

The Natural Desire For The Vision of God
In Saint Thomas Aquinas

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss "the natural desire for the vision of God in Saint Thomas Aquinas." I will begin by quoting St. Thomas in two passages which imply that each man has this natural desire. In the first he discusses man's natural desire for a knowledge of God, and in the second he points out that this desire does not rest in (theological or philosophical or even biblical given) knowledge of God alone, but in nothing less than the vision of God. According to Edmund Brisbois in his article "Human Desire And The Vision Of God In Saint Thomas", this concept "is one of the most fundamental as well as one of the most difficult in the whole of Christian Philosophy," and our understanding of it depends on our prior understanding of "the psychology of human activity, even considered from a purely rational point of view, for human action cannot entirely abstract from the possibility of the supernatural; and secondly,...theology, insofar as the solution implies the determination of the connection between the natural and the supernatural."¹ This brings us to the purpose of this paper, namely to state what St. Thomas says about the natural desire for the vision of God, and then to compare and contrast the views of the main commentators who discuss his position on this topic.

Saint Thomas takes it up in his Summa Contra Gentiles. The relevant passages are from Volume III, Chapters XXV and L. For example, in Chapter XXV he states:

"Now seeing that all creatures, even those that are

devoid of human reason, are directed to God as their last end: and that all reach this end in so far as they have some share of a likeness to him: the intellectual creature attains to him in a special way, namely through its proper operation, by understanding him. Consequently this must be the end of the intellectual creature, namely to understand God."²

In Chapter I of the same volume, he then makes the point that we do not rest in the natural knowledge of God, but rather that this natural knowledge leads to a desire for the vision of God. He states:

"Now it is not possible that the separate substance's natural desire rest in such a knowledge of God. For whatever is imperfect in a species, seeks to acquire the perfection of that species: thus whoso has an opinion about a matter, and therefore imperfect knowledge about it, for this very reason is spurred to the desire for certain knowledge of it. Now the aforesaid knowledge which separate substances have about God without knowing his substance, is an imperfect kind of knowledge; for we do not deem ourselves to know a thing if we know not its substance: so that the chief point in knowing a thing is to know what it is. Therefore this knowledge which the separate substances have about God does not set their appetite at rest, but

spurs it on to the vision of the divine substance."³

The importance of these two passages is that they represent what St. Thomas means when he talks about man's natural desire for the knowledge of God and man's desire for the vision of God. In the first, when St. Thomas says that the "proper operation" of man is to seek some knowledge of God, he is evidently claiming that it is natural for man to seek after God, because God is good and the purpose of all men is to seek after the good. But to simply seek after this good which is God and even to gain knowledge of Him is not enough. In the second passage he claims that man will continue to seek until he has arrived at the beatific vision, the seeing of God as He is in Himself. Thus, these two passages show that the desire not only to know God but to see Him as He is in Himself is what St. Thomas means when he speaks of the natural desire for God. All men have in their nature the tendency to become more knowledgeable by coming to know the truth. For St. Thomas, man has this natural desire to know and see God, because we do not know what God is in Himself. Consequently, when man comes to know and see God as He is in Himself, there will no longer be any tendency to know what He is.⁴

At this point, it will be useful to discuss St. Thomas' position on this topic as it is understood by two important contemporary Aquinas scholars, Edmund Brisbois and William R. O'Connor. Some interpreters of St. Thomas have had difficulty

with his concept of a natural desire for the supernatural end. Their chief complaint is that St. Thomas never clarified what he meant by the natural and the supernatural in this connection. Brisbois on the other hand, argues that St. Thomas was aware of this problem, and that he dealt with it on several occasions through out his work. (S.T. Ia, 12, 1; Ia IIae, 3, 8; Sum. c. Gent. 50, 51; De Malo. V, 8; Comp. Theol. 104, 106; 2 Sent. XXXII, 2, 2; 4 Sent. XLIX, 1, 3.)⁵

