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"REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM": SINNING, SUFFERING, AND RECONCILING[1]

Abstract. This article investigates the philosophical and theological structure of reconciliation through a sustained engagement with the problems of sin, suffering, and punishment. Situated at the border of classical metaphysics and Christian theology, it retrieves Augustinian and Thomistic accounts to show how reconciliation emerges not despite judgment, but through its transfiguration by mercy. Drawing from primary texts including Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and *Expositio super Iob*, alongside Augustine's *Confessions*, *City of God*, and sermons, this work develops an ontological anthropology in which evil is understood as *privatio boni*, punishment as medicinal, and mercy as the perfection rather than the negation of justice. This paper moves through five interlocking reflections. The noble death of Socrates is examined as a typological precursor to Christian reconciliation, disclosing the limits of unaided reason before the mystery of guilt and grace. Aquinas's reading of Job is then retrieved to show how undeserved suffering, received in fidelity, functions as a purgative within a teleological moral order. The metaphysical self-destruction of evil as privation is analyzed to establish the irreducible redeemability of the human person. Because evil possesses no positive essence, the *imago Dei* in the soul remains capable of restoration through grace. Historical exemplars, including Alessandro Serenelli's conversion, Pope John Paul II's embrace of Mehmet Ali Ağca, and the Church's repentance in the Galileo affair, are then examined as concrete enactments of forgiveness as ontological reconstitution. Finally, Jacques Maritain's self-description as a „beggar of heaven" and „secret agent of the King of Kings" is read as a culminating figure of the reconciled life: hidden, cruciform, and ordered toward eschatological communion. This study concludes that reconciliation is a participation in the divine order rather than a moral gesture or a therapeutic release, an eschatological reality in which the soul is reordered to its end. Forgiveness emerges as the concrete visibility of truth, restoring being through love rather than abolishing guilt.

Keywords: reconciliation; Thomistic metaphysics; Augustinian anthropology; evil as privation; justice and mercy

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1. Introduction: the final words of a thief. 2. Socrates and the forgiveness that surpasses philosophy. 3. Job and the bitterness of medicinal justice. 4. Evil as self-destroying and the self as redeemable. 5. Forgiveness and the power that refuses the sword. 6. Conclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE FINAL WORDS OF A THIEF

There is a tragic precision in the refusal to forgive. When Achilles drags Hector's corpse around the walls of Troy, scorning all entreaties for clemency, he does so in the full lucidity of wrath, a wrath whose source lies in grief as much as pride. Hector had slain Patroclus; Achilles' vengeance thus finds its justification in the ancient code of honor, τιμή (*timē*), the measured dignity of the hero. But no measure governs what follows. For twelve days, the body lies desecrated, and only the tears of Priam, stooping to kiss the hands that slew his son, break the cycle. When the old man weeps and Achilles weeps with him, tragedy yields, briefly, to reconciliation.[2] What the Homeric epic anticipates in trembling, the Christian revelation accomplishes in full. The logic of mercy, unanticipated by the logic

2 Homer narrates Achilles' desecration of Hector's corpse as the culmination of a wrath (*mēnis*) that exceeds the bounds of heroic justice (Homer, 2020, *Iliad* XXIV, Butler trans.). His refusal to return the body violates the ritual structure of *timē* (honor) and disrupts the cosmic order, and the poem measures the offence by time: it is "the morning of the twelfth day" before Apollo rebukes the gods for leaving the body unrescued. The tragic arc is reversed only when Priam, invoking *xenia* (guest-friendship) and paternal grief, supplicates his son's killer: he "clasped his knees and kissed the dread murderous hands that had slain so many of his sons," and says of himself that he has "raised to my lips the hand of him who slew my son." What follows is not pardon but shared grief, "the two wept bitterly, Priam as he lay at Achilles' feet weeping for Hector, and Achilles now for his father and now for Patroclus." This moment initiates a proto-liturgical act of reconciliation, restoring balance by the silent dignity of the suffering endured. It is worth noticing what the poem does not do. The gesture is liturgical, Priam kissing the hands that killed his son, and Homer gives it no commentary: the poem shows the limit of retributive order without being able to name what lies beyond it. Achilles' tears are thus a metaphysical concession: wrath yields to recognition of shared finitude, anticipating the Christian conversion of justice through mercy.

of revenge, fulfills justice through love. In this, the metaphysical horizon of reconciliation is first disclosed.

The act of remembering, in its deepest sense, is the reconstitution of an original relation through which being is received. When the penitent thief turns to Christ and pleads, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42), he does not request vindication, reprieve, or even understanding. He invokes not knowledge, but memory: μνήσθητί μου (*mnēsthēti mou*).[3] It is a cry for ontological restoration, a confession of dependency. The thief asks to be included because remembrance by the Son of Man confers ontological renewal and not recognition alone. To be remembered by Him who is *veritas subsistens* is to be gathered back into the truth from which sin had severed him. This act of remembering, made from the gallows of Roman justice, turns punishment into grace and renders the condemned into a citizen of the kingdom.

At first glance, the thief's end seems to stand in absolute contrast to the death of Socrates. The Athenian philosopher, surrounded by friends, drinks the hemlock with composure and words of serene finality. In *Phaedo* 117e–118a, Plato describes Socrates as facing death without lamentation, guided by *logos* and confident in the immortality of the soul (Plato, 1997).[4] The scene is solemn, luminous, and

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3 The thief's invocation must be read through the theological anthropology of memory developed by Augustine. In *Confessions* X (Augustine, 1966), *memoria* is the inner structure of the soul wherein truth dwells. To be remembered by Christ is to be restored in *esse*, held within the personal intentionality of divine knowing. The thief's plea implies this metaphysical dimension: remembrance is ontological, a restoration of disrupted being through the actus *reditus* of the divine Logos. This act transfigures sin, embedding guilt within the deeper structure of redemptive memory.

4 Plato presents Socrates' death as the telos of philosophical existence: a measured ascent of the soul toward the Good. The composure displayed is the fruit of *meletē thanatou*, the practice of death, which manifests philosophy's contemplative orientation. Socrates' λόγος (*logos*; reason) orders his passions and affirms the immortality of the soul. His death is the philosophical prefiguration of Christian martyrdom: it discloses a rational metaphysics of transcendence that is taken up and fulfilled in the Christian Logos.

unbroken by fear. But the contrast is not opposition; it is type and fulfillment. Socratic death is philosophical: governed by reason, free from passion, and void of supplication. The thief's death is theological: burdened by guilt, opened by humility, and dependent entirely upon the gaze of another. Socrates dies well; the thief dies saved. And yet, the dignity of the former prepares the metaphysical grammar of the latter. In both, death becomes a final act of disclosure, one that points beyond the moment to an order in which justice, judgment, and the soul's end converge.

The significance of this study lies in its effort to retrieve, within the terms of classical and Christian metaphysics, the inner structure of reconciliation as the supreme manifestation of mercy without violating justice. The modern fragmentation of these categories, wherein justice becomes retributive exactitude or bureaucratic legality, and mercy is rendered therapeutic or sentimental, obliterates the conceptual space in which punishment may be medicinal and suffering redemptive. Thomas Aquinas, with the full weight of Augustinian inheritance, presents a vision of punishment as *Poena medicinalis* rather than vengeance, a bitter but necessary restoration of moral order through suffering properly received (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 87, a. 7).[5] This account presupposes an anthropology in which the soul retains an intrinsic orientation toward the good, even in its most disfigured state, a teleological potency requiring not denial but reformation. Suffering thus becomes ordered to restoration, provided it is received in truth. Against this metaphysical

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Whereas Socrates dies in accordance with nature rightly understood, the thief dies in dependence on the superabundant grace of Him in whom nature is healed and elevated.

