

## Aquinas on God and Free Will (“Cliff Notes” Version)

Since God is God, we cannot add one iota to what God does in us. If we could add anything to what God does, there would be something in us that God did not create. If there were something in us that God did not create, God would not be the creator of all things. So God would not be God. That crucial truth is the source of the old theological problem about grace and free will, the problem of predestination.

That problem finally got a solution in the last century. Actually, the answer to the dilemma is found in Aquinas, but in only one line of his work. So we overlooked it for centuries, and most seminaries have yet to catch up with it. In a moment, we will give you a brief summary of the solution. But we are *not* recommending that you make this technical metaphysics part of your normal pastoring. But as pastors, you need to be aware of this much background.

As you know, any activity a created cause performs is also caused totally by God. When a dog barks, the dog is producing that act only because God is causing him to produce the act. God is the primary cause of that effect; the dog is only the secondary cause. The same is true of a decision produced by our will. When we produce a meritorious choice, we are producing it only because God is causing us to produce it. He is the primary cause; we are only the secondary cause acting because God is producing the act in us.

But then how can our choices be free? How can one choice be meritorious for us and another choice demeritorious. How can either choice be our responsibility if they exist because God first caused them to exist?

The short answer is that we cannot be the primary cause of *anything*, of any positive reality. But we *can* be the primary cause of the *lack* of something, the *absence* of some reality that should be there. As you know, what makes something evil is not the positive reality it contains but the absence of what should be there. So we can be the primary source of evil since being the primary source of evil requires us, not to cause the positive presence of something but to be responsible for the absence of something that should be there.

How can we have the primary responsibility for absence, if we cannot produce a choice unless God causes it in us? The line from Aquinas that solves the problem is this (the speaker should hand out the following and/or display it in PowerPoint):

There is *no need to seek a cause* of this [the absence, the lack that is the root of moral evil] because the liberty of the will itself, thanks to which it can act *or not act*, suffices for this. (De Malo, I, 3; emphasis supplied.)

There is no need to seek a cause since the basic freedom is not the freedom to choose A *as opposed to choosing something other than A*. The basic freedom is the freedom to choose A *as opposed to refraining from choosing A*. The basic freedom is not between an act of choosing A or an act of choosing non-A, but between producing an act of choosing A or not producing an act of choosing A. When God creates sufficient conditions to cause a dog to bark, the dog cannot

refrain from barking. When God creates sufficient conditions to cause us to choose A, we can still refrain from choosing A.

Sufficient conditions for us to choose A mean sufficient grace for us to choose A. If God creates sufficient grace for us to produce a “Yes,” our refraining from producing a “Yes” is the moral equivalent of producing a “No.” But our refraining from saying “Yes” does not require God to cause an additional effect, which would be an act of saying “No.” Nor does our refraining from saying “Yes” require us to be able to cause some act that would be more than what God causes in us. For refraining from saying “Yes” is not an act; it is the absence of an act, the absence of an act that should be there. So, if the grace we receive is sufficient to cause in us an act of saying “Yes,” the negative state of just refraining from the act of saying “Yes” is the moral equivalent of a positive act of saying “No.”

Any time we say “Yes” to God, we do so only because God caused the act of saying “Yes” in us. But that act of saying “Yes” is still a free act which is our responsibility and which earns us merit, because we could have freely refrained from saying “Yes.” If we did refrain from saying “Yes,” the absence of an act that should be there would be our responsibility entirely. So our not refraining from saying “Yes” is also our responsibility, but not entirely. It is primarily the result of God’s grace being sufficient for us to say “Yes,” and only secondarily the result of our not freely refraining from saying “Yes.”

That, in brief, is the theological solution to the question of how we cooperate with grace. The majority of Catholics will probably never need to know the theological solution to the problem of grace and free will. And for those who don’t have the time to let it sink in, the theological solution can be confusing. Not cooperating with grace is a negative; for refraining from saying “Yes,” is a negative, an absence of what should be there. So from the technical metaphysical point of view, our cooperating with grace, our responding to God’s action in us, amounts to a double negative, our (1) *not* (2) *refraining* from saying “Yes, our (1) not taking responsibility for (2) an absence.

When the act of saying “Yes” occurs, all we contributed “on our own,” that is, over and above what God did in us, is describable by the double negative that we did not refrain from saying “Yes.” But because refraining, non-acting, being responsible for absence, is always in our power, when the act of saying “Yes” is present, we have cooperated with God by freely not refraining when we could have refrained.<sup>1</sup>

How do we communicate the fact that salvation is totally a free gift from God without asking all Catholics to understand that double-negative theology that took the best theological minds centuries to figure out—centuries of acrimonious, internecine battling? Catholics need to know that what grace does for us is to cause us to produce acts that are our acts, just as a dog’s barking is the truly the dog’s act even though it is also something totally caused by God. Grace saves us by causing us to produce meritorious acts like repenting and believing. And Catholics need to know that they need to make positive acts describable by positive verbs like repenting and believing. The opposite would be quietism.

