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The Headship of Christ and the Angels: An Ambiguity in Thomas’s Account

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(Received 17 August 2024; revised 16 September 2023; accepted 18 September 2023)

Abstract

The development of Thomas’s teaching on Christ’s headship relies upon the principle of the causality of the maximum: ‘the maximum in a genus is the universal cause in that genus’. This principle appears in the fourth way to demonstrate God’s existence. Applied to the humanity of Christ, Thomas argues that Christ, on account of his perfect fullness of grace, is, according to his humanity, the universal source of grace for all the members of the Church, including the angels. How does this cohere with Thomas’s teaching elsewhere in the *Summa theologiae* that it is only as Word that Christ causes grace in the angels? In this paper, I explore this tension and offer a way of understanding Thomas’s broader approach to the mystery of Christ.

Keywords: angelology; Christology; grace; medieval theology; *Summa theologiae*; Thomas Aquinas

In this paper, I explore a tension that arises in Saint Thomas’s account of Christ’s headship over the angels as it appears in the *Summa theologiae*. Relying on a philosophical principle which has come to be known as the ‘causality of the maximum’ (i.e., that the maximum in the genus is cause in that genus), Saint Thomas argues that Christ, on account of his perfection in grace, is the universal principle of grace according to his human nature.¹ This is true of Christ with respect to ‘all of those who are members of the Church, regardless of time, place, or state’.² This power of transmitting grace constitutes the primary aspect of Christ’s headship.³ Notably, Saint Thomas extends

¹The typical example Saint Thomas gives is of heat. What has the maximum of heat is the cause of all heat. See, for instance, *Summa Theologiae*, 4 vols. (Ottawa: Commissio Piana, 1953), (hereafter *ST*), III, q. 9, a. 2, co.: ‘What is in potency is reduced to act by that which is in act, for it is necessary that what makes other things to be hot itself be hot’. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Latin and French are my own. On the causality of the maximum see V. de Couesnongle, ‘La causalité du Maximum: L’utilisation par Saint Thomas d’un passage d’Aristote’, *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 38 (1954), 433–44 and ‘La causalité du maximum: Pourquoi Saint Thomas a-t-il mal cité Aristote?’ *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 38 (1954), 658–80.

²ST III, q. 8, a. 6, co.

³Arguably, this is the chief aspect of headship. See ST III, q. 8, a. 1, co. St. Thomas names three respects in which the headship of Christ is similar to the natural head: order, perfection, and power. While Christ

Christ's headship to include the beatified angels, who, through their ordering to the supernatural vision of God, are no less members of the Church.⁴ Yet, if Christ is head of the angels according to his humanity, it also seems to follow that he is, in the same capacity, the cause of their grace, which St Thomas suggests in certain texts. In this case, the grace given to the angels in creation would ostensibly find its source in the humanity of Christ. Such a teaching, however, seems to imply a kind of supralapsarianism, according to which the Word would have become Incarnate regardless of humanity's fall – for even before the Fall of humanity, the angels would have received grace (perhaps proleptically as the OT saints did) through the humanity of the *Incarnate Word*.⁵

This raises at least one problem with respect to Thomas's Christology. Saint Thomas famously held that since Scripture only speaks of the Incarnation as a remedy for the sin of humanity, it is better to say that sin is the reason for the Incarnation than to say that the Incarnation would have occurred without sin.⁶ This likely accounts for a key text that seems to *limit* the scope of Christ's human headship with respect to the angels. In treating Christ's judiciary power, Thomas states that Christ is considered the cause of angelic beatitude only according to his divine nature. Besides appearing to contradict texts describing Christ's influence over the angels, this position more fundamentally undermines the principle of the causality of the maximum, upon which St Thomas bases Christ's universal headship. Consequently, Christ's humanity cannot be called the *universal* cause of grace. On the other hand, however, if Christ as human indeed possesses the maximum of grace in the genus of grace, it would follow that he is the cause of grace and glory in all others, including the blessed angels. In this case, it would be possible to posit Christ as human as the cause of angelic grace and glory. Yet, serious modification of Thomas's teaching on the *ratio* of the Incarnation would be required.

is head in all three ways, the first and second aspects clearly correspond to the grace of union and Christ's singular grace, respectively. Thus, it is primarily in relation to the third aspect, the power of causing sense and motion in the members of the body, that Christ is called head – i.e., inasmuch as he bestows grace on all the members.

⁴Saint Thomas is not unique in seeing the angels as subjected to Christ's headship. The teaching has its roots in Scripture (Eph. 2:20–22; Col. 2:10) and in the authority of Dionysius (*Celestial Hierarchy*, ch. 7). Thomas argues for the unity of angels and human beings on the basis of their common supernatural end. See ST III, q. 8, a. 4, ad 2. Since Christ is not only head of wayfarers but also of comprehensors, it follows that he is the head of the blessed angels – for he has the fullness of grace and glory.

