St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica III, Q 48. The efficiency of Christ's Passion

Article 1. Whether Christ's Passion brought about our salvation by way of merit?

Objection 1. It would seem that Christ's Passion did not bring about our salvation by way of merit. For the sources of our sufferings are not within us. But no one merits or is praised except for that whose principle lies within him. Therefore Christ's Passion wrought nothing by way of merit.

Objection 2. Further, from the beginning of His conception Christ merited for Himself and for us, as stated above (9, 4; 34, 3). But it is superfluous to merit over again what has been merited before. Therefore by His Passion Christ did not merit our salvation.

Objection 3. Further, the source of merit is charity. But Christ's charity was not made greater by the Passion than it was before. Therefore He did not merit our salvation by suffering more than He had already.

On the contrary, on the words of Philippians 2:9, "Therefore God exalted Him," etc., Augustine says (Tract. civ in Joan.): "The lowliness" of the Passion "merited glory; glory was the reward of lowliness." But He was glorified, not merely in Himself, but likewise in His faithful ones, as He says Himself (John 17:10). Therefore it appears that He merited the salvation of the faithful.

I answer that, As stated above (7, 1,9; 8, 1,5), grace was bestowed upon Christ, not only as an individual, but inasmuch as He is the Head of the Church, so that it might overflow into His members; and therefore Christ's works are referred to Himself and to His members in the same way as the works of any other man in a state of grace are referred to himself. But it is evident that whosoever suffers for justice's sake, provided that he be in a state of grace, merits his salvation thereby, according to Matthew 5:10: "Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice's sake." Consequently Christ by His Passion merited salvation, not only for Himself, but likewise for all His members.

Reply to Objection 1. Suffering, as such, is caused by an outward principle: but inasmuch as one bears it willingly, it has an inward principle.

Reply to Objection 2. From the beginning of His conception Christ merited our eternal salvation; but on our side there were some obstacles, whereby we were hindered from securing the effect of His preceding merits: consequently, in order to remove such hindrances, "it was necessary for Christ to suffer," as stated above (Question 46, Article 3).

Reply to Objection 3. Christ's Passion has a special effect, which His preceding merits did not possess, not on account of greater charity, but because of the nature of the work, which was suitable for such an effect, as is clear from the arguments brought forward above all the fittingness of Christ's Passion (46, Answers 3,4).

Article 2. Whether Christ's Passion brought about our salvation by way of atonement?

Objection 1. It would seem that Christ's Passion did not bring about our salvation by way of atonement. For it seems that to make the atonement devolves on him who commits the sin; as is clear in the other parts of penance, because he who has done the wrong must grieve over it and confess it. But Christ never sinned, according to 1 Peter 2:22: "Who did no sin." Therefore He made no atonement by His personal suffering.

Objection 2. Further, no atonement is made to another by committing a graver offense. But in Christ's Passion the gravest of all offenses was perpetrated, because those who slew Him sinned most grievously, as stated above (Question 47, Article 6). Consequently it seems that atonement could not be made to God by Christ's Passion.

Objection 3. Further, atonement implies equality with the trespass, since it is an act of justice. But Christ's Passion does not appear equal to all the sins of the human race, because Christ did not suffer in His Godhead, but in His flesh, according to 1 Peter 4:1: "Christ therefore having suffered in the flesh." Now the soul, which is the subject of sin, is of greater account than the flesh. Therefore Christ did not atone for our sins by His Passion.

On the contrary, It is written (Psalm 68:5) in Christ's person: "Then did I pay that which I took not away." But he has not paid who has not fully atoned. Therefore it appears that Christ by His suffering has fully atoned for our sins.

I answer that, He properly atones for an offense who offers something which the offended one loves equally, or even more than he detested the offense. But by suffering out of love and obedience, Christ gave more to God than was required to compensate for the offense of the whole human race. First of all, because of the exceeding charity from which He suffered; secondly, on account of the dignity of His life which He laid down in atonement, for it was the life of one who was God and man; thirdly, on account of the extent of the Passion, and the greatness of the grief endured, as stated above (Question 46, Article 6). And therefore Christ's Passion was not only a sufficient but a superabundant atonement for the sins of the human race; according to 1 John 2:2: "He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."

Reply to Objection 1. The head and members are as one mystic person; and therefore Christ's satisfaction belongs to all the faithful as being His members. Also, in so far as any two men are one in charity, the one can atone for the other as shall be shown later (XP, 13, 2). But the same reason does not hold good of confession and contrition, because atonement consists in an outward action, for which helps may be used, among which friends are to be computed.

