

## The Light of Tabor: Christian Personalism and Adoptive Sonship

Romanus Cessario, O.P.  
St. John's Seminary  
Brighton, Massachusetts

Commentators have observed on the significance of the date that the Holy Father chose to sign the encyclical.<sup>1</sup> The August Feast of the Transfiguration illuminates the themes contained in *Veritatis Splendor*, especially the divine reality in man that Catholic moral theology guided by the Magisterium seeks to explicate and promote. It is axiomatic that all the mysteries of Christ's life, death, and resurrection sanctify those who are members of his Body. "Every act and suffering of Christ," Aquinas assures us, "acts instrumentally in virtue of his divinity for man's salvation."<sup>2</sup> The mystery of Christ's Transfiguration points in a special way to the theme that occupies many theologians of the period: pre-ethical anthropology and its relationship to a Christian anthropology of sonship. The Transfiguration assures us that a rational nature can participate through grace and charity in the divine glory and majesty.<sup>3</sup> We are left to consider the question: How does God accomplish this transformation in those members of the human race whom he has predestined for glory?<sup>4</sup>

### I

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, J. A. Di Noia, O.P., "Veritatis Splendor: Moral Life as Transfigured Life," in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, ed. J. A. DiNoia, O.P. and Romanus Cessario, O.P. (Chicago, IL: Midwest Theological Forum, 1999), 1–10. This volume was published to commemorate the encyclical's fifth anniversary in 1998.

<sup>2</sup> *Summa theologiae* III, q. 48, a. 6: "omnes actiones et passiones Christi instrumentaliter operantur in virtute divinitatis ad salutem humanum," cited in Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 135.

<sup>3</sup> See *ST* III, q. 23, a. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas holds that the splendor which Christ assumed at his Transfiguration was that of a glorified body "as to essence, but not as to mode of being" (*ST* III, q. 45, a. 2).

We find in the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas (1224/25–74) certain considerations essential to a proper theological understanding of a Christian anthropology of sonship. One line of inquiry is found in Aquinas’s discussion of the mystery of Christ’s life that governs the central message of *Veritatis Splendor*. When he treats the Transfiguration in *tertia pars* question 45, Aquinas includes in article 4 what at first glance appears to be a throw-away question: “Whether the testimony of the Father’s voice, saying, *This is my beloved Son*, was fittingly heard.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, this article contains an important distinction. Aquinas’s express inquiry is about the “convenience”—the fittingness or suitableness—of the text that is recorded variously in each of the Synoptic accounts (Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:35): “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Mt 17:5).<sup>6</sup> The authority of the canonical Gospels supplies an *in contrarium*. Since Aquinas accepts the sacred texts themselves as sufficient warrant for the fittingness of the testimony, the article contains no *sed contra*. God spoke these words, so there is no reason for theological discussion about their coherence with the economy of salvation. Still, the testimony of the Father’s voice at the Transfiguration points to the question of sonship, both of Christ’s own and, according to the principle of instrumentality, of that possible for the rational creature.

The reply to question 45, article 4 sets forth, as I have indicated, a first and crucial distinction for a Christian anthropology of sonship: “Men become adopted sons of God by a certain conformity of image to the natural Son of God. Now this is accomplished in two ways. First of all, by the grace of the wayfarer, which is an imperfect conformity;

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<sup>5</sup> ST III, q. 45, a. 4: “utrum covenienter auditum fuerit testimonium paternae vocis in transfiguratione.”

<sup>6</sup> Scripture references are taken from the Revised Standard Version, Catholic edition (1965).

secondly, by glory, which is a perfect conformity.”<sup>7</sup> Aquinas includes in this article the text of 1 John 3:2: “Beloved, we are God’s children (in the Vulgate Latin, “filii Dei”) now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like (“similes”) him, for we shall see him as he is.” A first thing to consider, therefore, about a Christian anthropology of sonship is that it exists for now in a twofold state or degree of likeness or similitude, one here below that is imperfect, another, above on high that is perfect. A second thing to consider is that this likeness or similitude is impressed on the human being after the fashion of an inhering form, which according to the adage *forma dat esse* becomes the principle of the Christian’s image-activity. The final perfection of this activity is called beatific vision.

