

## **Staying in Love with God: Resolving a Difficulty concerning Grace as Cooperative**

Lonergan on the Edge 2012

Nicholas DiSalvatore

The motivator of this paper—which I have titled “Staying in Love with God: Resolving a Difficulty concerning Grace as Cooperative”—is a question that has been bothering me for some time now, both personally and academically. The question is this: What role, if any, does the subject play in his or her own conversion to friendship with God? Looking for the answer to this question has led me to appreciate just how difficult it can be to try to understand the intelligibility of grace in its cooperative aspect. It is this difficulty that I am mostly concerned with today.

But the difficulty itself is just one of the three aspects of my paper that is begging for the lion’s share of my twenty minutes. The second aspect of my paper, of course, is how Lonergan can help to resolve this difficulty and how he offers a more adequate way to think about the question in general. And the third aspect of the paper has to do with the larger ramifications of such a change in understanding, if a change in understanding is in fact what is in order.

Of course, to do justice to any of the three aspects requires a full presentation of its own. Like the other presenters, I have had to make careful choices about how best to invite others into my inquiry in such a short space of time. In the end, I have chosen to offer brief, and therefore incomplete, glimpses into the paper’s three parts. It may very well be the *least* inadequate way to communicate the main ideas of my topic—but I cannot emphasize the word “inadequate” enough. The plan will be, first, to *begin* to indicate the difficulty concerning the intelligibility of cooperative grace; next, to explicitly highlight just *one* of the many ways that

Lonergan has helped me to resolve this difficulty in my own understanding; and, lastly, to gesture *very obliquely* towards some of the further questions that this raises in what will turn out to be about a minute's worth of concluding remarks.

\* \* \*

Let me begin, then, with a brief elucidation of the difficulty in question. The difficulty, to put it out on the table as early and clearly as I can, is this: That the cooperative aspect of grace—whatever it may really be—is often taken to be an active operation on the part of the subject by which the subject says Yes to, chooses, or accepts the offer of the gift of God's love. In other words, it's a way of saying that God's love comes in the form of invitations, to which we are free to respond. On the face of it, this characterization isn't entirely wrong. Indeed, for the most part, it's exactly right. But it's inadequate, and it can be misleading, for the very reason that grace does more than just *invite* the subject to respond—though it does do that. Most importantly, however, and most fundamentally—that is, in that first moment when grace converts the subject to friendship with God, when grace establishes the dynamic state of being in love—grace doesn't *invite* the subject to respond, grace *gives* the subject its response.

We can see the difficulty that I'm interested in, in any number of places. But in some places, the difficulty in question is complicated by other still more complicating difficulties. For the sake of simplicity, then, I have chosen to comment briefly on a text in which the difficulty in question is both relatively easy to spot and only moderately complicated. That text is question 111 of the *prima secundae*, article 2, where Thomas asks whether grace is fittingly divided into operative and

cooperative grace. Those familiar with the question will remember that Thomas identifies operative and cooperative aspects of both actual grace and habitual grace.

I now quote the relevant portion of the text regarding *actual* grace:

There is a double act in us. First, there is the interior act of the will, and with regard to this act the will is a thing moved, and God is the mover; and especially when the will, which hitherto willed evil, begins to will good. And hence, inasmuch as God moves the human mind to this act, we speak of operating grace. But there is another, exterior act; and since it is commanded by the will, as was shown above [q. 17, a. 9], the operation of this act is attributed to the will. And because God assists us in this act, both by strengthening our will interiorly so as to attain to the act, and by granting outwardly the capability of operating, it is with respect to this that we speak of cooperating grace.