⁵Or, as Karl Barth might put it, through the *Logos incarnandus* – i.e., the Word about to be Incarnate. See *Church Dogmatics* IV/2. Of course, the notable difference between the Old Testament saints and the blessed angels is that the former existed after the fall, whereas the latter would not have been redeemed from a fallen state, but would have moved from a state of original grace to glory.

⁶Cf., ST III, q. 1, a. 3: 'For those things which arise from the will of God alone, beyond the due of any creature, cannot be known by us unless it be handed down in Sacred Scripture through which the divine will is known. Wherefore, since in Sacred Scripture the reason [for the Incarnation] is taken from the sin of the first man, it is more fittingly (*convenientius*) said that the Incarnation is ordered by God in remedy for sin, so that, if sin had not existed, the Incarnation would not have occurred. Yet, the power of God is not restricted to this, for, even if sin had not existed, God could still have become incarnate'. While Thomas clearly recognizes that things could have been otherwise (i.e., God could have become Incarnate even without sin), nevertheless, he seems committed to saying no more than what is given to us explicitly in Sacred Scripture.

How ought we to understand the argument for Christ's headship over the angels and, by consequence, Saint Thomas's argument from the causality of the maximum? While a reading of Saint Thomas's argument in *Tertia pars*, qq. 8–12 gives the impression that the philosophical principle of the causality of the maximum has a determinative role (i.e., carrying the force of metaphysical necessity), I will argue that Saint Thomas's treatment of Christ's judiciary power (in ST III, q. 59, a. 6) highlights that the principle is not so much an *a priori* principle – i.e., one from which Saint Thomas's teaching on headship is deduced – but is rather an *a posteriori* explanation of the revealed data – i.e., the fact that the Word became flesh to save humanity from sin. Although Christ in his humanity is the source of grace for all, this is only true in the context of the economy of human redemption. In other words, Christ is primarily the head of those who are capable of being redeemed by grace after having fallen into sin; Christ's headship extends to the angels secondarily, only inasmuch as they are players in the drama of human redemption. From this, I show how, in the realm of the mysteries of faith, Thomas is always careful to use philosophy to illuminate, never to determine, what is fundamentally revealed. In other words, even if metaphysical principles are absolute in the realm of natural reason, their force is relativized in matters pertaining to the highest mysteries of faith.⁷ Here we see an important and concrete way in which philosophy is *ancilla theologiae*.⁸

I. Saint Thomas on Christ as the universal principle of grace

It is necessary to begin with a broader consideration of Saint Thomas's understanding of Christ's headship. According to Saint Thomas, the grace of headship (*gratia capitis*) belongs to Christ as human according to the threefold reason of order, perfection, and power.⁹ Order, because Christ's soul is above all other creatures due to its nearness to the Word through the hypostatic union; perfection, because Christ's soul enjoys the most perfect fullness of grace; and power, because it belongs to Christ to communicate or 'flow' (*influere*) grace to all of his members. The three aspects neatly correspond to the three types of grace Saint Thomas attributes to Christ: the grace of union (q. 2), singular or individual grace (q. 7),¹⁰ and the grace of headship (q. 8).¹¹ In the *Tertia pars*

⁷According to St. Thomas's *Compendium theologiae* Bk I, ch. 2, two truths in particular fall under this category: the divinity of the Trinity and the humanity of Christ. It is helpful to compare the use of Thomas's principle of the causality of the maximum in his account of Christ's perfection with his use of the same principle in his demonstration of God's existence in the fourth way (see ST I, q. 2, a. 3, co.).

⁸In other words, the ambiguity in Thomas's account is a concrete example of his theological method as spelled out in ST I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

⁹ST III, q. 8, a. 1; a. 4, co. This is in distinct contrast to the Franciscan idea of Christ as head primarily according to his conformity to us.

¹⁰See ST III, q. 7, a. 9, co.

¹¹Saint Thomas's enumeration and explanation of these three types of grace can be understood as an explication of John 1:14 and 16, which speak of the Word becoming flesh (order: grace of union), full of grace and truth (perfection: individual grace), from whose fullness we have all received (power: capital grace). See Franklin T. Harkins, 'Christ's Perfect Grace and Beatific Knowledge in Aquinas: The Influence of John Damascene', in *Reading the Church Fathers with St. Thomas Aquinas: Historical and Systematical Perspectives*, ed. by Piotr Roszak and Jorgen Vijgen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), pp. 339–72. Harkins does an excellent job showing how Thomas's doctrine of Christ's grace and beatific knowledge is grounded in a careful reading of John 1:14 and 16.