To distinguish a twofold state of sonship gives theologians a way to talk about the eschatological expectations that Christians cherish in accord with what St. Paul writes in Romans, “and if children (‘filii’), then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ...” (8: 17). It also affords a way to understand growth in holiness; for as *Veritatis Splendor* observes, there is a close connection “between eternal life and obedience to God’s commandments.”<sup>8</sup> The dynamic relationship between what here below remains imperfect and what at the same time tends toward being perfect is lived out by each believer in what the encyclical calls the “Christian moral life.”<sup>9</sup> “Dynamic” is not, in this context, a superfluous modifier. The term serves to signify any movement that proceeds both from

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<sup>7</sup> *ST III*, q. 45, a. 4: “Dicendum quod adoptio filiorum Dei est per quamdam conformitatem imaginis ad Filium Dei naturalem. Quod quidem fit dupliciter: primo quidem fit per gratiam viae, quae est conformitas imperfecta; secundo, per gloriam patriae, quae erit conformitas perfecta....” Translations from the *Summa theologiae*, sometimes slightly modified, are taken from the sixty-one-volume Blackfriars edition published in London by Eyre & Spottiswoode between 1964–1980.

<sup>8</sup> See *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 12.

<sup>9</sup> For example, “The Spirit of Jesus, received by the humble and docile heart of the believer, brings about the flourishing of Christian moral life and the witness of holiness amid the great variety of vocations, gifts, responsibilities, conditions and life situations” (no. 108).

the inner dimension of the reality itself and according to some kind of necessity, as an acorn contains imperfectly the perfect oak tree that (barring external impediments) will develop from it.

The necessity that attaches to natural dynamic movements is not absolute. Aquinas usefully points out in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* that movement in nature proceeds according to a necessity that is suppositional, *ex suppositione finis*.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of the *tertia pars*, without diminishing the excellence of the grace of union, he also applies this mode of necessity, that is, when something is required for a better and more expeditious attainment of an end, to the Incarnation itself.<sup>11</sup> Some acorns will be eaten by squirrels, just as some wayfarers, though they may receive initially the grace of adoptive sonship, will sin and fall away. In the orders of nature and grace, *ex suppositione finis* works to illustrate how the God-given dynamism that belongs to a particular created form interacts with other natural or voluntary agents in the course of moving toward the perfective end proper to the form.<sup>12</sup> Our transformation into sons proceeds in accord with this kind of necessity.

## II

It is important to remember that Aquinas builds his anthropology of sonship around the notion of the image: “per quamdam conformitatem imaginis ad Filium Dei naturalem.” It is equally important to recall that Aquinas does not hold that adoptive sonship is to be thought of as a participation in the natural sonship that is Christ's. Just as the human image is related to the Trinity as its model, adoptive sonship is contracted in

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<sup>10</sup> *Physics* II, ch. 9 (200a14). For further discussion, see William A. Wallace, *The Modeling of Nature* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1996), pp. 20ff.

<sup>11</sup> See *ST* III, q. 1, a. 2.

<sup>12</sup> The difference between providence and predestination is understood.

respect to the whole Trinity. Although some New Testament texts, such as Galatians 4: 4, “God sent forth his Son ... so that we might receive adoption as sons,” may appropriate adoption to the natural Son within the Trinity, the bestowal of the grace of adoption, including the eschatological promises that this grace brings, results from the work of the whole Trinity.<sup>13</sup> In accordance with a way of speaking about God, which is in fact what appropriation is, adoption is attributed “to the Father as its author, to the Son as its model, to the Spirit as the Person who imparts to us the likeness of this model.”<sup>14</sup> As part of the divine economy, adoptive sonship itself is the common work of the three divine Persons.