5 Aquinas distinguishes *poena vindicativa* from *Poena medicinalis*. The latter refers to a punishment that, while just, is ordered toward the correction and reformation of the sinner. The soul, even when disordered, retains its orientation toward the good and thus remains susceptible to healing. Punishment is medicinal when it restores the appetite's proportion to reason and reorders the will toward its final cause. This logic presupposes a teleological anthropology in which moral restoration is possible because nature, though wounded, is not destroyed. *Poena medicinalis* thereby manifests justice in the mode of charity.

account stands the modern disjunction between evil and being. In contemporary anthropology, moral failure is often evacuated of ontological consequence, reduced to pathology or systemic imbalance. That evacuation is no longer only a thesis about the person; it has become an administrative practice, and its consequences are now being described in detail. Writing in January 2025, the *Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith* and the *Dicastery for Culture and Education* warn against delegating judgments about persons to systems that process "data, often collected surreptitiously, on an individual's makeup and prior behavior," and insist that "a person's past behavior should not be used to deny him or her the opportunity to change, grow, and contribute to society"; what such systems structurally cannot accommodate, the note says, is "compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and above all, the hope that people are able to change" (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Dicastery for Culture and Education, 2025, §94). Leo XIV draws the political consequence: where such delegation becomes routine, "compassion, mercy and forgiveness — understood not as mere appearances but as real political actions — gradually disappear from view" (Leo XIV, 2026, §103). Neither text is invoked here as an authority settling a philosophical question. They are cited because they state, with unusual exactness, the contest this article enters: whether the disappearance of mercy from the adjudication of persons is a loss of something real or merely the removal of an inherited sentimentality. The answer turns on what a person is, and specifically on whether a person's worst act is a constituent of what he is. Aquinas maintains that evil is a *privatio boni debiti*, the absence of a due good, and so neither a positive entity nor a rival principle. Evil exists only in a good subject (Aquinas, 2018, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, c. 11).[6] It parasitizes the good and dissolves by

6 The chapter is headed "*Quod subiectum mali est bonum.*" Its governing sentence is "*omne igitur malum in bono aliquo est,*" every evil is in some good. It reflects the principle that being and goodness are coextensive (*ens et bonum convertuntur*). Evil cannot

its own internal deficiency. Thus, sin, though real, possesses no ontological density of its own; its persistence is made possible only by the goodness it deforms. Reconciliation, so understood, annihilates evil through the reordering of the will and the reintegration of the soul into its proper finality. Mercy, then, heals the separation that sin introduces into the structure of being.

The governing problematic of this inquiry is the metaphysical concealment of reconciliation in a moral order dominated either by punitive legalism or by sentimental absolution. Both alternatives fail to grasp the depth of Aquinas's metaphysical realism, in which punishment and mercy are mutually implicative. Reconciliation requires that evil be taken with full seriousness: that it is confessed, endured, and transfigured. Aquinas's doctrine of evil as *privatio boni* (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 48, a. 1),[7] and his claim that evil arises by the failure of a good cause to operate according to its nature (Aquinas, 2003, *De Malo* q. 1, a. 3),[8] form the philosophical

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possess substance; it exists only as a privation of the good in a nature ordered to form. Accordingly, evil is a deficiency, a deformation parasitic upon a prior act of creation, and not a rival metaphysical principle. This internal poverty of evil ensures that reconciliation is the ontological restoration of what ought to be. Grace enters the wound and reorders the subject toward its end.

7 Aquinas identifies evil as *privatio boni debiti*, the privation of a good due to a nature. This concept presupposes that every nature is defined by its form, and thus evil is the absence of form where it should be. Because the potency of a subject remains, the capacity for good is not extinguished by sin. Evil's presence is thus marked by a hollowing out of ordered being. Reconciliation, accordingly, draws the subject back into the actuality of its proper form. The logic is restorative: to reconcile is to heal the internal relation between act and form, substance and end.

8 The article, "Is Good the Cause of Evil?" (Regan trans.), is the right one for the claim, and the locator matters: q. 1, a. 1 asks whether evil is an entity, and a. 2 whether there is evil in good; only a. 3 takes up causation. Aquinas argues there that evil has no cause of its own but follows on a deficiency in a good cause, so that it enters the world as an accidental consequence of an agency that fails of its own nature rather than as anything positively intended. The point is worth pressing. If evil had a proper cause it would have a proper nature, and the account of it as privation would fail; the doctrine of privation and the denial of a *per se* cause stand or fall together. This safeguards divine simplicity

core upon which a theology of reconciliation may be built. Within such a metaphysics, punishment purifies the person. Mercy does not ignore the wound; it heals it by truth.

This article unfolds as a fivefold reflection on reconciliation: first, through the noble death of Socrates as a typological precursor; second, through the suffering of Job as interpreted by Aquinas, in which punishment becomes purgative and ordered to justice; third, through the metaphysical logic of evil as self-destructive, thereby revealing the possibility of grace; fourth, through historical exempla, namely Alessandro Serenelli, Mehmet Ali Ağca, and the Church's reckoning with the Galileo affair, as concrete enactments of forgiveness; and finally, through the words of Jacques Maritain, who describes himself as a beggar of heaven, a secret agent of mercy disguised in the garb of this world. In this final figure, reconciliation is dramatized: lived in tension, humility, and hope. The thief's plea, "Remember me," becomes the archetype of the soul's return to order through surrender. In that remembered gaze, sin is judged and embraced; suffering is borne and redeemed; and justice is fulfilled in the charity of truth. A helpful contemporary clarification of Aquinas's Job-reading is that it turns on a precise thesis about the moral–metaphysical structure of suffering: as Harm Goris observes, Aquinas treats Job as a "Scholastic disputation (*disputatio*)" over whether "temporal adversity is not the proper punishment of sins" (Goris, 2020, 161). This claim situates the present inquiry at the methodological border between philosophy and theology: it concerns not only biblical meaning but also the metaphysical intelligibility of how temporal evil can be ordered toward a final end without turning into retributive equivalence. While this study draws on Augustinian and Thomistic sources, it engages them as philosophically articulated accounts of being, causality, and moral

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and the goodness of creation while preserving the real moral weight of human freedom. Reconciliation therefore becomes a metaphysical necessity: only the restoration of the deficient will to its proper operation resolves the disorder that evil introduces.

order. The claim that reconciliation constitutes an ontological restoration is therefore advanced within philosophical anthropology, albeit one open to theological illumination rather than insulated from it. Two limits should be declared at the outset, since the argument is weaker than it may appear and stronger where it matters. This article does not show that reconciliation requires theological premises to be intelligible; it shows only that the account of the person it presupposes is available to philosophical anthropology, and that positions denying that account cannot supply what reconciliation is ordinarily taken to mean. Nor does it adjudicate between the Augustinian and the Thomistic idioms on which it draws, which diverge in ways that would matter to a study of either author for his own sake, but which converge on the single thesis at issue here.

Conversely, it would be a mistake to think this border position is idiosyncratic. Realist phenomenology likewise treats moral conversion as concerning the being of the person rather than merely subjective states or external acts. Dietrich von Hildebrand analyzes moral evil as a disorder in the person's relation to value and describes moral renewal as the re-ordering of the person toward what is objectively good for the person (Hildebrand, 2020, 430–476). "True love will always concern itself with this objective measure of the true good for the beloved" (Hildebrand, 2020, 62).