of the *Summa theologiae*, Saint Thomas provides an account that causally links each of these three aspects: on account of the hypostatic union, whereby Christ's soul is the nearest to the cause of grace, Christ enjoys the greatest perfection of grace¹²; from this fullness or perfection of Christ's individual grace, on account of the metaphysical principle of the 'causality of the maximum', Christ is the cause of grace for all others.¹³ This last aspect, the power to bestow grace to others, is the grace of headship whereby Christ's humanity is rendered the universal principle of grace 'from whom all receive, grace upon grace'.¹⁴

Within the broader context of thirteenth-century scholasticism, Saint Thomas's notion of Christ's headship marks a significant development. Unlike some of his contemporaries, notably, Alexander of Hales and Saint Bonaventure, who, on the basis of the Augustinian dictum that God alone can give grace, conceived of Christ's human headship as, at most, a dispositive cause of grace (i.e., Christ as human disposes or prepares others to receive grace immediately from God through his human prayer, merit, etc.),¹⁵ Saint Thomas places Christ's humanity at the center of the redemptive

¹²This is based on yet another metaphysical principle pertaining to a thing's nearness to its causal source, which is cited in other passages. See III, q. 7, a. 9, co.: 'The nearer a thing is to the flowing cause, the more perfectly it participates in its effects'.

¹³See ST III, q. 7, a. 9, co. In this regard, Saint Thomas will also say that Christ's grace is infinite, see ST III, q. 7, a. 11, co. See also, ST III, q. 7, a. 11, ad 3.

¹⁴ST III, q. 8, a. 1, ad 1 distinguishes between the authoritative and instrumental communication of grace. Only the latter belongs to Christ as human, which nevertheless does not exclude Christ's humanity as an efficient cause of grace. This distinguishes Christ from others who also communicate grace instrumentally.

¹⁵See for example Alexander of Hales, *Doctoris Irrefragabilis Alexandri de Hales Ordinis Minorum Summa Theologica*, 4 vols (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1924–48), Vol III, In1, Tr3, Q1, Ti1 (p. 141): 'It must be said that in Christ, according as he is man, there is grace according as he is head of the Church. In order to understand this, it must be known that the influence of grace is from God either without a medium or through a medium. Without a medium Christ, as God, is immediately the giver of grace by authority and by the proper reason of efficient causality [...] Through a medium Christ, according as he is man, in many ways: for he is a medium by way of faith, by way of merit, by way of desire or prayer, and by way of disposition'. The Halensist proceeds to describe the various ways in which Christ, as human, acts as a medium of grace. Notably, none of these is by way of efficient cause. Rather, in each case, Christ disposes God (through prayer, merit, etc.) to give grace to believers through the Holy Spirit. For the Halensist, grace is communicated only through the Holy Spirit. This is true of Christ's created grace, as well as the grace of others. In this way, the relationship of the Holy Spirit to Christ is in many ways parallel to the relationship between the Holy Spirit and other pure human beings. The created grace of union, 'not only disposes [the human nature of Christ] to knowledge and love of God, but even to the personal unity with God', Vol III, In1, Tr3, Q1, Ti2 (p. 145). For a text which provides a similar distinction in the two ways that Christ is the source of grace, see Bonaventure, see *In III Sent.*, dist. 13, a. 2, q. 1, resp. (*Opera omnia*, Quaracchi, t. 3, 1887, pp. 284–85): 'But the properties, namely of influencing sense and motion, belong to him by reason of the divinity and by reason of the humanity. For to communicate (*influere*) the sense and motion of grace belongs to him in two ways: either through mode of one preparing (*praeparantis*), or through the mode of one imparting (*impartientis*). If through the mode of one preparing, then it belongs to Christ by reason of his own human nature, in which he suffered for us and by suffering satisfied and removed the enmity and disposed [us] for the reception of perfect grace. If through the mode of one imparting or conferring, then it belongs to Christ by reason of the divine nature, who "alone is God, who illuminates pious minds," it is he alone who baptizes interiorly, because "our mind is formed directly by Truth itself," as Augustine often says. – Or to say the same thing in different words, to influence through the mode of meriting belongs to Christ the man; through mode of efficient cause, to Christ God; or to influence as to the remission of the punishment (*poenae*), to Christ the man, as to the remission of fault (*culpa*), to Christ God. And thus,

economy as an instrumental, efficient cause.¹⁶ For Thomas, Christ's humanity does not serve merely to *prepare* others for an otherwise unmediated bestowal of grace immediately from God; instead, his humanity itself mediates grace as its universal principle and source. The philosophical principle of the causality of the maximum, which is essential to the fourth way to God's existence, here bolsters Saint Thomas's understanding of the biblical data which speaks of Christ as head of the Church and the source of grace.¹⁷ Through the perfection of Christ's individual grace (through his 'fullness of grace and truth'), Christ is seen to possess the maximum of grace rendering his human nature the cause of grace in all others.