In order to grasp what Aquinas means when he says that “adoptive sonship . . . is similar to natural sonship,” it is necessary to return to his discussion of the Blessed Trinity; in particular, to recall his absolute consideration of each divine Person found in *prima pars* questions 33–38.<sup>15</sup> After a single question devoted to the First Person, Aquinas turns “to study the Person of the Son. The names given him are three,” says Aquinas, “‘Son,’ ‘Word’ and Image.’ We know,” he continues, “the meaning of the term ‘Son’ from that of the ‘Father’; there remain to be examined, then, the names ‘Word’ and ‘Image.’”<sup>16</sup> The examination continues in questions 34 and 35 of the *prima pars* where we learn that the Christian tradition agrees that the names “Word” and “Image” are both personal names in God and names proper (*proprium*) to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. It is not possible to develop a theologically accurate Christian anthropology of sonship without including proper reference to the other personal names of the Son,

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<sup>13</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The whole divine economy is the common work of the three divine persons” (no. 258).

<sup>14</sup> *ST III*, q. 23, a. 2, ad 3. See also Blackfriars, vol. 50, ed., Colman E. O’Neill, O.P. (1965), appendix 6, esp. pp. 254–56.

<sup>15</sup> *ST III*, q. 23, a. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Prologue at *ST I*, q. 34: “Deinde considerandum est de persona Filii. Attribuuntur autem tria nomina Filio, scilicet Filius, Verbum et Imago. Sed ratio Filii ex ratione Patris consideratur; unde restat considerandum de Verbo et Imagine.”

“Word,” and “Image.” This is the case because of the nature of the Trinitarian processions. The Christian tradition, following the lead of St. Augustine, holds that the Second Person is considered first as Word and only then, in terms of intellectual procession, as Son.<sup>17</sup> As Aquinas expresses it, “the procession of the Word corresponds to the action of the intellect (“actionem intelligibilem).”<sup>18</sup>

Two considerations follow: First, about the Word. As the biblical accounts of creation suggest, the divine “Word” bears a special relationship to creatures. In his commentary on John’s Gospel, Aquinas observes that *Logos* was not, as it could have been, translated as *ratio* because the Prologue expresses the effective power of the Word, “all things were made through him” (Jn 1:3), whereas *ratio* expresses only the cognitive character of the concept or mental word.<sup>19</sup> The name “Word” connotes, then, a reference to creatures inasmuch as, though God’s knowledge of Himself is cognitive, his knowledge of everything that is outside of himself is both cognitive and causative (*factiva*). “Logos” nonetheless connotes pattern or model, an “actionem intelligibilem.”<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to observe that when *Lumen Gentium* comments on the text of Colossians 1: 15, “He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created,” the conciliar text carefully expresses itself: “[Christus] est Imago *imago Dei* invisibilis, in eoque *condita sunt* universa.”<sup>21</sup> In Christ, all things receive their foundation. In this foundation, living things find their ends: “[C]reatures are said to do

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<sup>17</sup> See *ST I*, q. 27, a. 2: “Unde processio verbi in divinis dicitur generatio et ipsum verbum procedens dicitur Filius.”

<sup>18</sup> *ST I*, q. 27, a. 3: “Processio autem verbi attenditur secundum actionem intelligibilem.”

<sup>19</sup> *Lectura super Iohannem* 1, lect. 1. For further information, see Blackfriars edition of the *Summa theologiae*, vol. 7, ed. T.C. O’Brien (1976), p. 38, n“c.”

<sup>20</sup> See above note 18 and *ST I*, q. 27, a. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, no. 7.