But Catholics also need to know that when we make a meritorious choice, we have added absolutely nothing to what God causes in us. For if God were not the creator of everything, God would not be God. And if we did have to add something to what God does in us, we could not rely on God's promises to do everything we need for us. So is there a way at the pastoral level to ensure that Catholics have a firm grasp of the following three things without requiring Catholics to learn obscure, double-negative theology?

First, that we can rely on God to do all the work in us necessary for us to be saved.

Second, that cooperating with God requires us to make decisions, especially the decisions to repent and believe, to accept Jesus as our Personal Lord and Savior.

Third, when we make the necessary decisions, we are not adding one iota to what God does in us; we make those decisions only because his grace causes us to do so.

In short, the question is how Catholics can understand that there is *moral* burden on them in the process salvation without thinking that this burden requires them to add anything to what God does in them. Actually, there is more than one way to communicate these things. We will explain one way that most people understand without any problem, and then mention some other ways.

Most people understand when we say that a person didn't cause something but only *allowed* it to happen, only *let* it happen, only *permitted* it to happen. We even say that about God himself, namely, that he doesn't cause evil but allows it to happen. And we have all probably been in situations where we could have prevented something from happening, whether something bad or something good, but let it happen. We might allow the sun to melt the snow on a warm day rather than shoveling the snow ourselves. A football coach may allow someone to rush the quarterback, rather than have the person blocked, in order to set up a screen pass. A doctor may allow an infection to take its course rather than give a patient a medicine she is allergic to.

Sometimes allowing something to happen without causing it is for the good, sometimes for the bad. On a regular basis, courts have to decide whether merely allowing something to happen does or does not make a person legally responsible for it. As confessors, you sometimes have to tell a penitent whether they should or should not allow someone to happen even though the penitent is not the one doing it. For example, are there times when you may allow someone to die and times when you should not allow someone to die, even though you do no more to actively cause the death in one case than in the other.

So we can expect Catholics to understand that God will do everything for our salvation that we need to have done if we just *let* him, if we just *allow* him to, if we just *permit* him to. What God is solemnly promising in the passages we handed out is that he will cause us to walk in his statues *if we just let him*; he will keep us blameless at the coming of the Lord *if we just allow him to*; he will sustain us guiltless to the end *if we just give him permission*. In the very

common, everyday understanding of these words that we just illustrated, allowing God to work does not imply adding anything positive of our own to what God does in us.

Letting grace work is not passivity or quietism. It requires our making decisions. But Catholics need to know that we can produce meritorious choices only because God's power causes us to do so, if we just let it cause those choices. When we make a meritorious choice, we have cooperated with God. But what our cooperating with God means is that we have just let his grace produce its intended effect, have just allowed grace to do its work. We are just permitting it to save us because that all we have to do in order to be saved. That is all we have to do because that is all we can do.

From the point of view of metaphysical theological theory, cooperating with grace amounts to the double negative of not refraining from the meritorious choice grace is meant to cause. But from the point of view of what we are psychologically aware of there is no double negative, only the positive choice grace causes in us because we allowed it to. In order to make a choice of repenting, we have to cooperate with grace, but that just means letting grace cause the choice of repenting in us. And because all we have to do to make a meritorious choice is to allow grace to work, we are not adding one iota to what God does in us.

There are other ways to say this. Instead of talking about allowing grace to work, we can tell Catholics that all they have to do to be saved is to *yield* to God's grace, to *surrender* to his action within us, or to *accept* his promise that he will save us. Vocabulary is not the main point. We should not get caught up in it and certainly should not let those we are ministering to get caught up in it.

For example, someone may doubt her ability to sincerely repent. If so, she can ask for the grace to repent before she is psychologically aware of having repented. If her prayer for repentance is sincere and made in faith, she has de facto already repented and believed and so already allowed God's grace to work. For when we have produced an act of asking sincerely and with faith, we have only done so by allowing God to create that act in us. But at the time, she does not need to know that she has already repented; she just needs to know that God will answer her prayer with sufficient grace to cause her to repent.

<sup>1</sup> For more on Aquinas' solution to the God/free-will problem, see Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, Chap 4, and *God and the Permission of Evil*. Be forewarned that the full discussion has to be much more technical and complicated. Maritain's "shatterable impulse" is just a philosophical substitute for the theological "sufficient grace," and "unshatterable impulse" a substitute for "efficacious grace."