The contrast between Saint Thomas's teaching and that of his near predecessors and contemporaries is most evident in an image that Saint Thomas borrows from the *Summa Fratris Alexandri*. In the *Summa Fratris*, the Halensist distinguishes the grace of Christ from that of others by likening it to a flame (*flamma*), while likening the grace of others to a coal (*carbo*).¹⁸ Christ's grace is like a flame, not only as it has light in itself but also as it is able to illuminate those around itself; the grace of others, on the other

influence in one way pertains to Christ according to the created nature, in another way according to the uncreated nature'.

¹⁶On Christ's humanity as the instrument of the divinity see Theophil Tschipke, *L'humanité du Christ Comme Instrument de salut de la divinité*, trans. by Philibert Secrétan (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg: 2003) and Gilles Emery, 'Christ, le Médiateur', in *Christus-Gottes schöpferisches Wort: Festschrift für Christoph Kardinal Schönborn zum 65. Geburtstag* eds. George Augustin, Marian Brun, Erwin Keller, Markus Schulze (Freiberg: Verlag Herder GmbH, 2010), pp. 337–55. We see at least the beginning of a shift in Albert, who explicitly denies that the grace of union is created and instead prioritizes the grace of headship first in his *De incarnatione*, tract. 5, q. 2, and later in his commentary on the *Sentences*. See Albert the Great, *In III Sent.*, dist. 13, a. 2, sol. (ed. Borgnet, t. 28, 1894, p. 238a). Here, Albert's account is a bit muddled (for he seems at times to speak as though Christ as human is the source of grace, at other times as if this is restricted solely to the divinity). But he tells us that the head assimilates members to itself 'through something which it communicates, which is like a form'. He continues, 'in this way [Christ] is the head of the blessed and of those existing in grace, to whom he flows something like (*quasi*) a similitude of his own life, both his motion and his sense, in gifts perfecting the intellect and affection (*intellectum et affectum*)'. The immediate context suggests that this is according to Christ's human nature. For Albert, it is not so much his conformity to the members of the body that makes him, as human head, but rather the way in which he, through his humanity, conforms the members of the body to himself.

¹⁷See ST I, q. 2, a. 3, co.: '[T]he maximum in a genus is the cause of all that belongs to that genus, as fire, which is the maximum of heat, is the cause of heat in all that is hot'.

¹⁸The broader context is a treatment of Christ's grace in terms of final, efficient, and formal cause. The treatment of the various luminary bodies arises with respect to efficient causality. This might lead some to think that the Halensist is attributing efficient causal power to Christ's humanity itself. This is not the case, however. Due to the Halensian understanding of the uncreated grace of union, to speak of Christ's grace in terms of efficient causality turns out to be more a statement of the action of the Holy Spirit (who communicates grace to Christ and to others) than that of Christ as human. Thus, to speak of Christ's grace in terms of efficient causality, and therefore in terms of his headship, is to speak of his grace inasmuch as he is conformed to the members of the Church. See *Summa fratris*, Vol III, In1, Tr3, Q1, Ti2 (p. 150): 'For the whole Trinity moves and rules the Church and infuses grace into her, by which she might sense through faith and be moved through charity [...] but according to the humanity, Christ is properly called head because he is related to the Church on account of his conformity to her through grace and nature'. Against an objection that the Holy Spirit is thus constituted as the head of the Church rather than Christ, the Halensist responds: '[A]lthough the influence to the Church of every sense and motion of spiritual grace is from [the Holy Spirit], nevertheless, it does not belong to him to be in conformity of nature with the Church, and, therefore, it is not fitting that he be head, properly, but commonly, or less properly', (*Summa fratris*, Vol III, In1, Tr3, Q1, Ti2 (p. 151).

hand, is like a coal that has light for itself but does not illuminate surrounding bodies. In his *Scriptum* on the *Sentences*, Saint Thomas amends the Halensian image by adding yet another source of light, beyond the flame, which he likens to Christ's grace. This is the light of the sun:

We see that some things have such bodily light so that they glow, as certain worms, rotten wood, and coal; some so that they illuminate others, as the light of a candle; but still others so that every illumination (*omnis illuminatio*) is from them, just as it is with the sun.¹⁹

Saint Thomas goes a step beyond the Halensist by comparing Christ directly to the sun which is the source of every illumination. He concludes:

And so it is with the grace of Christ: for he has grace through which he is perfect in himself, and which flows from him to others: and [this grace] makes some of those to whom it flows co-workers (*cooperatores*) with God, as it says in 1 Corinthians 3:9, and it also flows from him to all, for *from his fullness we all receive*, John. 1:16.²⁰

Saint Thomas's revision of the Halensian image of Christ's grace highlights the notion of Christ as the universal source and principle of all grace.