God's word inasmuch as they carry out some effect towards which they are directed through the begotten Word of divine wisdom."<sup>22</sup>

The causal relationship that exists between God and creatures remains a central element of Aquinas's Christian anthropology. When it is said that all things are created in the Word, this means that everything that God creates enjoys the special causal relation of creation. Anti-Arian caution excludes this relation being affirmed with reference to the Second Person, who is Son "origine non adoptione; veritate non nuncupatione; nativitate non creatione."<sup>23</sup> Human beings, on the other hand, bear a likeness to the intelligible Word of divine wisdom because they have been created in Him. Pre-ethical anthropology concerns what is proper to this kind of creature, who since he is endowed with mind and will, is also said to bear the natural image of the Trinity.<sup>24</sup> The encyclical refers to "man's proper and primordial nature, the 'nature of the human person' (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 51), which is the person himself in the unity of soul and body, in the unity of his spiritual and biological inclinations and of all the other specific characteristics necessary for the pursuit of his end."<sup>25</sup>

Second, about the Image" The Son is properly said to be the image of God because he is the Word of God: "[T]he Son proceeds in the manner of a word, whose meaning it is to be alike in kind ("similitudo speciei") to the source from which it proceeds."<sup>26</sup> However, adopted sons in the Son do not possess this "similitudo speciei," and so we find ourselves compelled to recognize some form of analogical agreement. In

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<sup>22</sup> *ST I*, q. 34, a. 1, ad 4: "creaturae dicuntur facere verbum Dei in quantum exsequuntur effectum aliquem, ad quem ordinantur ex verbo concepto divinae sapientiae."

<sup>23</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* Bk 3, 11 (*PL* 10:82).

<sup>24</sup> See *ST I*, q. 45, a. 7, where Aquinas takes up the distinction between the image and the trace ("vestigium") of the Trinity in creation.

<sup>25</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 50.

<sup>26</sup> *ST I*, q. 35, a. 2.

order to ensure that the work of adoptive sonship, of making us like the natural Son, is seen as a work of the whole Trinity, recourse to analogy of proper proportionality is required: The natural Son is to the Father as the adoptive son is to the whole Trinity. God's adoptive sons are in the fullest sense of the word, his creation, and thus they cry out, "Abba! Father!" (Rom 8: 15).

Now we can interpret what Aquinas means when he says that "men become adopted sons of God by a certain conformity of image to the natural Son of God."<sup>27</sup> Because image also requires analogical predication when said of the Son and of the human creature, it is necessary to identify what is similar and different in the analogy: "The image of one thing is present in another in one of two ways. The first, as in a being of the same specific nature, e.g., the king's image in his son; the second, as in a being of a different nature, e.g., the king's image on a coin. The Son is the Image of the Father in the first manner; man is the image of God in the second."<sup>28</sup> When it is said that man is created after the image of God, this means that there exists within a specifically different nature from that of God an analogical likeness to God that is able to undergo transfiguration.<sup>29</sup> The existence of a natural likeness that is apt for receiving a new form that grace or glory confers remains a central notion of St. Thomas's theological anthropology and, I would argue, the supposition of the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*.

To minimize the distinction between what is created by God through the Word and what is brought forth through the redemptive action of the incarnate Son in the

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<sup>27</sup> See above, note 7.

<sup>28</sup> *ST I*, q. 35, a. 2, ad 3: "...imago alicujus dupliciter in aliquo invenitur: uno modo in re ejusdem naturae secundum speciem, ut imago regis invenitur in filio suo; alio modo in re alterius naturae, sicut imago regis invenitur in denario. Primo autem modo Filius est Imago Patris; secundo autem modo dicitur homo imago Dei."

<sup>29</sup> Also see *ST I*, q. 33, a. 3: "The quality of being God's son is present in a creature not in the full sense, but on the basis of a limited likeness, and one that becomes fuller the nearer it approaches the absolute expression of this sonship."

