

EXCERPTS FROM
SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS
ON THE TRANSFIGURATION
OF OUR LORD

—*Summa Theologiae*, III, Q.45



Question 45. Christ's transfiguration

- 1 Was it fitting that Christ should be transfigured?
- 2 Was the clarity of the transfiguration the clarity of glory?
- 3 The witnesses of the transfiguration
- 4 The testimony of the Father's voice

Article 1. Whether it was fitting that Christ should be transfigured?

Objection 1. It would seem that it was not fitting that Christ should be transfigured. For it is not fitting for a true body to be changed into various shapes [figuras, but only for an imaginary body. Now Christ's body was not imaginary, but real, as stated above (III:5:1). Therefore it seems that it should not have been transfigured.

Objection 2. Further, figure is in the fourth species of quality, whereas clarity is in the third, since it is a sensible quality. Therefore Christ's assuming clarity should not be called a transfiguration.

Objection 3. Further, a glorified

body has four gifts, as we shall state farther on (Supplement:82), viz. impassibility, agility, subtlety, and clarity. Therefore His transfiguration should not have consisted in an assumption of clarity rather than of the other gifts.

On the contrary, It is written (Matthew 17:2) that Jesus "was transfigured" in the presence of three of His disciples.

I answer that, Our Lord, after foretelling His Passion to His disciples, had exhorted them to follow the path of His sufferings (Matthew 16:21-24). Now in order that anyone go straight along a road, he must have some knowledge of the end: thus an archer will not shoot the arrow straight unless he first see the target. Hence Thomas said (John 14:5): "Lord, we know not whither Thou goest; and how can we know the way?" Above all is this necessary when hard and rough is the road, heavy the going, but delightful the end. Now by His Passion Christ achieved glory, not only of His soul, not only of His soul, which He had from the first moment of His conception, but also of His body; according to Luke (24:26): "Christ ought [Vulgate: 'ought not Christ'] to have suffered these things, and so to enter into His glory (?)." To which glory He brings those who follow the footsteps

of His Passion, according to Acts 14:21: "Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God." Therefore it was fitting that He should show His disciples the glory of His clarity (which is to be transfigured), to which He will configure those who are His; according to Philippians 3:21: "(Who) will reform the body of our lowliness configured [Douay: 'made like'] to the body of His glory." Hence Bede says on Mark 8:39: "By His loving foresight He allowed them to taste for a short time the contemplation of eternal joy, so that they might bear persecution bravely."

Reply to Objection 1.

As Jerome says on Matthew 17:2: "Let no one suppose that Christ," through being said to be transfigured, "laid aside His natural shape and countenance, or substituted an imaginary or aerial body for His real body. The Evangelist describes the manner of His transfiguration when he says: 'His face did shine as the sun, and 'His garments became white as snow.' Brightness of face and whiteness of garments argue not a change of substance, but a putting on of glory."

Reply to Objection 2.

Figure is seen in the outline of a body, for it is "that which is enclosed

by one or more boundaries" [Euclid, bk i, def. xiv]. Therefore whatever has to do with the outline of a body seems to pertain to the figure. Now the clarity, just as the color, of a non-transparent body is seen on its surface, and consequently the assumption of clarity is called transfiguration.

Reply to Objection 3.

Of those four gifts, clarity alone is a quality of the very person in himself; whereas the other three are not perceptible, save in some action or movement, or in some passion. Christ, then, did show in Himself certain indications of those three gifts—of agility, for instance, when He walked on the waves of the sea; of subtlety, when He came forth from the closed womb of the Virgin; of impassibility, when He escaped unhurt from the hands of the Jews who wished to hurl Him down or to stone Him. And yet He is not said, on account of this, to be transfigured, but only on account of clarity, which pertains to the aspect of His Person.

Article 2. Whether this clarity was the clarity of glory?

Objection 1. It would seem that this clarity was not the clarity of glory. For a gloss of Bede on Matthew 17:2, "He was transfigured before them,"

voice; so also in the transfiguration, which is the mystery of the second regeneration, the whole Trinity appears—the Father in the voice, the Son in the man, the Holy Ghost in the bright cloud; for just as in baptism He confers innocence, signified by the simplicity of the dove, so in the resurrection will He give His elect the clarity of glory and refreshment from all sorts of evil, which are signified by the bright cloud.

Reply to Objection 3.

Christ came to give grace actually, and to promise glory by His words. Therefore it was fitting at the time of His transfiguration, and not at the time of His baptism, that men should be commanded to hear Him.

Reply to Objection 4.

It was fitting that the disciples should be afraid and fall down on hearing the voice of the Father, to show that the glory which was then being revealed surpasses in excellence the sense and faculty of all mortal beings; according to Exodus 33:20: "Man shall not see Me and live." This is what Jerome says on Matthew 17:6: "Such is human frailty that it cannot bear to gaze on such great glory." But men are healed of this frailty by Christ when He brings them into glory. And this is signified by what He says to them: "Arise, and fear not."

John 3:2: "We are now the sons of God, and it hath not yet appeared what we shall be: we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like to Him, because we shall see Him as He is." Since, therefore, it is in baptism that we acquire grace, while the clarity of the glory to come was foreshadowed in the transfiguration, therefore both in His baptism and in His transfiguration the natural sonship of Christ was fittingly made known by the testimony of the Father: because He alone with the Son and Holy Ghost is perfectly conscious of that perfect generation.

Reply to Objection 1.

The words quoted are to be understood of God's eternal speaking, by which God the Father uttered the only-begotten and co-eternal Word. Nevertheless, it can be said that God uttered the same thing twice in a bodily voice, yet not for the same purpose, but in order to show the divers modes in which men can be partakers of the likeness of the eternal Sonship.