O'Connor clarifies the way St. Thomas is using the term 'natural.' For him, St. Thomas is referring to what is **innate**, as when he speaks of Christ having grace by nature in this sense. (S.T. III, Q2, a12) St. Thomas is here using the term 'natural' in an Augustinian manner: "that which is given to a creature by the creator at its origin."⁶ Thus, with this understanding of 'nature' and 'natural(ly)', we can summarize St. Thomas' argument as follows: " the desire to see God is manifested in the spiritual being as the immediate expression of a desire that does not accidentally arise within him, but which has its roots in his very nature: the desire to know everything according to its essence."⁷ This desire will not be satisfied with mere knowledge of a being; it demands to see the essence, for part of an individual's very nature is to know a thing as it is in itself. Since we know of the existence of God, we "will naturally desire to know Him according to His essence, as He is in Himself, according to His own form, and not simply in an analogical manner."⁸ Thus, mans nature is perfected when he arrives at the vision of

God, and his **natural** desire is fulfilled.

Saint Thomas, holds that the fulfillment of this desire is possible, because man could not have a **natural** desire for the impossible or that which he could not obtain. For the commentators on St. Thomas' great work, his position on the desire for the vision of God is a major problem the discussion of which will occupy us for the remainder of this paper. The main commentators who deal with this position of St. Thomas are four: Dominic Banez (1528-1604), Thomas Cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534), Dominic Soto (1494-1560), and Francis Sylvester of Ferrara (1474-1528). Other commentators have written on this position, and are still writing on this position, but they all start from the opinions of the four men who will be discussed in this paper.

The sources that I have used to interpret the Latin texts of these men are The Eternal Quest by William R. O'Connor, an indispensable work, and "The Human Desire and The Vision of God in Saint Thomas Aquinas", by Edmund Brisbois.

All four commentators agree with St. Thomas that the natural desire for the vision of God presupposes the knowledge of God. They disagree with his notion that knowledge of God is natural, i.e., implanted in a creature at the moment of creation by the creator. They hold instead that knowledge of God is acquired, whether through revelation or otherwise, and that the desire for the vision of God is therefore a contingent or elicited natural desire. Thus man

is "conditioned not alone by nature, but by the free development of a conscious activity, and by the previous acquisition of certain knowledge that is not innate."⁹

According to Brisbois, the four commentators have varying beliefs about the concept of natural desire in general and, consequently, they disagree "upon the real import of St. Thomas' spontaneous desire for the sight of God, and upon the conditions of its significance as a natural desire."¹⁰

Banez and Cajetan are reluctant to accept the claim that man has an innate natural desire for God, a desire implanted in him naturally the moment he is created as St. Thomas believes. They hold that man knows through revelation that he will be elevated to the supernatural level, and that this knowledge **elicits** a natural desire to see this supernatural being as He is in Himself. (Elicited desires include those natural desires which the subject has in the presence of a good he has conceived, as well as "unnatural" desires for what may or may not be conceivable or even good.--Brisbois p. 12.) Their main concern is to safeguard the transcendence of the supernatural. Indeed, both of these commentators think that man's desire to see God is a mere "hypothesis". That is to say, we can suppose that there is such a desire only after revelation has made known to us that our final end is the supernatural seeing of God. Without revelation man could not make such a hypothesis or know and desire what is in fact his final end. The natural desire to see God is thus natural

because nature is its subject, and not because of the object that it seeks or the manner of proceeding.¹¹

On the other hand, we have Soto and Sylvester of Ferrara whose views are importantly different from those mentioned above. These men are willing to acknowledge that every created intellectual nature has a genuine natural desire for the vision of God. They are as concerned as the other two men to safeguard the transcendence of the supernatural, but, as we will see below, they claim to find more in St. Thomas than a mere "obediential potency." These men constitute the second great class of commentators that discuss St. Thomas' position on the natural desire for the vision of God.¹²

I wish now to consider, one at a time, each of these four great commentators with regard to what he makes of St. Thomas' position on the natural desire for the vision of God.