Saint Thomas will put things more starkly in the *De veritate*, likening the relationship of Christ's humanity to grace to the relationship of God to being: 'And since Christ in some way (*quodammodo*) flows (*influit*) the effects of grace to all rational creatures, thus he is himself in some way the principle of all grace according to his humanity, just as God is the principle of being'.²¹ Later still, in the *Tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, Saint Thomas will explicitly link this argument to the causality of the maximum:

For the soul of Christ received grace in such a way that grace might somehow be transmitted from [his soul] to others. And therefore, *it was necessary (oportuit)* that he possess the maximum grace (*maximam gratiam*), just as fire, which is the cause of heat in everything that is hot, is [itself] maximally hot (*maxime calidus*).²²

Consequently, Christ is head of all who receive grace, 'in every time, place, and state'.²³

Saint Thomas neatly links Christ's power of communicating grace to his individual perfection in grace through the principle of the causality of the maximum, which is, in turn, a result of his soul's propinquity to the Word through the hypostatic union.²⁴

¹⁹See *In III Sent.*, dist. 13, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 1, co.

²⁰See *In III Sent.*, dist. 13, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 1, co.

²¹Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, Leonine edn, Vol. 22, parts 1–3 (Rome: Editori di san Tommaso, 1970–76), (hereafter *DV*), q. 29, a. 5, co. The use of rational (*rationales*) rather than intellectual suggests that here Thomas is considering Christ's headship with respect to humans alone.

²²See *ST III*, q. 7, a. 9, co. Emphasis added.

²³*ST III*, q. 8, a. 6, co.

²⁴For more on how these various principles (i.e., the causality of the maximum and the principle of propinquity) function in Thomas's understanding of Christ's perfection, see Joshua H. Lim, 'The Principle

This more-or-less straightforward causal account of Christ as the universal principle of grace is nevertheless complicated by Christ's relationship to the angels.

2. Christ's headship over the angels

Bolstering the authority of Pseudo-Dionysius is the ample witness of the biblical testimony regarding Christ's headship over the angels.²⁵ As in his treatment of Christ's headship over men, Saint Thomas relies on philosophical principles to illuminate our understanding of what is revealed. But what happens when a given philosophical principle appears to lead to a conclusion that contradicts revelation? Such a contradiction seems to appear in Saint Thomas's account of Christ's headship when compared with his account of Christ's judiciary power. While Christ's headship relies on the causality of the maximum (the angels, too, are recipients of grace and glory in some way through Christ), nevertheless, Saint Thomas's account of Christ's judiciary power seems to strongly qualify this position, insofar as Christ is only the cause of the *accidental* reward of the angels and not the essential reward. In other words, Christ as human is the cause of the joy that accrues to the angels on account of the redemption of humanity, but he is not the cause of their essential reward, i.e., the glory of the angels in beholding the divine essence.

The tension between the universality of Christ's influence, on the one hand, and its restriction to the accidental reward of the angels, on the other, is surprising given the many parallels Saint Thomas's account of Christ's headship over the angels (III, q. 8, a. 4) has with the account of his headship over human beings. The argument for Christ's headship over the angels is based on the same threefold characteristic of headship: order, perfection, and power. Saint Thomas writes:

Christ is the head of this entire multitude [of angels] because he is nearer to God [i.e., order] and participates more perfectly in [God's] gifts – and [he does this] not only more than men, but even the angels [i.e., perfection]; moreover, not only do men receive from his influence [*influencia*] but the angels, too [i.e., power]. *Wherefore the mystical body of the Church is not constituted from men alone but also from the angels.*²⁶

Here again, we see the application of the principle of the causality of the maximum: on account of his nearness to God and the consequent perfection he derives from that

of Perfection in Thirteenth-Century accounts of Christ's Human Perfection', *The International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 24 (2022), 352–79.

²⁵For example, Eph 1:20–23; Col 1:15–20; Heb 2:5. For Thomas's teaching on the angels in general, see Serge-Thomas Bonino, *Angels and Demons: A Catholic Introduction*, *Thomistic Ressourcement Series*, Vol. 6, Trans. by Michael J. Miller (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016). Bonino's work contains an excellent review of the problem of Christ's headship over the angels in Aquinas and the position of subsequent commentators in ch. 11, 'Jesus Christ, Head of Angels', pp. 221–30. See also Bernhard Blankenhorn, *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas*, *Thomistic Ressourcement Series*, Vol. 4 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), pp. 215–48. Thomas quotes Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchies*, ch. 7 in III, q. 12, a. 4, s.c.: '... the highest angels question Jesus and from him learn the knowledge of the divine work for us, and Jesus teaches them immediately (*sine medio*)'.

²⁶ST III, q. 8, a. 4, co., emphasis added.

proximity, Christ's grace is the source of 'influence' not only for human beings but also for the angels. Notably, as Thomas's consideration of Christ's headship pertains primarily to his human nature, it follows that Christ's influence over the angels is related to his human headship.