Church risks confusing the orders of nature and grace, with the result that it would be difficult to treat rightly a Christian anthropology of sonship. To cite one example from the encyclical, it is sufficient to recall what it says about a sometimes fashionable exaggerated personalism: “This heightened sense of the dignity of the human person and of his or her uniqueness, and of the respect due to the journey of conscience, certainly represents one of the positive achievements of modern culture. This perception, authentic as it is, has been expressed in a number of more or less adequate ways, some of which however diverge from the truth about man as a creature and the image of God, and thus need to be corrected and purified in the light of faith.”<sup>30</sup>

To take full account of “the truth about man as a creature and the image of God” it is necessary to insist upon a threefold distinction that governs the relationship between pre-ethical anthropology and a Christian anthropology of sonship. (1) God may be called “Father” with respect to intelligent creatures on account of the likeness of the natural image, but not with the priority of a personal name, and therefore by way of metaphor not by proper analogy. In order for the analogical deployment of Father to be valid, there must be a relation of one person to another. This personal analogy applies, as has been observed already, (2) to adoptive sons on earth who enjoy likeness to the divine by grace and (3) to full-blown saints in heaven who enjoy the likeness of glory, in accord with what St. Paul says in Romans 8:17, “and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”<sup>31</sup> One may speak of the dynamism of discipleship. In fact, adoptive sonship includes a missionary aspect, as the Holy Father so clearly indicated in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: “Did we

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<sup>30</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 31.

<sup>31</sup> The material is set forth in *ST I*, q. 33, a. 3: “Utrum hoc nomen Pater dicatur in divinis per prius secundum quod personaliter sumitur.”

not celebrate the Jubilee Year in order to refresh our contact with this living source of our hope? Now, the Christ whom we have contemplated and loved bids us to set out once more on our journey: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (Mt 28:19). The missionary mandate accompanies us into the Third Millennium and urges us to share the enthusiasm of the very first Christians: we can count on the power of the same Spirit who was poured out at Pentecost and who impels us still today to start out anew, sustained by the hope ‘which does not disappoint’ (Rom 5:5).”<sup>32</sup> Only God can effectuate this movement.

### III

What is apparent to those persons who, over the past decade, have welcomed the encyclical? The limitations of space allow me to comment only on certain themes that had been suggested by those who organized the Roman symposium at which this essay was first read.<sup>33</sup> First are questions of the present moment. Three areas of concern that have emerged in the past several years include: stem cell research, which makes it difficult to work in the area of bioethics; the state approval of same-sex unions, which makes it more difficult to both instruct about chastity and promote the full truth about marriage; and lack of agreement on just war criteria, which relates to the general theme of political prudence. When one addresses these questions, following the method of *Veritatis Splendor* makes it possible to avoid giving the impression that the Church promotes sectarian or private moral views. What is at stake is man’s participation in the divine goodness: “Each creature is stretched out toward the attainment of its own

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<sup>32</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 58.

<sup>33</sup> The symposium composed of international scholars was held during the month of September 2003.

perfection, which is a likeness of the divine perfection and goodness.”<sup>34</sup> As the important teaching found in chapter one of the encyclical reminds us, “Only God can answer the question about what is good, because he is the Good itself.”<sup>35</sup> The themes of adoptive sonship and the image of God find their completion in Beatitude, or in the beatific vision. But these themes also are to be understood within the context of the fundamental participation in the divine goodness that informs everything that exists. The basic teleological dynamism of creation emerges against the background of the divine will from which all striving after perfection springs.<sup>36</sup> The challenge for the Christian evangelist and theologian is to persuade people to consider this truth of creation when they engage ethical issues.

Second is the question of conscience. The formation of the moral conscience requires adherence to the truth about the good. As the encyclical points out, “in the practical judgment of conscience, which imposes on the person the obligation to perform a given act, the link between freedom and truth is made manifest. Precisely for this reason conscience expresses itself in acts of ‘judgment’ that reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary ‘decisions.’”<sup>37</sup> It is impossible for anyone to make a judgment of conscience that conforms to the truth about the good without possessing the virtue of prudence. In my view, there is more reason today than there has been in the past to employ the distinction between infused and acquired prudence. This distinction helps one to explain the Gospel and its requirements to people who possess some appreciation of what moral goodness imposes on every human being.