2. SOCRATES AND THE FORGIVENESS THAT SURPASSES PHILOSOPHY

If reconciliation is the ontological restoration just described, the first question is whether unaided reason can reach it. Greek tragedy is the place to test this, because it takes injury with entire seriousness and still cannot heal the wound. *Philoctetes*, abandoned on Lemnos because of a wound that stank and bled, was discarded out of necessity rather than forgotten through injustice. His pain was acknowledged only when prophecy required his return, not when fraternity demanded his care. His reentry into the war was functional, not

reconciliatory. Though he fought and fulfilled the condition for Troy's fall, no inner healing occurred. The wound was never transfigured. Τιμή (*timē*; honor) was restored by utility, but the ontological disorder, the split between the self and those who abandoned him, remained unresolved. Greek tragedy arrests at this limit: justice, in the absence of mercy, becomes a suspended gesture, poised over a void it cannot fill.[9]

Socrates stands at the apex of that classical dignity. In his death, there is no bitterness, no invective, no vengeance. In the *Phaedo*, he embodies μελέτη θανάτου (*meletē thanatou*; practice of death), in which the philosopher, having purified the soul from bodily passions, meets his end with serenity. "The one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death," he teaches (Plato, 1997, *Phaedo* 64a).[10] His final actions, drinking the hemlock, continuing dialogue, and remembering a votive debt, reveal an ordered ascent. His death is an affirmation of λόγος (*logos*; reason) as the soul's ordering principle and as the principle

9 The hero is bitten by a viper, and the wound, "a dreadful nauseous ranckling wound" that "eat throw his foot," gives off so offensive a smell that the Greek commanders "expose him in the wilds of Lemnos" (Sophocles, 2025, *Philoctetes*, Sheridan trans.). His abandonment is therefore expedient rather than punitive, which is precisely what makes his recall so cold: the prophet Helenus foretells that Troy "would never be conquered except they brought this person," so the army wants the bow and must take the man with it. His reentry into their ranks is a pragmatic necessity rather than a reconciliatory act, and his wound is reappropriated for utility. The moral order of tragedy, governed by fate and heroic suffering, lacks a principle of interior healing or relational restoration; the justice rendered is external and incomplete. Without mercy understood metaphysically as the reintegration of the person into right relation, the tragic order remains capable of nobility but not of reconciliation.

10 Plato describes the telos of philosophy as preparation for death. The philosophical death is an act of detachment from bodily distraction, allowing the soul to return to its proper object, the Forms. Μελέτη θανάτου is an ascent. Socratic death exhibits the perfection of the rational soul within the natural order. Yet it neither assumes nor accounts for the metaphysical breach introduced by sin. The soul may rise, but it is not remade.

of intelligibility that governs the cosmos. He dies in truth, untainted, bearing no charge of guilt.

However, the order Socrates reveals is insufficient. He cannot forgive, because he recognizes no personal injury. He claims innocence, and while his trial was unjust, it did not introduce an ontological fissure into his being. The *logos* he affirms does not admit relational wounds. He can commend justice, obey the law, even accept death as the fate of a philosopher, but he cannot reconcile the guilty because he does not know the guilt that shatters communion. This is the final light of unaided reason: luminous, restrained, noble, but closed. The philosophical order is preserved, but no new being is granted. In his death, nothing is remade.

By contrast, the thief on the cross embodies the dissolution of all external order. Condemned justly, exposed to the elements, disfigured, his final act is a supplication: μνήσθητί μου, Κύριε, ὅταν ἔλθῃς ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ σου (*mnēsthēti mou, Kyrie, hotan elthēs en tē basileia sou*; "Remember me, Lord, when you come into your kingdom") (Luke 23:42).[11] His death bears no symmetry and no philosophical elegance. It is a cry issued from the extremity of guilt, directed to mercy. His condition is not misunderstood; it is confessed. Yet he asks to be remembered. The plea is not rhetorical, nor nostalgic. It is ontological. To be remembered by Christ is to be restored to being, not merely recalled in affection.[12]

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11 The thief's plea presupposes guilt, acknowledges divine kingship, and appeals to memory as covenantal restoration. The invocation of the kingdom (βασιλεία) points to the eschatological order in which the right relation with God is consummated. The thief's request seeks existential redemption.

12 The biblical tradition consistently portrays divine remembrance as effectual action. Genesis 8:1 ("God remembered Noah"), Exodus 2:24 ("God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant"), and Psalm 106:4 ("Remember me, O Lord, when you show favor to your people") exemplify memory as redemptive reconstitution. Within Aquinas's doctrine of divine knowledge as causative, such remembering entails the restoration of the subject into the divine order. The thief's plea is thus a request for ontological re-creation.

This memory, albeit couched in a single imperative, carries its full biblical and metaphysical weight: it is the reconstitution of a broken relation by the act of divine charity. In the Old Testament, for God to "remember" is to act, to restore, to redeem. In Aquinas's metaphysical lexicon, divine knowledge is causal: what God knows, He brings into being. Hence, divine memory is itself an act of restoration. The thief's invocation enters into this causal intentionality. His guilt becomes the matter into which mercy is infused, reordering him by ontological reintegration. His death, like Socrates', is public and juridical, but unlike Socrates, his final word entrusts him to grace.

Aquinas affirms that justice is a stable habit whereby one gives each their due (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 58, a. 2),[13] but mercy, he declares, is the greater virtue, because it gives according to the need of the other (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 21, a. 3).[14] "*Misericordia non tollit iustitiam, sed est quaedam iustitiae plenitudo*": mercy perfects justice.[15] In this light, the thief's petition participates in the *plenitudo iustitiae*, the fullness of justice realized in reconciliation. Divine justice, in this vision, is not exhausted by

13 The definition presupposes a cosmos governed by proportion and right relation. Human justice remains within the domain of measure and equivalence, aimed at restoring balance within the polis. It is a necessary but limited good, incapable of reaching the depths of moral failure or healing existential fracture.

14 Mercy perfects justice by fulfilling its end, giving according to a need that exceeds calculation. Far from a failure of judgment, this discloses a deeper truth: the restoration of the whole through superabundant good. Forgiveness in this schema transcends justice through love.

15 The sentence is Aquinas's own, from the reply to the second objection (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 21, a. 3 ad 2). The difference between mercy and justice lies in the relation to the creature rather than in God: mercy gives what justice does not owe, and so restores the creature's ordered relation to its final cause. The formulation is careful. Aquinas does not say that mercy exceeds justice, which would leave the two in competition, but that it fills justice out, which makes mercy the completion of the same act rather than a second and softer one. This is what secures mercy's ontological seriousness: it is the fullest actualization of divine rectitude, not a relaxation of it.

recompense. It is fulfilled in the restoration of the soul to its proper end: communion with the good.

Moreover, this restoration is possible only through analogy. Human and divine mercy are not univocal; divine mercy is an act rooted in God's own essence. Aquinas insists that God stands under no obligation to what is outside him: "*licet Deus hoc modo debitum alicui det, non tamen ipse est debitor, quia ipse ad alia non ordinatur, sed potius alia in ipsum*" (although God in this way renders each thing its due, he is not himself a debtor, since he is not ordered to other things, but rather they to him) (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 21, a. 1 ad 3).[16] Divine justice is not extrinsically measured but internally ordered by the perfection of God's will. In this ordering, mercy emerges as the highest realization of justice, restoring the creature to that from which it fell by fulfilling justice superabundantly through love. It is in this superabundance that the thief is remembered as he is remade.

