteed. In the end, it is always miraculous, a gift from God, and dependent on faith. This being said, the possibility of supernatural virtue normally depends on a very ordinary thing, an ongoing relationship with a community of Christians. The baptized person is incorporated bodily into Christ not simply through baptism in isolation, but through a relationship with the Church as the Body of Christ, which shared baptism symbolizes. A church community employs all available resources—reasoned explanation, persuasion of affections, disciplinary routines—to elicit and solidify in its members a self-motivated commitment to its understanding of the good life.⁵⁸ We can presume that supernatural virtue is usually formed by God's enlistment of the same basic strategies and resources used to cultivate natural virtue in any human community.

Therefore, the terms 'natural' and 'supernatural' should be used in a nuanced fashion in a contemporary account of virtue. If they are defined primarily with reference to the statement, "which God works in us *without us*," they may misleadingly suggest (1) a magical or automatic understanding of sacraments of baptism and penance; or (2) that humans and God act independently as causes of two separate sets of virtues, one for secular life and one for religious life; or (3) that the good works of Christians are moved by the Spirit and grace while the good works of everyone else are not. Such an interpretation of virtue would be out of step with contemporary Catholic ecclesiology and sacramental theology. Supernatural virtue can be understood as something "God works in us *with us*." Just as it is not necessary for the world to normally be deprived of grace in order for grace of sacraments to be a gift, so it is not necessary for there to be no human secondary cause of supernatural virtue in order for it to be a grace, or for God's power to be fittingly manifested. Human actions may serve as secondary, instrumental efficient causes in this arena no less than they do in sacraments.

Renewed attention to charity as *friendship* with God should allow us to admit for its incremental growth and decline—comparable to friendship in the natural order—as a general rule. Sudden, miraculous infusion (or sudden destruction through unprecedented mortal sin) could be acknowledged as an occasional event, but we must be careful that our theology of virtue does not portray it as the norm of moral and spiritual development. Moreover, human friendships—family relations preeminent among them—and all the ordinary activities they entail, must be acknowledged for their crucial role as instruments of friendship with God. This is in keeping with Aquinas' linking of love of God and love of neighbor as basic expressions of charity.

⁵⁸ Among these human resources we will certainly include rituals and celebrations, the sacraments among them. ~~Rahner and those influenced by him will remind us that sacraments are not simply acts of God, but also human acts.~~ For instance, Bernard Cooke, in *Sacraments & Sacramentality* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1983), especially in chapters 1-4, speaks to the function of religion, ritual, symbols, and sacraments as they help humans individually and communally to construct a "hermeneutic of experience."

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