Naturally, objections arise against the notion of Christ's headship over the angels. First, the Word assumed a human nature not an angelic nature.²⁷ Second, the blessed angels, inasmuch as they enjoy the vision of God as comprehensors, cannot truly be called members of the Church, which is the congregation of the *faithful* (i.e., those who walk by faith, *viatores*). The third objection argues against Christ's headship over the angels on the grounds that the Word was made flesh to give life (*vivificat*) not only to souls but also to bodies, which angels lack. Thus, Christ as human cannot give life to the angels.²⁸

Thomas's several replies to the objections only strengthen the sense in which Christ as human is the source of influence for the angels. To the first objection that Christ does not share in the same nature with the angels, Saint Thomas deems it sufficient to point to the similarity in genus between human beings and angels as the basis for Christ's headship over the angels.²⁹ Though human beings and angels are different in species, nevertheless, they share in the genus of intellectual creatures. To the second objection, that the Church is constituted by the faithful (i.e., *viatores*) and therefore excludes the blessed angels, Saint Thomas highlights Christ's status not only as *viator* but also as *comprehensor*. For Christ, 'as possessing grace and glory most fully', is head of all of the blessed as much as he is head of wayfarers.³⁰ Finally, against the third, Saint Thomas points to the proximity of Christ's soul to God through personal union, which enables his humanity 'to cause something not only in the spirit of men, but also in the

²⁷ST III q. 8 a. 4, arg. 1.

²⁸ST III, q. 8, a. 4, arg. 3.

²⁹ST III, q. 8, a. 4 ad 1. The third objection, namely, that Christ effects change in human bodies, which angels lack, means that Christ, who gives life to human beings, cannot give life to angels. In his reply to the third objection, Saint Thomas states that the humanity of Christ can cause an effect even in angels 'on account of his highest union (*maximum coniunctionem*) to God'. Ambiguously, this is accounted for by an appeal to the power of Christ's spiritual nature (*ex virtute spiritualis naturae*).

³⁰ST III, q. 8, a. 4, ad 2. Notably, this argument underscores the necessity of Christ's earthly beatific vision inasmuch as it enables Christ's humanity to be the source of grace and glory from the first moment of his conception. For more on the soteriological character of Thomas's teaching on Christ's vision see Joshua Lim, 'The Necessity of the Beatific Vision in Christ's Humanity: A Re-Reading of *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 9', *The Thomist*, 86 (2022), 515–42; Joshua H. Lim, "'An Encyclopedic Pico della Mirandola?'" Re-Thinking Aquinas on Christ's Infused Knowledge', *Nova et Vetera* (English edn), 21 (2023), 147–174; Guy Mansini, 'Understanding St. Thomas on Christ's Immediate Knowledge of God', *The Thomist*, 59 (1995), 91–124. For a contemporary Thomist account of Christ's beatific knowledge, see Simon Francis Gainé, *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation and the Vision of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2015); Thomas Joseph White, 'The Necessity of the Beatific Vision in the Earthly Christ', in White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), pp. 236–76; Dominic Legge, *The Trinitarian Christology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 172–86; for a study of Thomas's doctrine, especially from his biblical commentaries see Charles Rochas, *La science bienheureuse du Christ simul viator et comprehensor: Selon les commentaires bibliques et la Summa theologiae de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2019); Harkins, 'Christ's Perfect Grace and Beatific Knowledge in Aquinas', pp. 339–72.

spirit of angels'.³¹ Thus far, Christ appears to be head over the angels in much the same way that he is head over men.

When we turn to Thomas's account of Christ's judiciary power, i.e., 'the power to be the judge of the living and the dead', we find many parallels to the above account.³² Most significantly, as with Christ's headship, Saint Thomas is concerned to attribute judiciary power not only to Christ as Word (the opinion of Chrysostom, among others) but primarily as human.³³ Thomas's argument for judiciary power belonging to Christ as human is explicitly premised on Christ's headship as human. Aquinas writes, 'Christ, in his human nature, too, is head of the whole Church and [...] God subjected all things under his feet. Wherefore, to have judiciary power also pertains to him according to his human nature'.³⁴

On the surface, Saint Thomas's account of Christ's judiciary power over the angels is relatively straightforward. That Christ as human possesses judiciary power over the angels has a foundation not only in the biblical testimony (e.g., 1 Cor 6:3, quoted in the *sed contra*)³⁵ but also in the very logic of Saint Thomas's teaching on Christ's headship. If Christ's headship extends to the angels, then it seems to follow that Christ's judiciary power likewise extends to the angels. And this is just what Saint Thomas says: Christ has judiciary power over the angels because of his nearness to the Godhead; as a result, his soul is filled with 'the truth of the Word of God',³⁶ and, as Dionysius the Areopagite states in the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Christ illuminates even the angels.³⁷