To speak of forgiveness as the highest truth is to speak analogically. For in God, justice is the perfect rectitude of His will, ordering all things to their ends. Human justice operates under the species of either *commutative* or *distributive* justice, rectifying inequality among persons or allocating goods according to desert. But in God, as Aquinas teaches, justice transcends these divisions: it consists in the very act by which God renders to each creature its proper place in the order of creation (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 21, a. 1).[17] In this light, forgiveness is not merely a restoration of ex-

16 Aquinas articulates that God owes nothing to creatures by obligation, but by the free ordination of His will. Divine justice is not reactive or compensatory; it is the eternal rectitude of the divine will ordering each thing to its end. This makes room for mercy as justice's highest act, not its exception. What appears divided in human terms, punishment and pardon, is in God a single act of ordering.

17 Aquinas distinguishes divine justice from its human analogues. While human justice is commutative or distributive, resting on reciprocity or proportion, divine justice is the eternal act of ordering all things to their proper end. This justice flows from the essence of God. Forgiveness, within this divine order, is the restoration of right being through the gratuitous gift of merciful ordering.

ternal order, but a reintegration into being itself, an act in which divine justice and mercy coincide not dialectically, but identically in the single act of love.[18]

Socrates teaches us how to die nobly; the thief, how to die reconciled. The former orders the soul to truth; Truth himself reorders the latter. One dies without accusation, the other under condemnation. Even so, only one is promised paradise. Forgiveness does not merely follow guilt; it transfigures it. Christ's act of remembering creates forward rather than looking back. It is ontological, not psychological. To be forgiven is to be recreated in justice fulfilled through mercy. Such is the metaphysical act that Socrates, for all his wisdom, could not imagine. Yet it is his wisdom that prepares the ground, by training the soul in death, for the mercy that grants it life.[19] This insistence that forgiveness presupposes rather than abolishes judgment finds a precise parallel in contemporary philosophy of memory. Paul Ricoeur argues: "The fault is the existentiell presupposition of forgiveness" (Ricoeur, 2004, 460). He further maintains that "the power

18 Asking whether charity is friendship, Aquinas answers with Aristotle that not every love has the character of friendship, but only the love that is joined with benevolence, by which we will the good of the one loved (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 23, a. 1). Charity is friendship with God on those terms, a relation presupposing likeness and union, and mercy as a work of charity restores the creature to it by overcoming the breach sin introduces. The article carries a further clause that bears directly on the thief: charity, "*quae maxime est amicitia honesti, se extendit ad peccatores, quos ex caritate diligimus propter Deum,*" extends to sinners, whom we love out of charity for God's sake. The friendship is therefore not withheld until the sinner has ceased to be one, which is precisely what the thief's petition assumes. His plea functions as an act of participatory desire: to be known, loved, and reordered by divine intimacy.

19 Asked whether God's knowledge is the cause of things, Aquinas answers that it is, so that divine knowing is productive rather than receptive: God's act of knowing is not measured by things but measures them (Aquinas, 1952–1954, *De Veritate* q. 2, a. 14, Mulligan trans.). To be remembered by God is therefore to be brought into being or sustained in it, and the thief's plea invokes a forward-creating love rather than a backward glance. Divine memory is re-creative; divine mercy, working through memory, restores the soul to its participation in *esse*.

of the spirit of forgiveness [is] to unbind the agent from his act" (Ricoeur, 2004, 459). On the account defended here, such unbinding is intelligible only because reconciliation effects an ontological re-ordering of the person toward the good, not a merely psychological release or narrative reframing.

3. JOB AND THE BITTERNESS OF MEDICINAL JUSTICE

Socrates could not forgive because he was not guilty; the thief could be forgiven because he was. Neither case settles what to make of the sufferer who is innocent and afflicted nonetheless, and it is against that case that the medicinal account of punishment must prove itself. The Book of *Job* initiates the reader into the paradox wherein justice is a mystery to be entered rather than a problem to be resolved or a doctrine to be defended. Job's protest is born of fidelity. "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). In the midst of devastation, he affirms divine causality. He submits to providence. Yet his submission is not silent. He argues, questions, and laments to remain within the address of divine justice. The drama of Job is thus a purification of the meaning of suffering.[20] Aquinas, in the *Expositio super Iob ad litteram*, interprets Job's complaints not as blasphemy but as evidence of righteousness under trial. Job speaks, he writes, "*per modum quaerentis*" (in the manner of one inquiring), and not because he holds the divine judgment unjust; he objects as disputants do against what others have said, to understand

20 The structure of the Book of *Job* does not follow the logic of divine retribution. From the outset, Job is identified as blameless (Job 1:1), and yet his suffering is permitted. His fidelity amidst suffering foregrounds the metaphysical tension between visible disorder and invisible justice. The prologue frames his ordeal within divine permission, but the drama that follows does not resolve the contradiction through moral explanation. Rather, it exposes the inadequacy of moralism and prepares for a deeper engagement with divine wisdom.

the truth more fully.[21] His questioning thus belongs to *amicitia cum Deo* (friendship with God), the intimacy which dares to ask because it refuses to renounce. Aquinas is explicit that Job wishes neither to contradict divine justice nor to contend against God, "*divinae iustitiae contradicere nolle nec contra Deum velle contendere*."[22]

Further, the suffering of Job, precisely because it is undeserved, reveals the order of divine justice as deeper than retributive equivalence. Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of punishment, one simply penal and the other medicinal. "*Est enim de ratione poenae quod sit contra voluntatem*" (it belongs to the nature of punishment that it be against the will), so that punishment, taken, stands opposed to the good the will seeks.[23] Yet this is not an absolute opposition. The same article records the principle that "*poenae sunt medicinae*" (punishments are medicines), and Aquinas answers it by distinguishing satisfactory punishment, which is voluntarily assumed or patiently borne, from

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21 The phrase *per modum quaerentis*, in the comment on Job 23:4, does more work than it appears to (Aquinas, 2016, 251). Aquinas is not merely excusing Job's vehemence; he is classifying his speech as a genre, since objection raised in order to understand more fully is the ordinary motion of a disputed question. Job's protest therefore belongs to the same order of discourse as a scholastic *quaestio* rather than to complaint, which is the textual ground for reading the book as a *disputatio* (Goris, 2020, 161).

22 The distinction Aquinas draws, commenting on Job 9, is between contradicting divine justice and contending with God about it, and only the first is impiety (Aquinas, 2016, 109). The narrative had already made the point at Job 1:22, where what Job is acquitted of is folly in speech rather than speech itself. Reverent lament survives the distinction; indictment does not.