There are two items to which I would like to draw our attention. First is the fact that Thomas batches the actual grace of conversion along with all other actual graces. In fact, Thomas makes this grace—the grace that establishes friendship with God—the *quintessential* example of actual grace. We speak of actual grace, Thomas says, [actually, it wasn't yet known as actual grace but as “divine help,” *divinum auxilium*]—we speak of this, he says, “especially when the will, which hitherto willed evil, begins to will good.” In other words, even though the *gift given* in conversion is—as we'll see—habitual grace, the *giving* of this gift is an actual grace, indeed, *the* instance of actual grace. But this kind of grace is still kin to other actual graces that cause the interior acts of the will, examples of which might be—to use an image that

Father Doran has used—the direct, reflective, or deliberative insights involved in understanding, affirming, and valuing concrete instances of the Law of the Cross. Actual graces cause *interior* acts of the will—which is to say, intentional responses. They always reorient the subject for a moment, but sometimes they are part of the establishment of a more permanent reorientation.

If the first thing I wanted to call attention to was the fact that the grace that converts the subject to friendship with God is an actual grace, the second thing I want to call attention to is the fact that the grace of conversion is an actual grace that Thomas put squarely on the operative side of the operative-cooperative divide. In other words, it is an event that does not *involve* the subject's operation so much as it *enables* the subject's operation. This operative actual grace, we saw, causes an interior act of the will, an intentional response; but this change *enables* what Thomas calls "exterior acts of the will." Exterior acts of the will are not simply those acts that transcend our interiority—acts, as it were, "outside of us." They sometimes *involve* such acts, but are not limited thereto. Exterior acts of the will are to interior acts of the will what formulation is to a direct insight, what a judgment of fact is to a reflective insight, what a judgment of value is to a deliberative insight. They are, in other words, the *autonomous* operations *effected* in and by the subject that correspond to the *spontaneous* operations immanently *received* in and by the subject. I'll be coming back to this hopefully not too tangled nest of terms in a bit, but for the moment, I simply want to emphasize that, as far as Thomas is concerned, the event that establishes the habitual gift of supernatural friendship with God is an event that God effects, which is to say operates, *alone*. *Sine nobis*, as Augustine put it,

“without us.” At the very most, then, one can say, not that there is any cooperating in conversion to friendship with God, but that there is a cooperative *aspect* to conversion inasmuch as the divine operation that causes “the will, which hitherto willed evil, [to begin] to will good,” enables the subject to effect acts in cooperation with that divine operation, which is to say, under the sway of religious love. In fact, I think this is precisely what Thomas means.

And to further support the point, let me quote the short passage from this question that relates to *habitual* grace:

If, on the other hand, grace is taken for the habitual gift, then again there is a double effect of grace ... thus habitual grace, inasmuch as it heals and justifies the soul, or makes it pleasing to God, is called operating grace; but inasmuch as it is the *principle* of meritorious works, which spring from the free-will, it is called cooperating grace.

To elucidate the relevant point here, I find it helpful to ask the following question: What is the relationship between habitual grace and the subject’s active cooperation with God? Essentially Thomas is saying that, considered as an enhancement of human *substance*—that is to say, considered in terms of what it makes humans to *be*—the habitual gift is entirely operative, and the being in question is thereby rendered healed being, justified being, being that is pleasing to God—being that is *in love* with God. On the other hand, considered as an enhancement of human *nature*—that is, considered in terms of what it enables humans to *do*—the habitual gift is cooperative, and it is a principle of meritorious works. The key term here, I think, is principle. Habitual grace as cooperative, just like the grace of conversion, does not

*involve* the subject's cooperation; it *enables* the subject's cooperation. This, I think, is key. And I suspect that it is rarely emphasized enough. Lonergan, of course, is, if not emphatic, at least clear on this same exact point in *Method in Theology*: "[T]he dynamic state," he writes, "of itself is operative grace, but the same state as principle of acts of love, hope, faith, repentance, and so on, is grace as cooperative." (p. 107) This comes straight from the part of *Summa* we've been considering. And from it one should be able to see the precise relationship between, on the one hand, the grace that establishes the dynamic state of being in love, and, on the other hand, the acts of love, hope, faith, repentance and so on, of which the dynamic state is the remote *principle*. Again, just as we saw above that the *giving* of the habitual gift is an instance of actual grace that is entirely operative, this *gift* itself is *also* operative, but has a cooperative aspect to it insofar as it is considered from the point of view of what it enables the subject to do. It is, in other words, a question of a notional difference. The healing and justifying action of the dynamic state of being in love, together with the divine operation that establishes this dynamic state in the first place, occur entirely apart from the subject's active operation. And from this point of view, the answer to the question about what role the subject plays in his or her own conversion to friendship with God is this: Nothing whatsoever.