Dominic Banez summarizes his interpretation as follows:

"St. Thomas does not mean to demonstrate that in man is a natural desire to see God. Here merely wishes to show that, after faith reveals the possibility of the beatific vision, this vision is most in harmony with a created intellect. It is customary with St. Thomas to offer suitable natural reasons to show how the mysteries of faith are most in harmony with nature and not at all in conflict with it. In a spiritual creature is a certain wishfulness, a kind of imperfect desire, to see God. From this St. Thomas draws a probable argument

to the effect that the beatific vision is possible.
lest such a desire be frustrated."¹³

His interpretation begins by implying that St. Thomas does not really mean what he says when he discusses man's natural desire for the vision of God. For Banez, the only possibility for man to see God comes after faith, and revelation precedes faith. Once revelation has produced faith, **then** from reason the spiritual creature finds it possible to seek such a vision. St. Thomas gave natural reasons to support the position that mysteries of faith are in harmony with nature, as opposed to being in conflict with it. It follows that the natural desire to see God is an "imperfect" desire which is perfect by revelation. From this St. Thomas infers the possibility for the vision of God, since the desire would be in vain if this possibility were not granted. In this way Banez seeks to interpret the text of St. Thomas as compatible with the aforementioned "transcendence of the supernatural."¹⁴

The second assumption Banez is compelled to make about St. Thomas' position is that he is referring to something other than God when he talks about the "beatific vision," because according to Banez it is impossible to have a natural(innate) desire for the supernatural. In any case, according to Banez, St. Thomas is speaking primarily as a philosopher and merely furnishes a probable argument for the possibility of such a desire. Knowledge of this possibility can only come from revelation.¹⁵

Thomas Cardinal Cajetan, like Banez, is especially concerned to safeguard the transcendence of the supernatural. In order to do this, he restricts as much as possible the natural aspect of the natural desire of God. Cajetan, unlike Banez, thinks that St. Thomas is speaking as a theologian and not as a philosopher. Man desires to know the cause of grace after seeing its effects; but only after and because revelation has made known to us the fact that the vision of God is our end can we call this desire natural. Cajetan also thinks that we naturally desire to see God as the first cause of things, but this is not an inclination towards the vision of God as He is in Himself. The desire for the beatific vision is natural only in the sense that human nature is the subject of it.¹⁶ It is not natural in its origin and object.

For Cajetan this is all that the natural desire for God means. Human nature in itself cannot reach the supernatural level, and a desire of this sort cannot go beyond the nature in which it is found. Therefore, according to Cajetan, this desire cannot be called natural except in so far as it is a "hypothesis" of revelation.¹⁷ He also thinks that the desire of seeing the supernatural good is a natural desire insofar as it is dependent upon the ordering of human nature to its ultimate supernatural good; "only in this hypothesis is there question of a real, natural, objectively necessary desire; a desire that is supernatural as regards its object, but natural as to its mode."¹⁸ Man's desire aims at the supernatural end since he is already directed towards that

end.

Cajetan, unlike Banez, admits that in speaking of the natural desire for God, St. Thomas had something legitimate to write about, and that such a desire somehow existed even if it was hypothetical. Banez denied the whole concept ("St. Thomas did not mean to demonstrate that in man is a natural desire to see God"). As we have already mentioned, Cajetan thinks that this desire exist in a hypothetical manner, in that God awakens in man a desire to know all that he can know. From this Cajetan affirms his belief that St. Thomas is speaking as a theologian who is considering man in relation to the supernatural end, as opposed to a philosopher who would consider man in the absolute point of view. Philosophy considers the natural desire for God only to be an "obediential potency" in a created intellectual nature in reference to this supernatural end. Cajetan holds that for Aquinas the natural desire is more than obediential potency; thus St. Thomas must be regarded not as a philosopher but as a theologian.¹⁹

For Cajetan, the "natural desire" can be understood in two ways; as first act and as second act. The first act means ones nature is inclined towards a certain act, therefore it is not an elicited act. The second act consists of intellect or senses moving the appetite, but determined by ones nature. This act is called appetition, as distinct from natural appetite is not at elicited act. Cajetan understood St. Thomas' natural desire for God to be **appetition**. For him the

desire for God is determined by the will following knowledge. The problem arises when he tries to explain what St. Thomas meant by 'natural', and what ~~he~~ means by 'natural'.