23 The article asks whether the debt of punishment remains after sin, and its own formulation is "*est enim de ratione poenae quod sit contra voluntatem*": what makes something a punishment is that it runs against the will (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 87, a. 7). The definition is doing more than describing an unpleasantness. If punishment is constituted by opposition to the will, then a punishment freely assumed is, in that respect, less a punishment, which is exactly the move Aquinas makes next: satisfactory punishment "*diminuit aliquid de ratione poenae*," it lessens something of the nature of punishment, being simply voluntary and involuntary only in a certain respect. This is the hinge on which medicinal punishment turns, and it explains why Job's endurance can be purgative without being penal in the strict sense.

punishment so called.[24] Though Job has not sinned in a proximate sense, his suffering can still serve a medicinal purpose by increasing virtue, exposing hidden dependencies, or manifesting divine justice before men and angels. Aquinas's metaphysics does not require guilt to justify suffering; it requires only that suffering be ordered. In this ordering, the good is disclosed more profoundly through it.[25]

This logic is intelligible only through the doctrine of evil as *privatio boni*, the privation of the good. Evil has no essence; it is the absence of a due good in a subject. "*Privatio autem et forma privata in eodem subiecto sunt*" (privation and the form deprived are in the same subject), from which Aquinas concludes that "*omne igitur malum in bono aliquo est*" (every evil, therefore, is in some good) (Aquinas, 2018, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, c. 11).[26] Evil can only exist in a good and is parasitic upon being. It has no power of its own but corrupts through the weakness of secondary causes. "*Malum autem non agit nisi virtute boni*" (evil does not act except by the power of the good)

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24 The principle that "*poenae sunt medicinae, ut dicitur in II Ethic.*" enters the same article as an objection, drawn from Aristotle, and not as Aquinas's own thesis (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 87, a. 7): the objector argues that since medicine is not given to one already cured, no debt of punishment can remain once sin is removed. Aquinas does not deny the medical analogy; he refuses the inference, on the ground that the debt is discharged by satisfaction rather than by the mere cessation of fault. The distinction matters for the reading of Job offered here. Not all suffering answers to a proximate fault, and suffering can heal, instruct, or purify without being the payment of a penalty.

25 In applying this doctrine to Job, Aquinas interprets his suffering as medicinal rather than penal. Though Job is not guilty, his endurance serves the ends of divine justice by manifesting the steadfastness of the just and revealing the inscrutable wisdom of God. Suffering, in this reading, becomes a modality of participatory purification rather than a mere consequence.

26 The chapter, "*Quod subiectum mali est bonum*," formulates the principle that evil exists only as a privation in a good subject: "*omne igitur malum in bono aliquo est.*" Since being is convertible with good, all that exists participates in goodness; evil, then, can only exist as a defect within that which is good. This ontological account prevents evil from becoming a rival metaphysical principle.

(Aquinas, 2018, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, c. 10).[27] This is why evil, though permitted, cannot prevail; it self-destructs, and in doing so reveals the stability of the good it attacks. From this, Aquinas concludes that the suffering of the innocent participates in the divine ordering of being rather than marking an error within the moral order. Job is justified by vision. "*Auditu auris audivi te, nunc autem oculus meus videt te*" (Job 42:5).[28] Aquinas reads the seeing as a fuller knowing, "*idest plenius te cognosco quam prius*," on the analogy that what is seen is known more certainly than what is heard. He assigns the advance to the affliction and the divine revelation together. Job turns from hearing to seeing, from assent to encounter, and his suffering is thereby reabsorbed into order rather than explained away.[29] The whirlwind does not answer Job's questions; it dissolves them in the vision of wisdom.

Subsequently, Job's final restoration, in double possessions, renewed health, and reconciled kin, is a transfiguration. It signs

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27 The chapter is headed "*Quod causa mali est bonum.*" The phrase "*malum autem non agit nisi virtute boni*" affirms that evil has no intrinsic force; it acts only parasitically upon the good. The verb matters. Aquinas says that evil does not act (agit) except by the power of the good, which is a claim about causality rather than about conflict: evil has no efficacy of its own to bring to a contest. He introduces the sentence as already settled, "ut probatum est," and uses it as a premise for the stronger conclusion of the chapter, that the cause of evil is itself a good. This incapacity for autonomous causality ensures that evil, even when permitted, ultimately reveals the superabundant stability of the good that permits it.

28 The verse, lemmatised from the Vulgate, turns on a contrast of senses rather than of faculties, hearing against sight, and Aquinas takes the contrast to mark degrees of certainty in knowing rather than the acquisition of something not known before (Aquinas, 2016, 417).

29 Commenting on Job 42:5, Aquinas reads the seeing as "*plenius te cognosco quam prius*," a fuller knowing, and attributes the advance to two causes together, the affliction and the divine revelation (Aquinas, 2016, 418). The reading needs handling with care, because Aquinas does have Job confess a fault, namely having spoken beyond his knowledge. The vision is therefore not a substitute for repentance but its condition: on this reading the more fully one considers divine justice, the more fully one sees one's own fault, so that growth in knowledge and contrition are a single movement rather than alternatives.

the deeper rectitude restored in him. As Aquinas explains, Job's restoration reveals a divine order. He is not rewarded as one who was right; he is drawn more deeply into the mystery of one who remained faithful within unknowing.[30] The justice of God does not transact; it transfigures. It gives suffering place and proportion within a cosmos governed by wisdom. Job becomes the prefigurement of Christ, whose suffering likewise bore no guilt, but was ordered to the healing of the world. "By his bruises we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). In Job, suffering ceases to be absurd. It becomes metaphysically intelligible as the bitter draught that restores the soul to communion with being. Thus, the Book of Job is not a theodicy but a doxology. It does not solve the problem of evil; it opens it to praise. In Aquinas's reading, Job's final silence signifies assent rather than defeat. He speaks no more because he has seen. Justice remains, but it has been deepened into mercy. And mercy, far from negating justice, brings it to fulfillment.[31]

4. EVIL AS SELF-DESTROYING AND THE SELF AS REDEEMABLE

Job's affliction could be ordered to a good only because evil is the kind of thing that admits of being so ordered. That premise has now done work twice, in the account of medicinal punishment and in the reading of Job, and it must be argued in its own right before

30 Commenting on Job 42:10, Aquinas is careful about what the restoration does and does not show (Aquinas, 2016, 421). Job "did not direct his hope to recovering temporal prosperity but to attaining future happiness," and the Lord restored the temporal goods over and above what was hoped for; the doubling is therefore an overflow rather than a settlement. Aquinas adds that Job's own prayer and penitence obtained the lifting of divine anger from his friends, which is why the restoration reads as a restored communion before it reads as a recompense.

31 Aquinas's reading of Job resists moral minimalism. His exegesis reveals that justice in God is consummated in ordering all things, suffering included, to their proper end. The final silence of Job is thus a gesture of contemplative assent to the mystery of the divine providence, in which mercy is the perfection of justice, not its negation.

more weight is placed on it. Evil enters the metaphysical order as a parasite. It possesses no essence, no act, no positive intelligibility. "*Malum enim… nihil est aliud quam privatio eius quod quis natus est et debet habere*" (For evil… is nothing else than the privation of what one is by nature and ought to have) (Aquinas, 2018, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, c. 13).[32] As privation, evil inheres only in that which is good; it is not its own genus, nor does it offer an alternative order. It is the un-being of being and the deformation of form. Accordingly, evil "*non potest esse per se existens: cum non sit essentiam habens*" (cannot exist by itself, since it has no essence), and its subject is therefore a good (Aquinas, 2018, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, c. 11; cf. Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 48, a. 3).[33] Every manifestation of evil is the trace of a violated good, and every trace points beyond itself to the metaphysical plenitude it distorts.[34]

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32 The chapter is headed "*Quod malum habet aliquam causam.*" The definition just quoted is grammatically negative but not argumentatively weak, and the weight falls on *privatio* rather than on the negation. A privation is an absence measured against a nature, so that the word itself carries the standard whose failure it reports: blindness in a stone is nothing at all, blindness in an eye is a loss. The chapter's governing claim depends on exactly this: evil has no cause *per se*, "*etsi malum non habeat causam per se*," yet must have one *per accidens*, precisely because a privation presupposes the nature it deprives. Phillip Cary reaches the same conclusion from the Platonist side and in the same vocabulary, describing the will's capacity to cling to what makes it miserable as "not freedom but weakness, defect, and instability; this is not the soul's autonomy but its vulnerability to privation, loss, and misery" (Cary, 2008, 16).