Unfortunately, however, this answer is as inadequate as the answer that says that the subject actively says Yes to, chooses, or accepts the offer of the gift of conversion. Thankfully, there's help to be found.

\* \* \*

*Implicitly*, of course, in my brief commentary on Thomas's question, I have already demonstrated my overwhelming debt to Lonergan. Not only has he taught me how to be a better reader of texts in general; he has taught me how to be a better reader of Thomas in specific. And I find it helpful, in exercises like these, to be reminded that Lonergan didn't reach up to Thomas so that we didn't have to, but so that we could—and with his help. The help that Lonergan provides for this particular question is great indeed. And therefore I would like to make *explicit* mention of the element of his work on grace that elicited in me a more nuanced grasp of the intelligibility of the role of the subject in his or her conversion to friendship with God.

Before I do so, however, I want to *just very briefly* indicate two other elements in Lonergan's thought that are potentially confusing on this score—at least, for those who, like us, spend a lot of time reading his works.

The first element is the fact that when Lonergan uses the word "conversion," he usually means—as he said in the 1968 essay "Theology in its New Context"—"an ongoing *process*." In this presentation, of course, I have been using the term conversion to indicate what, in the old theology, was understood as the beginning of faith, the *initium fidei*. Conversion, in other words, as the establishment of friendship with God, not as the ongoing relationship as process. This is why I have rarely referred to conversion plain and simple and have referred, rather, to the subject's conversion to friendship with God, or the conversion that establishes the dynamic state of being in love. But conversion as an ongoing process has not been totally left out of view in my analysis. It is here, as it were, "in between the lines," and it is

precisely this ongoing process—what was traditionally understood as *perseverance*—that I am implicitly holding up next to the event of the establishment of friendship with God in order to understand exactly where the subject’s operation lies.

And this brings me to the second element that could potentially confuse the matter, namely, Lonergan’s highly nuanced understanding of the nature of “operation.” Those familiar with *Grace and Freedom* and *Verbum* and any of the other early works of Lonergan, are familiar with his distinction between *operatus effectus*—an operation that operates an effect—and *operatus immanens*—an operation that is received in the potency. The distinct realities in question actually go by several other names, but these two will do just fine for now. The distinction is, in many ways, the key to Lonergan’s discovery of Thomas’s understanding of grace—a discovery to which I will turn in a moment. For now I just want to acknowledge that *because* of this distinction, it is legitimate to say—whether the operation is one that the subject *effects*, or—as in the actual grace that establishes the dynamic state of being in love—an operation that the subject *receives*—in both of these cases, I say, it is legitimate to say that the subject *operates*. Lonergan himself does so on many occasions. Might *this* then be the clue to the way in which the subject can be said to “cooperate” with the *establishment* of the dynamic state of being in love? Perhaps. But only if another, related distinction is made—which brings me, at last, to the part of Lonergan’s work on grace that I have found most helpful on this score.

In his interpretative work on Thomas's understanding of operative grace, that is, in his doctoral dissertation and in the articles that became *Grace and Freedom*; and in his more synthetic treatise on grace (or, rather, *supplement* to a treatise on grace), namely, *De ente supernaturali*, Lonergan made a distinction that I find crucial for understanding the role of the subject in the establishment of the dynamic state of being in love. That distinction is the one between a *virtually* free act and a *formally* free act. An act is "virtually free," writes Lonergan in *De ente supernaturali*, when it "enables its subject to perform or not perform another act." Note my emphasis of the word "enable," a word that I have used throughout this paper to denote precisely the sort of thing that Lonergan is getting at with regard to "virtually free acts." In virtually free acts, the subject undergoes a change, suffers a change, receives a change. It is also accurate to say that an operation is elicited in the subject, and even that the subject operates, but it doesn't change the fact that the operation is a *pati*, a passion, entirely given. The primary instance that Lonergan gives for a virtually free act—just like the primary instance that Aquinas gives for an interior act of the will *moved* by operative grace—is the willing of the end, and any change thereto.

