

Gregory Graham

Dr. Bruce Marshall

The Theology of Thomas Aquinas, Selected Topics

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Why Do I Still Suffer?

When we learn how baptism is a remedy for sin, the question arises, why do those who are baptized still suffer physical death, disease, concupiscence, and other “penalties” in this life that are the result of sin?

St. Thomas affirms that baptism has the power to take away these penalties, but God defers this effect of baptism until the resurrection. There are several reasons why it makes sense for these benefits to be delayed. The first has to do with our union with Christ as members of his body. He entered this world in a passable body that was subject to disease and death, so in union with him, we remain in a body subject to weakness so that we can share in Christ’s sufferings in this life, but later we will follow him in his resurrection and glorification.¹

The second reason is that we retain these penalties for the benefit of our spiritual training. We fight against these defects in order to grow in faith, and become stronger in the fight against the enemy. Such a struggle is prefigured by the settling of the Israelites in the promised land, where God allowed some of their enemies to continue to live so that “their children might learn to fight with their enemies, and to be trained up to war.” (Judges 3:2)²

The third reason is that impassibility would be an obvious, visible benefit to baptism, which would lead people to seek baptism solely for the physical benefit

¹ III, 69, 3 c p1

² III, 69, 3 c p2

without regard for eternal life and love for God.³ There would be little opportunity to exercise faith because the benefit of baptism would be easily seen.

This problem of the weak earthly state of the Christian is a common concern today, and I have not seen reasons put forward that are as good as those Thomas gives here. The importance of identifying with the suffering of Christ as members of his body is rarely expressed outside of more traditional Catholic and Orthodox circles, and the value of struggle for spiritual growth is less common today than it used to be, but I have never before seen an argument like Thomas' third argument. If we were healed from all of the penalties of sin at the moment of our baptism, almost everyone would be wanting baptism. It would be as bad as the people whom Jesus fed with the loaves and fishes, to whom he said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."⁴ Most people would not be getting baptized because they were seeking God himself, but because they saw others who after baptism no longer struggled with faults, disease, or even aging and death.

³ III, 69, 3 c p3

⁴ John 6:26 (RSV-CE)