33 The parallel article is headed "*Utrum bonum sit subiectum mali*," and its conclusion is "*relinquitur ergo quod subiectum mali sit bonum.*" The claim is load-bearing and easy to read past. If evil can exist only in a good subject, then the more thoroughly a thing is corrupted the less of it remains to corrupt, and a corruption carried to completion would yield not maximal evil but simple non-existence. Evil therefore has a ceiling it cannot pass, and the ceiling is set by the good on which it depends.

34 The convertibility of being and goodness makes deviation from the good a metaphysical deficiency rather than a difference of kind. The point is historical as well as conceptual. Peter Brown shows that what Augustine "would come to reject most forcibly" in the Manichaean system was precisely its picture of evil as an active invading power before which the good was "essentially passive," and that the Platonist alternative he adopted held instead that "the power of the Good always maintained the initiative" (Brown, 2000,

Accordingly, this structure renders evil intrinsically unstable. It cannot persist, for it has no principle of self-coherence. It is a disorder within order, a resistance within teleology, incoherence within intelligibility. Its being is borrowed, and its activity corrosive. Aquinas asserts that "*malum autem non agit nisi virtute boni*" (evil does not act except by the power of the good) (Aquinas, 2018, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, c. 10).[35] Evil ends through its own ontological insufficiency. It consumes the good on which it depends and thus undermines its own condition of existence. Evil, therefore, is self-annihilating.

Nonetheless, this same structure reveals something more radical: that the human self, damaged by sin and evil, is not condemned to destruction, but remains redeemable. Precisely because evil has no positive essence, it cannot definitively define the self. The image of God, *imago Dei*, in the soul may be obscured but not eradicated. This is why grace is restorative. It does not create *ex nihilo* anew; rather, it heals what remains, then elevates what is fallen, and fulfills what is distorted. "*Gratia… dicitur agere in animam non per modum causae efficientis, sed per modum causae formalis*" (grace acts on the soul not as an efficient cause but as a formal cause) (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 110, a. 2).[36] That the disfigurement is real and yet never total is the whole of what the argument requires, and

41, 90). Privation is thus not a softening of the doctrine of evil but the refusal of a rival god, and the doctrine was won against a live opponent rather than inherited as a formula.

35 The claim is stronger than it appears. It says not merely that evil is weak, but that every energy evil deploys is borrowed, so that the more vigorously a corruption acts the more completely it testifies to the vitality of what it corrupts. An evil perfectly successful would have destroyed its own instrument.

36 Cary draws out what follows for freedom: "This does not mean grace compels us to do anything against our will, but rather that it changes our will, making us willing where before we were unwilling," and God "makes this inward change in us not by the external force of coercion, but by the inner power of his own beauty" (Cary, 2008, 16). Formal causality is what allows grace to be irresistible without being coercive: it does not overpower the will from outside, it constitutes the will from within. *Confessions* X.27 states the same interiority in the language of prayer (Augustine, 1966): "You were within me, but I was outside of myself."

the conclusion is not reached by metaphysical analysis alone. Leo XIV arrives at it from moral experience: even where "persons dehumanize themselves and bring about tragedy, a small light continues to shine within humanity, one that can be rekindled, with God's grace, along paths of conversion and reconciliation" (Leo XIV, 2026, §121).

Because evil cannot eliminate being, the soul remains ordered to the good by nature and thus capable of restoration by grace. The *participatio entis* (participation in being) is not extinguished by sin; it is darkened, but remains. For Aquinas, to be is already to be ordered toward the good, and therefore every being, by virtue of its essence, tends toward perfection.[37] The evil-doer remains a creature of God, and his very sin, by negation, reveals the orientation he violates. Sin, as deviation, presupposes a norm of good.[38]

The recovery of the self, then, is the inward reconstitution of its order, its *ordo amoris* or order of love. Augustine defines virtue itself in these terms: the brief and true definition of virtue is *ordo amoris* (Augustine, 2008a, *De civitate Dei* XV.22).[39] This love is a structure,

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37 The soul is metaphysically conserved even in sin, and this is what makes restoration rather than replacement the shape of redemption (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 105, a. 5). Cary states the consequence exactly: "Though our free will can (through its own fault) be brought into captivity to carnal desires, it cannot simply be eliminated. We are always free enough to turn back to the Light with God's help" (Cary, 2008, 17). Give up the conservation and the doctrine of reconciliation reduces to re-creation, which would entail that the person forgiven is not the person who sinned, and so that nothing had in fact been forgiven.

38 "*Omne agens agit propter finem*," every agent acts for the sake of an end (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 1, a. 6). The premise here does the work of an argument. If every agent acts for an end, and every end is sought under the aspect of the good, then the sinner's act is not evidence of an appetite for evil as such but of an appetite for good misdirected. Sin is therefore parasitic upon the very orientation it violates, which is why it admits of reordering and not merely of penalty.

39 The Latin, "*definitio brevis et vera virtutis ordo est amoris*," will not support the looser rendering sometimes met with, "order is the condition of love." *Definitio* is the subject, *virtutis* the genitive it governs, and *ordo amoris* the predicate: what is being defined is virtue, and the definition given is the order of love. The distinction is not pedantry, because the whole argument turns on it. If virtue is the ordering of love, then vice is love

the right alignment of goods in the soul according to their ontological rank. Aquinas adopts this axiom to establish that every virtue and vice presupposes a certain ordering or disordering of loves (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 28, a. 4).[40] Healing, therefore, is not merely psychological restoration but metaphysical realignment. Grace rectifies the will by restoring its finality; it reclaims human nature.[41]

Thus, the self is redeemed by the transfiguration of evil. Evil, having no stability of its own, is made to serve a higher providence. "*O felix culpa… quae talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem*" (O happy fault… that merited such and so great a Redeemer) (*Exsultet*, Paschal Vigil).[42] The paradox of redemption is that evil, which cannot persist

misdirected, and the work of grace is accordingly rectification rather than replacement. Augustine draws the practical form of the phrase from the Song of Songs, "*ordinate in me caritatem*," "Order charity in me," read as the prayer of the *City of God* on pilgrimage; the chapter itself makes the citation, and Brown discusses it (Brown, 2000, 325).

40 Aquinas incorporates Augustine's structure of love as the basis of moral distinction, and in doing so inherits a claim about the will rather than about the law: what distinguishes virtue from vice is the ranking of the goods loved, not the quantity of love expended. This is why the same passion can belong to either.

41 In the treatise on grace, grace as healing (*sanans*) is distinguished from grace as elevating (*elevans*) (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, qq. 109–114). The distinction is what keeps reconciliation from dissolving into either of two inadequate models. Against a merely medical account, grace elevates a nature that could not have reached its final end even unwounded; against a merely additive account, it heals a nature that is genuinely wounded and not simply incomplete. Reconciliation requires both operations, which is precisely why it cannot be reduced to moral repair.

42 The liturgy's paradox is not that the fault was good but that it was permitted within an order capable of turning it to a greater good; meruit is said of the culpa only by extrinsic denomination, and the liturgy would be incoherent if it were not. The *Exsultet* is anonymous, and the attributions to Ambrose or Augustine that circulate with it are not sustained; what is Augustine's is a separate and much shorter thing. He wrote verses for the paschal candle and quotes them himself in the same chapter that gives the definition of virtue used above: "I once put this idea into a little hymn to the paschal candle" (Augustine, 2008a, *De civitate Dei* XV.22). The convergence is worth naming, since it means the ordering of love and the goodness of the created thing loved are made in one breath rather than assembled from two places. Peter Brown renders the verses "Those things are Yours, O God. They are good, because You created them. None of our evil is

in being, becomes the occasion for the self's return to being through grace. Where evil abounds, grace abounds more, fulfilling justice in the divine economy, where judgment becomes the prelude to mercy.