By contrast, Lonergan says, "that act is formally free in which the essential note of freedom [namely, the ability to be or not to be—a kind of autonomy] is present first and by reason of itself." (DES 167) The primary instances of formally free acts are acts of willing the means to the end. These acts, like the autonomous operations that may or may not follow upon the spontaneous intentional responses of direct, reflective, or deliberative insights, are instances where the subject can be

said to operate in the strict sense, which also means—I would like to suggest—that the grace in question can be said to be cooperative in the strict sense—which is to say, involving the subject’s active cooperation. Indeed, using Lonergan’s qualifiers to indicate the level of freedom of an act—i.e., virtual freedom as free in the restricted sense of enabling freedom, and formal freedom as free in the strictest sense of the term—I would like to suggest that we might usefully think of cooperative grace along the same lines: When the cooperative aspect of grace is an operation that, whatever else can be said about it, the subject receives as a total a gift—a gift which nevertheless enables future cooperation—we can think of this aspect of grace as *virtually* cooperative, cooperative in a restricted sense. And when the cooperative aspect of grace includes in its intelligibility the *joining in* of the subject in autonomous operation, as enabled by God’s grace, we can think of this aspect of grace as *formally* cooperative, cooperative grace in the strictest sense. In other words, it is only when the subject is operating with God in the strict sense of the term that the grace effecting this operation should be understood as *formally* cooperative grace. Otherwise, when the subject’s operations are merely enabled, the grace is perhaps more adequately understood as *virtually* cooperative.

\* \* \*

In the moments that remain, I offer just a few concluding remarks.

The aim in this paper has not so much been to propose the convention of qualifying cooperative grace with the terms *virtually* and *formally*; rather, I have simply attempted to draw attention to the need for a closer look at our understanding of the intelligibility of grace with respect to just this question.

Though technically speaking the subject may be said to “operate” in the change that establishes the dynamic state of being in love, we should not lose sight of the understanding that Lonergan shared with Aquinas and Augustine before him, namely, the understanding that the beginning of faith is something that God works in us without us—*in nobis sine nobis*. Only what follows is cooperative in the formal sense of the term. More colloquially, the subject actively does *nothing* to *fall* in love with the divine persons but—like the event of falling in love with *human* persons—receives it as a total gift. It is not a question, in other words, of activating an offer to be in love with God that is always already available to us in the prestructures of our existence. It is, rather, a question of receiving, in the moment of our histories that God chooses, what Lonergan calls in *Method in Theology*, “a gift of love for him.” (p. 109) This is not to say that we shouldn’t continue to speak of God’s love an invitation to which we must respond. We should, and we will, because it carries a profound truth to it. But to make the image of “invitation” more accurate, and to incorporate the intelligibility of the distinctions that I have here spoken of in terms of virtually and formally cooperative grace, I think it would be better to speak of the gift of love for God as a gift that itself *operatively* sets up an exigence with which we can either *cooperate* or not. It is here, *after* the giving of the gift of love for God—and not before—that we ask these questions from *Method*: “Will I love him in return, or will I refuse? Will I live out the gift of his love, or will I hold back, turn away, withdraw? .... Such is the basic option of the existential subject,” writes Lonergan, “*once called by God.*” (MIT, 116) Conversion to friendship with God, then—to use a rather simplistic image—is much less like receiving an invitation to a party that you

have to actually choose to go to, and more like being beamed directly to that party, which you are now free to enjoy or regret. The party in question, of course, is not *the* eschatological party, but is a sort of pre-party to that party—not to be confused, of course, with a cakewalk!

The virtually cooperative aspect of our conversion to friendship with God is, in other words, to end with the image that I have used in the title of my paper, less a question of being invited to *be* in love with God, or to *fall* in love with God, and much more a question of being given a gift of love for God that is itself, among other things, an invitation to *stay* in love with God.