There is, however, at least one fairly obvious reason as to why this might pose a problem. It makes little sense for Christ in his human nature to stand in judgment over the angels who have *already* been judged at the beginning of the world.³⁸ Does Christ in his human nature judge the angels at the beginning of the world? As Saint Thomas proceeds in his response, one detects a creeping ambivalence not evident in Saint Thomas's earlier remarks. The angels are subject to the judgment of Christ, he tells us, 'on account of those things they do for men (*ratione eorum quae circa homines operantur*), of whom Christ is, in a special way, the head'.³⁹ Notably, Christ's judiciary power over the angels is here described as arising only indirectly, inasmuch as the angels act for and around human beings *of whom Christ is head*. In other words, it is primarily because of Christ's headship *of human beings* that he can be called the judge of the angels.⁴⁰

³¹ST III, q. 8, a. 4, ad 3.

³²ST III, q. 59, a. 1, s.c. I am indebted to John Goyette for first bringing this text to my attention.

³³ST III, q. 59, a. 1.

³⁴ST III, q. 59, a. 2, co. See also ST III, q. 59, a. 2, co. Throughout the *corpus* of the article as well as in the various replies to the objections, Saint Thomas repeatedly refers back to the arguments we have seen him use in establishing Christ's headship based on the principle of propinquity.

³⁵ST III, q. 59, a. 6, s.c.

³⁶ST III, q. 59, a. 6, co.

³⁷Cf., ST III, q. 59, a. 6, co.: 'Wherefore he also illuminates the angels as Dionysius says in ch. 7 of the *Celestial Hierarchy*. Thus, it belongs to him to judge them'.

³⁸ST III, q. 59, a. 6, arg. 1.

³⁹ST III, q. 59, a. 6, co.: '... on account of those things which are done concerning men, of whom Christ is in some special way the head'.

⁴⁰There is scriptural warrant for such a view (Heb 1:14, which speaks of angels as ministering spirits). In the Gospel narratives we see this in the angels ministering to Christ (Matt 4:11), and Christ sending

As stated above, Saint Thomas here specifies that Christ's judgment extends to the angels only with respect to their *accidental* reward – i.e., the joy they have from the salvation of humans.⁴¹ But what of the *essential* reward of the good angels (i.e., eternal beatitude)? It is helpful to remind ourselves of the role of Christ's humanity in human beatitude. In the case of humans, Saint Thomas posits beatific knowledge in Christ's soul from the very moment of his conception inasmuch as his humanity is the very instrument by which others are brought to the beatific vision as from potency to act – 'for the cause must always be greater than the effect'.⁴² Here, too, Thomas argues for Christ's beatific knowledge on the grounds of the causality of the maximum.⁴³ Yet, in the case of the angels, Saint Thomas tells us that this is not done by Christ as human 'but as he is the Word of God, from the beginning of the world'.⁴⁴ Even if Christ's human headship extends 'over those who are members of the Church in every time, place, and state',⁴⁵ it nevertheless does not appear to extend as far back to the beatitude of the angels.

Saint Thomas's resolution to the above objection raises an important question about the causality of the maximum, which is arguably the central principle at work in his understanding of Christ's headship. If Christ's headship is contingent upon his perfect possession of grace and glory, then it appears that he ought to be the cause of grace and glory for all creatures. Moreover, since time is not an impediment (as we see with those members of the Church in the old covenant),⁴⁶ it seems unclear why Christ's judiciary power should not extend all the way to the angels at the beginning of the world. But if Christ's humanity is the universal cause of grace, it appears that the Incarnation is not, in fact, contingent upon the fall of humanity but would have been necessary for any and every communication of grace and glory to creatures.

If this last option is repugnant to Saint Thomas's understanding of the motive of the Incarnation, how ought we understand what is going on here?

3. Conclusion: Towards a solution

In speaking of Saint Thomas's doctrine of the non-overflow of the enjoyment of beatitude from the higher to the lower powers, Jean-Pierre Torrell makes an interesting comment about what is 'very clearly' Saint Thomas's theological method:

[E]ven if the entire logic of his thought moves in a single direction, [Saint Thomas] is capable of halting it the moment he encounters a single datum that

demons into the herd of swine (8:31). Thomas's more restricted understanding of Christ's influence of grace would thus be in keeping with his earlier view found in the DV, q. 29, a. 4, ad 5.

⁴¹ST III, q. 59, a. 6, co.

⁴²ST III, q. 9, a. 2, co.

⁴³See ST III, q. 9, a. 2, co.: 'for it is necessary that that through which others are heated itself be hot'.

⁴⁴ST III, q. 59, a. 6, co.

⁴⁵ST III, q. 8, a. 6, co.