5. FORGIVENESS AND THE POWER THAT REFUSES THE SWORD

If the self remains redeemable, the question becomes what act redeems it, and where that act can be seen. To forgive is to submit judgment to a higher order of truth. It is not to forget, and it is not to deny the reality of injustice. Wawrykow's account of Aquinas's Job-reading makes this "higher order" explicit by separating final from temporal reckoning: Aquinas "disentangles the temporal fortunes of a person from the moral or personal worth of that person" (Wawrykow, 2020, 249). The ontological weight of reconciliation, therefore, cannot be measured by outward reversal of suffering; rather, Job's endurance manifests that he "sought nothing other than God himself as his reward" and "merits eternal life" (Wawrykow, 2020, 245). Reconciliation, on this reading, refers to the re-ordering of the person toward God as the end, a restoration whose fullest disclosure is eschatological rather than circumstantial. When Christ commands Peter in Gethsemane, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52), He is not instituting pacifism but unveiling a metaphysical law: violence perpetuates itself because it is its own principle. Forgiveness breaks this cycle by transfiguring justice. The power that refuses the sword is not weakness; it is the greatness of mercy rendered luminous in humility. Aquinas, following Augustine, holds that "*misericordia est alienae miseriae in nostro corde compassio, qua utique, si possumus, subvenire compellimur*" (mercy is heartfelt compassion for another's misery, by which we are impelled to help him if we can), and derives the word

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in them. The evil is ours if we love them at the expense of Yourself" (Brown, 2000, 325). Evil is located in the disorder of the lover, never in the goodness of the thing loved.

itself from having "*miserum cor super miseria alterius*," a heart made wretched at another's wretchedness (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 30, a. 1).[43] Mercy (*misericordia*) arises from a rational movement of the will toward the good of another as wounded. It presupposes judgment but does not end in condemnation. "*Actus iustitiae potest terminari ad misericordiam*" (the act of justice can be fulfilled in mercy) (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 61, a. 4).[44] Mercy is the interior completion of justice, the form of *aequitas*, measured by the order of love. Forgiveness is thus the exercise of truth, not its abandonment. This is why the reconciled person must first remember. The Greek term ἀνάμνησις (*anamnēsis*; remembrance) designates more than cognitive recall. Its prefix ἀνα- carries the sense of upward motion as well as repetition, and the compound accordingly identifies a raising of what is past: the metaphysical act of drawing what was done into the presence of grace. For Augustine, the act that opens the soul to healing is *confessio*, which Peter Brown renders as "accusation of oneself; praise of God" (Brown, 2000, 169): the wound is named before it is mended.[45] Healing, then, presupposes memory

43 Aquinas takes his definition from Augustine, *De civitate Dei* IX: "*misericordia est alienae miseriae in nostro corde compassio, qua utique, si possumus, subvenire compellimur.*" The etymology he then supplies carries the argument: mercy is so called "*ex eo quod aliquis habet miserum cor super miseria alterius*," from having a wretched heart over another's wretchedness. *Miserum cor* is not sentiment but a structural claim about where mercy is located. The misery of the other is taken into the heart of the one who shows mercy, which is why mercy can be an act of the will and not merely a feeling, and why it presupposes rather than suspends the judgment that recognises the other's condition as misery at all. The *sed contra* had already conceded, with Damascene, that "*misericordia est species tristitiae*," mercy is a kind of sorrow; the *respondeo* shows what that sorrow is for.

44 The formulation belongs to the reply to the third objection, and it completes justice: mercy, as the superior virtue, perfects justice by going beyond strict equivalence toward restoration. The implication is metaphysical: justice pertains to due proportion, but mercy regards the good of the person in his vulnerability.

45 *Confessio* in Augustine carries two senses at once, self-accusation and praise, and the doubling is the point: the same act that indicates the wound turns the soul toward

transfigured by truth. The past must be lifted into a higher order, where it can be redeemed.

Nevertheless, the claim is not merely theoretical, for this order discloses itself historically. Alessandro Serenelli murdered Maria Goretti in 1902, when he was twenty; the conversion came in prison, years later, and the reconciliation with her mother, Assunta, came later still, when he asked her pardon and received it. He served twenty-seven years and was afterward received by the Capuchins of the Marches as a lay brother, living in their community for twenty-four years. A few years before his death in 1970, he wrote: "And now, with serenity, I await the moment of being admitted to the vision of God, of embracing my loved ones again, of being near my protecting angel and her dear mother, Assunta."[46] His repentance was not sentimentality but metaphysical reconstitution: the disorder confessed, the wound mourned, the person reordered. Forgiveness did not nullify the act; it restored the person within the moral structure that his act had violated.

Subsequently, when John Paul II visited Mehmet Ali Ağca in prison in 1983, two years after the assassination attempt, he spoke of entrusting justice to God. Their embrace witnessed the higher order of reconciliation. The Pope's gesture did not erase suffering; it ordered it toward mercy. Forgiveness was here the concrete visibility of the divine logic: to bear evil in the flesh, without retaliation, and to convert it into communion.

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the one who heals it (Brown, 2000, 169). Healing therefore presupposes memory transfigured by truth rather than memory suppressed. *Anamnēsis*, in this sense, opens the soul to being re-ordered. A Latin sentence widely circulated in this connection, "*nemo curatur a medicina nisi confiteatur vulnera sua*," has been removed from this note: it is commonly attributed to Sermon 329, and that sermon, which is on the martyrs, does not contain it.

46 The naming of Assunta Goretti in the letter's closing sentence is the load-bearing detail, and it is easily passed over (Serenelli, 2017). What Serenelli anticipates is a restored relation to the very persons his act had sundered, the daughter he killed and the mother he asked to forgive him. That is what distinguishes reconciliation from remorse: remorse terminates in the agent, reconciliation in the communion he broke.

Even institutional repentance participates in this metaphysical logic. On 31 October 1992, John Paul II received the findings of the commission he had established to investigate the Galileo case and identified the error at its root. He did not undo the tribunal; he located its failure within the reconciliation of reason and revelation. "The error of the theologians of the time, when they maintained the centrality of the Earth, was to think that our understanding of the physical world's structure was, in some way, imposed by the literal sense of the Sacred Scripture." (John Paul II, 1992, 471).[47] This was not an act of modern accommodation, but of metaphysical humility: a recognition that truth exceeds method and that divine wisdom cannot be reduced to human certainty.[48] Such gestures do not constitute moral performances in the theatrical sense, and they are not sentiments of magnanimity. They instantiate a metaphysical enactment, a participation in the divine economy in which the order of being is reclaimed through a voluntary descent into the disorder of sin, not by absorption, but by conversion through charity. Forgiveness, therefore, is the highest remembering: a memory that holds the wound in truth and refuses to retaliate. The one who forgives does not erase the crime; he enters its darkness to bear it differently. To do so is to imitate God, not merely in moral likeness but in ontological form: *imitatio Dei* is the pattern through which mercy restores justice and the humble are transfigured into agents of divine order. Aquinas's

47 The sentence is framed with care, and the care is the point. The error is ascribed to "the theologians of the time" rather than to the Church as such, and its content is an error about scriptural hermeneutics rather than about astronomy. What is retrieved is therefore a principle governing the limits of a method, not a verdict reversed, which is why the act belongs to the order of reconciliation rather than to that of correction.