Reply to Objection 2. Christ's love was greater than His slayers' malice: and therefore the value of His Passion in atoning surpassed the murderous guilt of those who crucified Him: so much so that Christ's suffering was sufficient and superabundant atonement for His murderer's crime.

Reply to Objection 3. The dignity of Christ's flesh is not to be estimated solely from the nature of flesh, but also from the Person assuming it--namely, inasmuch as it was God's flesh, the result of which was that it was of infinite worth.

Article 3. Whether Christ's Passion operated by way of sacrifice?

Objection 1. It would seem that Christ's Passion did not operate by way of sacrifice. For the truth should correspond with the figure. But human flesh was never offered up in the sacrifices of the Old Law, which were figures of Christ: nay, such sacrifices were reputed as impious, according to Psalm 105:38: "And they shed innocent blood: the blood of their sons and of their daughters, which they sacrificed to the idols of Chanaan." It seems therefore that Christ's Passion cannot be called a sacrifice.

Objection 2. Further, Augustine says (De Civ. Dei x) that "a visible sacrifice is a sacrament--that is, a sacred sign--of an invisible sacrifice." Now Christ's Passion is not a sign, but rather the thing signified by other signs. Therefore it seems that Christ's Passion is not a sacrifice.

Objection 3. Further, whoever offers sacrifice performs some sacred rite, as the very word "sacrifice" shows. But those men who slew Christ did not perform any sacred act, but rather wrought a great wrong. Therefore Christ's Passion was rather a malefice than a sacrifice.

On the contrary, The Apostle says (Ephesians 5:2): "He delivered Himself up for us, an oblation and a sacrifice to God for an odor of sweetness."

I answer that, A sacrifice properly so called is something done for that honor which is properly due to God, in order to appease Him: and hence it is that Augustine says (De Civ. Dei x): "A true sacrifice is every good work done in order that we may cling to God in holy fellowship, yet referred to that consummation of happiness wherein we can be truly blessed." But, as is added in the same place, "Christ offered Himself up for us in the Passion": and this voluntary enduring of the Passion was most acceptable to God, as coming from charity. Therefore it is manifest that Christ's Passion was a true sacrifice. Moreover, as Augustine says farther on in the same book, "the primitive sacrifices of the holy Fathers were many and various signs of this true sacrifice, one being prefigured by many, in the same way as a single concept of thought is expressed in many words, in order to commend it without tediousness": and, as Augustine observe, (De Trin. iv), "since there are four things to be noted in every sacrifice--to wit, to whom it is offered, by whom it is offered, what is offered, and for whom it is offered--that the same one true Mediator reconciling us with God through the peace-sacrifice might continue to be one with Him to whom He offered it, might be one with them for whom He offered it, and might Himself be the offerer and what He offered."

Reply to Objection 1. Although the truth answers to the figure in some respects, yet it does not in all, since the truth must go beyond the figure. Therefore the figure of this sacrifice, in which Christ's flesh is offered, was flesh right fittingly, not the flesh of men, but of animals, as denoting Christ's. And this is a most perfect sacrifice. First of all, since being flesh of human nature, it is fittingly offered for men, and is partaken of by them under the Sacrament. Secondly, because being passible and mortal, it was fit for immolation. Thirdly, because, being sinless, it had virtue to cleanse from sins. Fourthly, because, being the offerer's own flesh, it was acceptable to God on account of His charity in offering up His own flesh. Hence it is that Augustine says (De Trin. iv): "What else could be so fittingly partaken of by men, or offered up for men, as human flesh? What else could be so appropriate for this immolation as mortal flesh? What else is there so clean for cleansing mortals as the flesh born in the womb without fleshly concupiscence, and coming from a virginal womb? What could be so favorably offered and accepted as the flesh of our sacrifice, which was made the body of our Priest?"

Reply to Objection 2. Augustine is speaking there of visible figurative sacrifices: and even Christ's Passion, although denoted by other figurative sacrifices, is yet a sign of something to be observed by us, according to 1 Peter 4:1: "Christ therefore, having suffered in the flesh, be you also armed with the same thought: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sins: that now he may live the rest of his time in the flesh, not after the desires of men, but according to the will of God."

Reply to Objection 3. Christ's Passion was indeed a malefice on His slayers' part; but on His own it was the sacrifice of one suffering out of charity. Hence it is Christ who is said to have offered this sacrifice, and not the executioners.