The next commentator we shall discuss is Dominic Soto. His position is that St. Thomas was speaking of a genuine natural desire following knowledge of that which it was blindly seeking, i.e. a desire moving us towards God once we see that God is our final happiness and last end. This is a natural appetite as opposed to an elicited appetite. Man naturally seeks a true beatitude consisting in the vision of God as his final end, though he reaches this end not by himself, but with the help of God.²⁰

Soto's position is nicely summarized by Banez in his commentary on the natural desire for God in the Summa Theologica:

"Master Soto makes three points. First, he says there is in man a natural appetite for true beatitude which consists in the vision of God. In the second place he asserts that this end is simply natural for man. Third, he states that no one can naturally desire this true beatitude by means of an elicited act. In explaining his views he notes that natural appetite is used in two senses. First, it means an act is elicited by an appetitive power; e.g., all men naturally desire to know. Second, natural appetite means the very inclination of nature in the sense of an impulsion towards an end.

In this way a stone has a natural appetite for the center of the earth. This does not mean that the stone elicits a vital act, but it does mean that it is determined by its own weight in that direction. In this second way Soto teaches that man has a natural appetite to see God."²¹

Thus, Soto holds that man has a natural appetite for God that consists in a natural inclination and not an elicited act.

Francis Sylvester of Ferrara is the final main commentator on St. Thomas' natural desire for God, and his position is to me the most interesting of the four. Like Soto, he thinks that man has a genuine natural desire for the vision of God, but unlike Soto or the other two commentators, he considers natural appetite as an **elicited** act that is **determined** either in its exercise or in its specification. This position is applied to St. Thomas' position in two ways. First, a natural desire for God only arises after a knowledge of God's existence is attained, that is, "knowledge of God as the first cause of the effects seen in the universe." Thus, we have a **natural** desire to know God as the first cause of effects and not to see him as He is in Himself. Secondly, this desire lies **between** the **innate** natural appetite and a freely elicited act. It is not innate because an "innate tendency arises from a natural form that is always in act so long as its subject is in existence," and "the inclination following from this form is likewise always in act."²² It is

not freely elicited because it cannot be removed once its object is known to exist. It is thus an elicited but natural appetite.

Sylvester of Ferrara also clarifies the problem the others had about the natural and the supernatural. For him, the supernatural can be attained by the natural but not without aid from the supernatural. Only if the desire for God were an innate tendency would the supernatural be naturally attainable. Since St. Thomas was speaking of an elicited natural desire, not of an innate desire, and since an elicited natural desire cannot of itself rise to a supernatural object, it seems likely that St. Thomas held that God is not the object of unaided natural desire.

To sum up the foregoing, when St. Thomas speaks of the natural desire for the vision of God, he means that each man has an innate natural desire to see God as He is in Himself. Banez disagrees with the notion of "innate natural desire;" rather he holds that the possibility for man to see God comes after faith, and revelation precedes faith. Once revelation has produced faith, then from reason man finds it possible to seek such a vision. Cajetan, like Banez, believes that the desire to see God comes after revelation, and we desire to see God as the first cause of things, but this is not an inclination towards the vision of God as He is in Himself. On the other hand, Soto held that man has a natural appetite for God that consist in a natural inclination and not an elicited act. For Sylvester of Ferrara, whose position

to me was the most interesting of the four, held that man had a natural desire to know God as the first cause of effects, and that this desire lies between the innate natural appetite and freely elicited act. Most contemporary commentators who consider St. Thomas' notion for the natural desire for the vision of God stems from one of the above commentator's position.

End Notes

¹Edmund Brisbois, S.J. "The Human Desire For The Vision of God," The Modern Schoolman, No. 16 (1938-39), p. 9.

²Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Third Book Part I, trans. The English Dominican Fathers from the Latest Leonine Ed. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1924), p. 56.

³Ibid., pp. 119-120.

⁴William R. O'Connor, "Natural Desire For God In St. Thomas," The New Scholasticism, No. 14 (1940), pp. 246-247.

⁵Brisbois, p. 9.

⁶O'Connor, pp. 216-217.

⁷Brisbois, pp. 9-10.

⁸Ibid., p. 10.

⁹Ibid., pp. 11-12.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹William R. O'Connor, The Eternal Quest, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947), pp. 25-27.

¹²Ibid., pp. 27-28.

¹³Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁶O'Connor, "Natural Desire For God In St. Thomas," p. 217.

¹⁷O'Connor, The Eternal Quest, p. 34.

¹⁸Brisbois, p. 12.

¹⁹O'Connor, The Eternal Quest, p. 34.

²⁰Ibid., p. 58.

²¹Ibid., p. 59.

²²Ibid., p. 67.

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