48 "*In humilitate consistit perfectio virtutis,*" in humility consists the perfection of virtue (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 161, a. 5, ad 4). Aquinas here asserts that humility perfects virtue. Because humility aligns the soul with the truth of its dependence, it becomes the interior disposition necessary for the exercise of charity, justice, and mercy. Reconciliation, in this light, is impossible apart from humility, for the proud soul will never enter the logic of divine mercy.

interpretation of Job allows this "highest remembering" to be specified as a work of reconciliatory mediation rather than mere moral sentiment: Joseph Wawrykow notes that, for Aquinas, "Job merited the return to God's favor of the three friends," even while Thomas "doesn't likewise assert that Job merits his temporal restoration" (Wawrykow, 2020, 257). Forgiveness thus appears as an efficacious re-ordering of communion, a real reconciliation with persons before it is any change in circumstances. So it exemplifies the ontological priority of restored relation over external recompense.

6. CONCLUSION

The culmination of reconciliation is the quiet radiance of a soul reordered to the divine. It is more than the cessation of enmity, and more even than the mutuality of peace. If the drama of suffering, sin, and punishment reveals the disorder of the fallen cosmos, the gift of mercy discloses its eschatological resolution by elevation. For the Christian, the telos is not merely moral uprightness, but communion: *regnum Dei*, the Kingdom of God, disclosed as the final form of *caritas* and the visibility of grace in time. In his final reflections, Aquinas places the soul's end in the love by which it is drawn into God. "*Caritas diligit Deum super omnia eminentius quam natura*" (charity loves God above all things more eminently than nature) (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 109, a. 3).[49] Charity does not merely complete nature; it elevates it. The *regnum Dei* is received through humility: "*Beati pauperes spiritu, quoniam ipsorum est regnum caelorum*" (Blessed

49 In the reply to the first objection, charity "loves God above all things in a higher way than nature does. For nature loves God above all things inasmuch as He is the beginning and the end of natural good; whereas charity loves Him, as He is the object of beatitude." The contrast is between two formalities under which the same object is loved, not between two objects. Grace therefore elevates without displacing, and this is the structural condition of any account of reconciliation in which the person reconciled remains identical with the person who sinned.

are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven) (Aquinas, 2012, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 69, a. 4).[50] The condition of access to glory is dispossession of the self. Augustine, likewise, renders this eschatology personal. The restless heart, he writes, finds its rest in God alone: "*Inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*" (Augustine, 1966, *Confessions* I.1).[51] Rest is movement transfigured into praise. Confession (*confessio*) for Augustine is the primary gesture of the redeemed rather than the terminal act of the guilty. As Emery de Gaál observes of Ratzinger's early study of Augustine, *confessio* is read as a sacrifice, the unification of man with God in the strength of Christ, a *venire ad lucem*, a coming to the light where the soul is rendered luminous by divine truth.[52]

The foregoing analysis is not merely a historical interpretation of Augustine and Aquinas; it advances a philosophical claim: reconciliation, if it is to be more than moral amnesty or psychological relief, must be understood as an ontological restoration of the person, ordered toward the good. In convergent idioms, realist phenomenology

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50 Aquinas reads spiritual poverty as inward detachment rather than material destitution, which is what allows it to be the condition of access to a kingdom rather than a mere deprivation. The beatitude specifies a dispossession that makes room, and so stands to the *regnum Dei* as capacity stands to gift.

51 The sentence opens "*fecisti nos ad te*," you have made us for yourself. Cary observes that Augustine's whole account of grace turns on this structure of desire, the inward teaching of grace "leading our restless heart to the only thing that will give it eternal rest" (Cary, 2008, 16). *Inquietudo* is accordingly a metaphysical index: the heart's unrest measures the distance between what it is ordered to and what it presently holds, and it would be unintelligible in a being not so ordered.

52 Emery de Gaál (2024, 32–33), expounding Ratzinger's early study of Augustine: "Sacrifice describes for the Church Father unification of man with God. In the form of reconciliation with and return to God, it becomes sacrifice in the strength of the preceding sacrifice Christ had performed… *Confessio* incorporates the dimension of coming to light in divine effulgence: a 'venire ad lucem'." Brown finds the same doubleness in the word itself: *confessio* meant for Augustine "accusation of oneself; praise of God" (Brown, 2000, 169). The two are a single act, which is why confession can be the primary gesture of the redeemed and not the terminal act of the guilty.

holds out the *objective good for the person* against the *merely subjectively satisfying* (Hildebrand, 2020, 62), while hermeneutical philosophy insists that forgiveness *unbinds the agent from the act* without erasing the irrevocability of what has been (Ricoeur, 2004, 459–460). These approaches share the insight that reconciliation fulfills truth and judgment at the level of being itself. The contrast with which this article began can now be stated exactly. What a procedure that scores a person against his record cannot represent is not the warmth of mercy but its object: a self whose orientation to the good survives its own worst act. Leo XIV puts the difference in one line: "For an algorithm, an error is a flaw to be corrected; for a person, however, an error can be a catalyst for profound change" (Leo XIV, 2026, §128). The thesis defended here is what would make that sentence more than a preference, and it is contestable in a precise way. Were evil a positive constituent of the person, the record would be the person, and correction would be the only coherent response to it; the burden would then fall on any account of forgiveness to explain why the accurate description should be set aside. Because evil is privation, the record is precisely what the person is not, and reconciliation is an act of truth rather than an exception to it. Whoever would deny the conclusion must deny that premise, and must then say what the person is made of instead.

The final movement of man is a return made through grace received in gratitude. It is this metaphysical horizon that illumines the enigmatic self-description of Jacques Maritain (1981, 130):

> Who am I? A professor? I don't believe so: I teach out of necessity. A writer? Perhaps. A philosopher? I hope so. But also a type of romantic of justice, ready to imagine, after each battle, that it and the truth will triumph among men. And also, perhaps, a type of water diviner with the head to the earth in order to hear the noise of the hidden sources and of the invisible germinations. And also, and like every Christian, despite and in the middle

> of miseries and failings, and of all the betrayed graces of which I become conscious in the evening of my life, a beggar of heaven, disguised as a man of the world, a type of secret agent of the King of Kings in the territory of the prince of this world, who decides to risk himself like Kipling's cat, which walked alone.[53]

Maritain's words are no rhetorical flourish, but an ontological confession. The Christian life is hidden, cruciform, and interior; yet its true identity is royal because it participates analogically in God's dominion. The *secret agent* is incognito in humility. His power is witnessed. He risks himself in the midst of darkness to bring the memory of light. Thus, the one who forgives, suffers, and prays, "Remember me," is already within the promise of glory. His request is for fulfillment. He seeks to enter mercy. In this, he mirrors the King who reigns from the cross by the gift. The reconciled are not merely pardoned; they are re-ordered. Their pasts are assumed. In their wounds shines the brightness of the truth. And in their humility, the Kingdom is already present.

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53 Maritain's illustration inverts worldly visibility: the agent's hiddenness is a discretion proper to witness. The figure is deliberately comic as well as devout, since a "beggar of heaven, disguised as a man of the world" is a beggar who is in fact an emissary, and the comedy is doing argumentative work. It refuses in advance the triumphalism that a claim about participating analogically in divine dominion would otherwise invite, and so keeps the claim within the order of charity rather than of power.

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