Article 4. Whether Christ's Passion brought about our salvation by way of redemption?

Objection 1. It would seem that Christ's Passion did not effect our salvation by way of redemption. For no one purchases or redeems what never ceased to belong to him. But men never ceased to belong to God according to Psalm 23:1: "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof: the world and all they that dwell therein." Therefore it seems that Christ did not redeem us by His Passion.

Objection 2. Further, as Augustine says (De Trin. xiii): "The devil had to be overthrown by Christ's justice." But justice requires that the man who has treacherously seized another's property shall be deprived of it, because deceit and cunning should not benefit anyone, as even human laws declare. Consequently, since the devil by treachery deceived and subjugated to himself man, who is God's creature, it seems that man ought not to be rescued from his power by way of redemption.

Objection 3. Further, whoever buys or redeems an object pays the price to the holder. But it was not to the devil, who held us in bondage, that Christ paid His blood as the price of our redemption. Therefore Christ did not redeem us by His Passion.

On the contrary, It is written (1 Peter 1:18): "You were not redeemed with corruptible things as gold or silver from your vain conversation of the tradition of your fathers: but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb unspotted and undefiled." And (Galatians 3:13): "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." Now He is said to be a curse for us inasmuch as He suffered upon the tree, as stated above (Question 46, Article 4). Therefore He did redeem us by His Passion.

I answer that, Man was held captive on account of sin in two ways: first of all, by the bondage of sin, because (John 8:34): "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin"; and (2 Peter 2:19): "By whom a man is overcome, of the same also he is the slave." Since, then, the devil had overcome man by inducing him to sin, man was subject to the devil's bondage. Secondly, as to the debt of punishment, to the payment of which man was held fast by God's justice: and this, too, is a kind of bondage, since it savors of bondage for a man to suffer what he does not wish, just as it is the free man's condition to apply himself to what he wills.

Since, then, Christ's Passion was a sufficient and a superabundant atonement for the sin and the debt of the human race, it was as a price at the cost of which we were freed from both obligations. For the atonement by which one satisfies for self or another is called the price, by which he ransoms himself or someone else from sin and its penalty, according to Daniel 4:24: "Redeem thou thy sins with alms." Now Christ made satisfaction, not by giving money or anything of the sort, but by bestowing what was of greatest price--Himself--for us. And therefore Christ's Passion is called our redemption.

Reply to Objection 1. Man is said to belong to God in two ways. First of all, in so far as he comes under God's power: in which way he never ceased to belong to God; according to Daniel 4:22: "The Most High ruleth over the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will." Secondly, by being united to Him in charity, according to Romans 8:9: "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His." In the first way, then, man never ceased to belong to God, but in the second way he did cease because of sin. And therefore in so far as he was delivered from sin by the satisfaction of Christ's Passion, he is said to be redeemed by the Passion of Christ.

Reply to Objection 2. Man by sinning became the bondsman both of God and of the devil. Through guilt he had offended God, and put himself under the devil by consenting to him; consequently he did not become God's

servant on account of his guilt, but rather, by withdrawing from God's service, he, by God's just permission, fell under the devil's servitude on account of the offense perpetrated. But as to the penalty, man was chiefly bound to God as his sovereign judge, and to the devil as his torturer, according to Matthew 5:25: "Lest perhaps the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer"--that is, "to the relentless avenging angel," as Chrysostom says (Hom. xi). Consequently, although, after deceiving man, the devil, so far as in him lay, held him unjustly in bondage as to both sin and penalty, still it was just that man should suffer it. God so permitting it as to the sin and ordaining it as to the penalty. And therefore justice required man's redemption with regard to God, but not with regard to the devil.

Reply to Objection 3. Because, with regard to God, redemption was necessary for man's deliverance, but not with regard to the devil, the price had to be paid not to the devil, but to God. And therefore Christ is said to have paid the price of our redemption--His own precious blood--not to the devil, but to God.

Article 5. Whether it is proper to Christ to be the Redeemer?

Objection 1. It would seem that it is not proper to Christ to be the Redeemer, because it is written (Psalm 30:6): "Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, the God of Truth." But to be the Lord God of Truth belongs to the entire Trinity. Therefore it is not proper to Christ.

Objection 2. Further, he is said to redeem who pays the price of redemption. But God the Father gave His Son in redemption for our sins, as is written (Psalm 110:9): "The Lord hath sent redemption to His people," upon which the gloss adds, "that is, Christ, who gives redemption to captives." Therefore not only Christ, but the Father also, redeemed us.