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<sup>34</sup> *ST I*, q. 44, a. 4: “Et unaquaeque creatura intendit consequi suam perfectionem, quae est similitudo perfectionis et bonitatis divinae.”

<sup>35</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 9.

<sup>36</sup> See O’Neill, p. 252.

<sup>37</sup> *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 61.

Prudence perfects the practical intellect. A moral anthropology that purports to serve *Veritatis Splendor* must take account of all the capacities in the human creature that require development and perfection. Sin in the broad sense occurs when these capacities do not produce an action that achieves the perfective ends that together comprise the good of man. To cite Aquinas, a person sins when he performs an action deprived of its proper ordering to the end, *actus debito ordine privatus*. Both moral conscience and sin are properly explained within the larger context of the goods that perfect man as an individual (particularly the virtues of personal discipline, temperance, and courage) and as a social being (the virtue of justice and its parts). None of these virtues can operate outside of the directive function that is unique to prudence and that ensures the harmony of right reason and right appetite. Every sin therefore involves some departure from prudence.

It seems to me that most of the commentary, at least in English, that the encyclical has received centers on the rich instruction, found in section 4 of chapter 2, on the nature of the moral act. Competent moral theologians have sought to expound especially on the meaning of the phrase “in the perspective of the acting person” as this applies to the specification of the moral act.<sup>38</sup> It would not be useful to rehearse even briefly these discussions and exchanges. I would however like to conclude by remarking on what many consider to be an important connection between moral action and perfective end. The suggestion comes from a point that is well-known by those who study Aristotle’s

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<sup>38</sup> Many of the articles to which I refer have appeared in *The Thomist*. For example, Steven A. Long, “A Brief Disquisition Regarding the Nature of the Object of the Moral Act According to St. Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 67 (2003): 45–71.

*Ethics*: As a person is according to his appetites, so he views the end.<sup>39</sup> We discover in the ethical wisdom of the classical philosophers, who were deprived of all knowledge of adoptive sonship, a clue to understanding the full meaning of a Christian anthropology of sonship. To follow the way of the Lord Jesus a person must first of all be conformed to the Lord Jesus. This conformity is fully personal insofar as it extends to every properly human capacity that man enjoys: all the powers of the soul, including, and perhaps especially so, the powers of sense. The man who is conformed to Christ is the one who will love like Christ. In order to account for this new capacity to love completely, the theological tradition that follows Aquinas speaks about the infusion at baptism of both theological *and moral* virtues.

My pastoral experience persuades me that unless we bring people to love moral truth, especially in those situations where adhering to moral truth entails what is thought to be great sacrifice, for example, the care of pregnant rape victims and the refusal to resort to artificial forms of fertilization (IVH), we will never persuade them to act in accord with the truth. It is my impression that even some good Catholic moral theologians are too influenced by modern moral theories and so rest content to develop moral arguments. A Christian anthropology of sonship requires much more than minute attention to formal argument. Aquinas suggests what this “more” entails when he explains that the person in whom the influence of the virtues and the gifts is strong enters into a “semi-experiential” awareness of the divine indwelling Persons: “The Son in turn is the Word; not, however, just any word, but the Word breathing Love.... So Augustine says pointedly, ‘The Son is being sent whenever someone has knowledge or perception of

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<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of this adage and its place in the virtue theory of Aquinas, see my *Introduction to Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

him,' for 'perception' points to a kind of experiential awareness and this precisely is what wisdom is, a knowing that, as it were, is tasted.<sup>40</sup> To this wisdom, which comprises more than the recognition of moral norms, the encyclical summons us. The whole world should be grateful for the invitation. It supplies their title to transformation.

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<sup>40</sup> See *ST I*, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2.