⁴⁶See ST III, q. 8, a. 3, ad 3. Here, too, Saint Thomas's argument is somewhat ambivalent. He argues to the unity of the members of the Old Covenant with us insofar as they are ultimately ordered to Christ; thus, they are members of the same Church.

contradicts the coherence of this development. We should not be surprised at this for his method is irreproachable: the merest fact trumps every argument.⁴⁷

Does Torrell's account accurately describe the theological method at work in Thomas's treatment of Christ's headship over the angels? That is, does the 'fact' of the motive of the Incarnation as human sin,⁴⁸ finally trump Saint Thomas's argument based on the principle of the causality of the maximum? If so, the principle of the causality of the maximum can only ever be understood as an *a posteriori* account of what is revealed. Further, the principle (as with other aspects of the Incarnation that seem finally to be contingent upon the immediate will of God) is ultimately only as necessary as the Incarnation itself – which is to say, the arguments premised upon them are arguments *ex convenientia*, which, to be sure, carry a sense of necessity but an ambivalent one at that. Conversely, it seems that for Saint Thomas, *a priori* arguments based on philosophical principles cannot be carried through to their conclusions in a rigorously logical manner but always with an eye to what is more fundamental, namely, revelation.⁴⁹ This accords with what Serge-Thomas Bonino has described as St Thomas's approach. Just as the human knower must continually return to phantasms (*conversio ad phantasmas*), so must the theologian continually have recourse to Sacred Scripture (*conversio ad Scripturas*) as its permanent foundation.⁵⁰

To spell out how the principle of the causality of the maximum applies in this particular case, we might say that it accounts for the headship of Christ primarily with respect to humanity (and secondarily with respect to angels), and only within the narrower scope of the fall. The rigor of the principle only holds true within this narrower sphere and is applied 'universally' only within the given economy of human redemption. It does not apply to the angelic drama that took place at the beginning of the world, neither does it apply to the state of humanity prior to the Fall (i.e., Christ's humanity is not the source of the grace enjoyed by the first parent in the state of integrity).⁵¹ While this reading of Saint Thomas certainly diminishes the universality of Christ's causal power (i.e., with respect to all those who are members of the Church),

⁴⁷Torrell, 'S. Thomas et la science du Christ: Une relecture des questions 9–12 de la "Tertia Pars" de la Somme de Théologie', *Saint Thomas au XXe Siècle: Colloque du centenaire de la 'Revue thomiste' (1893–1992): Toulouse, 25–28 mars 1993*, p. 401.

⁴⁸ST III, q. 1, a. 3.

⁴⁹Pace Jean Galot's characterization of the medieval approach in 'Le Christ terrestre et la vision', *Gregorianum*, 67 (1986), 432.

⁵⁰Serge-Thomas Bonino, *Reading the Song of Songs with St. Thomas Aquinas, Thomistic Ressourcement Series*, Vol. 22, trans. by Andrew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023), pp. 86–87.

⁵¹Perhaps one way to state this is to say that Christ's grace is the universal source with respect to grace in its twofold respect of healing and elevating. It is the fall of man that brings about the need for grace to heal. See ST I-II, q. 109, a. 2, co.; q. 109, a. 3, co. While it is one and the same grace through which humankind is saved, nevertheless grace has a twofold aspect on account of the fallen state of the human soul to which it is applied. Even given such a distinction, however, it is unclear whether this is sufficient to preserve the universality that Saint Thomas attributes to Christ's headship via the causality of the maximum. Further, to state, as I do, that the grace of the first parents prior to the fall is not mediated by Christ's humanity is not to say that it does not in some way entail the proleptic glance of faith as did the faith of the Old Covenant Patriarchs and Prophets. Notably, Thomas holds that even prior to the fall there was need for an explicit faith in the mystery of Christ in order to be saved. See II-II, q. 2, a. 7. Briefly, it seems that Thomas can hold this position on account of the predestination of Christ (III, q. 24). Within the

it nevertheless also highlights Saint Thomas's focus on the revealed economy rather than a purely hypothetical situation that has not in fact obtained. Here, as elsewhere, philosophy ever remains the handmaid of theology. But that this is so should not be surprising given Thomas's own account of the subordination of all the sciences, including philosophy, to what is divinely revealed.⁵² In this regard, we see just how seriously Thomas, who is first and foremost a theologian, approaches the theological task of *fides quarens intellectum*.

broader scope of divine predestination, it is necessary to say that Christ's humanity was predestined from eternity with a view to the redemption of humanity. See III, q. 24, a. 4, co.: 'Because [God] foreordained the Incarnation of Christ, he simultaneously foreordained that he would be the cause of our salvation'. This, however, is the matter for another paper.

⁵²ST I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

Cite this article: Lim JH (2024). The Headship of Christ and the Angels: An Ambiguity in Thomas's Account. *New Blackfriars* 105(1), 92–103. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.11>