Objection 3. Further, not only Christ's Passion, but also that of other saints conduced to our salvation, according to Colossians 1:24: "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh for His body, which is the Church." Therefore the title of Redeemer belongs not only to Christ, but also to the other saints.

On the contrary, It is written (Galatians 3:13): "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us." But only Christ was made a curse for us. Therefore only Christ ought to be called our Redeemer.

I answer that, For someone to redeem, two things are required--namely, the act of paying and the price paid. For if in redeeming something a man pays a price which is not his own, but another's, he is not said to be the chief redeemer, but rather the other is, whose price it is. Now Christ's blood or His bodily life, which "is in the blood," is the price of our redemption (Leviticus 17:11-14), and that life He paid. Hence both of these belong immediately to Christ as man; but to the Trinity as to the first and remote cause, to whom Christ's life belonged as to its first author, and from whom Christ received the inspiration of suffering for us. Consequently it is proper to Christ as man to be the Redeemer immediately; although the redemption may be ascribed to the whole Trinity as its first cause.

Reply to Objection 1. A gloss explains the text thus: "Thou, O Lord God of Truth, hast redeemed me in Christ, crying out, 'Lord, into Thy hands I commend my spirit.'" And so redemption belongs immediately to the Man-Christ, but principally to God.

Reply to Objection 2. The Man-Christ paid the price of our redemption immediately, but at the command of the Father as the original author.

Reply to Objection 3. The sufferings of the saints are beneficial to the Church, as by way, not of redemption, but of example and exhortation, according to 2 Corinthians 1:6: "Whether we be in tribulation, it is for your exhortation and salvation."

Article 6. Whether Christ's Passion brought about our salvation efficiently?

Objection 1. It would seem that Christ's Passion did not bring about our salvation efficiently. For the efficient cause of our salvation is the greatness of the Divine power, according to Isaiah 59:1: "Behold the hand of the Lord is not shortened that it cannot save." But "Christ was crucified through weakness," as it is written (2 Corinthians 13:4). Therefore, Christ's Passion did not bring about our salvation efficiently.

Objection 2. Further, no corporeal agency acts efficiently except by contact: hence even Christ cleansed the leper by touching him "in order to show that His flesh had saving power," as Chrysostom [Theophylact, Enarr. in Luc.] says. But Christ's Passion could not touch all mankind. Therefore it could not efficiently bring about the salvation of all men.

Objection 3. Further, it does not seem to be consistent for the same agent to operate by way of merit and by way of efficiency, since he who merits awaits the result from someone else. But it was by way of merit that Christ's Passion accomplished our salvation. Therefore it was not by way of efficiency.

On the contrary, It is written (1 Corinthians 1:18) that "the word of the cross to them that are saved . . . is the power of God." But God's power brings about our salvation efficiently. Therefore Christ's Passion on the cross accomplished our salvation efficiently.

I answer that, There is a twofold efficient agency--namely, the principal and the instrumental. Now the principal efficient cause of man's salvation is God. But since Christ's humanity is the "instrument of the Godhead," as stated above (Question 43, Article 2), therefore all Christ's actions and sufferings operate instrumentally in virtue of His Godhead for the salvation of men. Consequently, then, Christ's Passion accomplishes man's salvation efficiently.

Reply to Objection 1. Christ's Passion in relation to His flesh is consistent with the infirmity which He took upon Himself, but in relation to the Godhead it draws infinite might from It, according to 1 Corinthians 1:25: "The weakness of God is stronger than men"; because Christ's weakness, inasmuch as He is God, has a might exceeding all human power.

Reply to Objection 2. Christ's Passion, although corporeal, has yet a spiritual effect from the Godhead united: and therefore it secures its efficacy by spiritual contact--namely, by faith and the sacraments of faith, as the Apostle says (Romans 3:25): "Whom God hath proposed to be a propitiation, through faith in His blood."

Reply to Objection 3. Christ's Passion, according as it is compared with His Godhead, operates in an efficient manner: but in so far as it is compared with the will of Christ's soul it acts in a meritorious manner: considered as being within Christ's very flesh, it acts by way of satisfaction, inasmuch as we are liberated by it from the debt of punishment; while inasmuch as we are freed from the servitude of guilt, it acts by way of redemption: but in so far as we are reconciled with God it acts by way of sacrifice, as shall be shown farther on (49).