Reply to Objection 2.

Just as in the Baptism, where the mystery of the first regeneration was proclaimed, the operation of the whole Trinity was made manifest, because the Son Incarnate was there, the Holy Ghost appeared under the form of a dove, and the Father made Himself known in the

says: "In His mortal body He shows forth, not the state of immortality, but clarity like to that of future immortality." But the clarity of glory is the clarity of immortality. Therefore the clarity which Christ showed to His disciples was not the clarity of glory.

Objection 2. Further, on Luke 9:27 "(That) shall not taste death unless [Vulgate: 'till'] they see the kingdom of God," Bede's gloss says: "That is, the glorification of the body in an imaginary vision of future beatitude." But the image of a thing is not the thing itself. Therefore this was not the clarity of beatitude.

Objection 3. Further, the clarity of glory is only in a human body. But this clarity of the transfiguration was seen not only in Christ's body, but also in His garments, and in "the bright cloud" which "overshaded" the disciples. Therefore it seems that this was not the clarity of glory.

On the contrary, Jerome says on the words "He was transfigured before them" (Matthew 17:2): "He appeared to the Apostles such as He will appear on the day of judgment." And on Matthew 16:28, "Till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom," Chrysostom says: "Wishing to show with what kind of glory He is afterwards to come, so

far as it was possible for them to learn it, He showed it to them in their present life, that they might not grieve even over the death of their Lord."

I answer that, The clarity which Christ assumed in His transfiguration was the clarity of glory as to its essence, but not as to its mode of being. For the clarity of the glorified body is derived from that of the soul, as Augustine says (Ep. ad Diosc. cxviii). And in like manner the clarity of Christ's body in His transfiguration was derived from His Godhead, as Damascene says (Orat. de Transfig.) and from the glory of His soul. That the glory of His soul did not overflow into His body from the first moment of Christ's conception was due to a certain Divine dispensation, that, as stated above (III:14:1 ad 2), He might fulfil the mysteries of our redemption in a passible body. This did not, however, deprive Christ of His power of outpouring the glory of His soul into His body. And this He did, as to clarity, in His transfiguration, but otherwise than in a glorified body. For the clarity of the soul overflows into a glorified body, by way of a permanent quality affecting the body. Hence bodily refulgence is not miraculous in a glorified body. But in Christ's transfiguration clarity overflowed from His Godhead and from His

soul into His body, not as an immanent quality affecting His very body, but rather after the manner of a transient passion, as when the air is lit up by the sun. Consequently the refulgence, which appeared in Christ's body then, was miraculous: just as was the fact of His walking on the waves of the sea. Hence Dionysius says (Ep. ad Cai. iv): "Christ excelled man in doing that which is proper to man: this is shown in His supernatural conception of a virgin and in the unstable waters bearing the weight of material and earthly feet."

Wherefore we must not say, as Hugh of St. Victor [Innocent III, De Myst. Miss. iv] said, that Christ assumed the gift of clarity in the transfiguration, of agility in walking on the sea, and of subtlety in coming forth from the Virgin's closed womb: because the gifts are immanent qualities of a glorified body. On the contrary, whatever pertained to the gifts, that He had miraculously. The same is to be said, as to the soul, of the vision in which Paul saw God in a rapture, as we have stated in the II-II:175:3 ad 2.

Reply to Objection 1.

The words quoted prove, not that the clarity of Christ was not that of glory, but that it was not the clarity of a

glorified body, since Christ's body was not as yet immortal. And just as it was by dispensation that in Christ the glory of the soul should not overflow into the body so was it possible that by dispensation it might overflow as to the gift of clarity and not as to that of impassibility.

Reply to Objection 2.

This clarity is said to have been imaginary, not as though it were not really the clarity of glory, but because it was a kind of image representing that perfection of glory, in virtue of which the body will be glorious.

Reply to Objection 3.

Just as the clarity which was in Christ's body was a representation of His body's future clarity, so the clarity which was in His garments signified the future clarity of the saints, which will be surpassed by that of Christ, just as the brightness of the snow is surpassed by that of the sun. Hence Gregory says (Moral. xxxii) that Christ's garments became resplendent, "because in the height of heavenly clarity all the saints will cling to Him in the refulgence of righteousness. For His garments signify the righteous, because He will unite them to Himself," according to Isaiah 49:18: "Thou shalt be clothed with all these as with an ornament."

under the form of a dove at the same time as the Father's voice was heard. But this did not happen at the transfiguration. Therefore it seems that the testimony of the Father was made in an unfitting manner.

Objection 3. Further, Christ began to teach after His baptism. Nevertheless, the Father's voice did not then command men to hear him. Therefore neither should it have so commanded at the transfiguration.

Objection 4. Further, things should not be said to those who cannot bear them, according to John 16:12: "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." But the disciples could not bear the Father's voice; for it is written (Matthew 17:6) that "the disciples hearing, fell upon their face, and were very much afraid." Therefore the Father's voice should not have been addressed to them.

On the contrary is the authority of the Gospel.

I answer that, The adoption of the sons of God is through a certain conformity of image to the natural Son of God. Now this takes place in two ways: first, by the grace of the wayfarer, which is imperfect conformity; secondly, by glory, which is perfect conformity, according to 1

as Jerome says on Matthew 17:19, "such a wonderful thing should seem incredible to them; and lest, after hearing of so great glory, they should be scandalized at the Cross" that followed; or, again, "lest [the Cross] should be entirely hindered by the people" [Bede, Hom. xviii; cf. Catena Aurea; and "in order that they might then be witnesses of spiritual things when they should be filled with the Holy Ghost" [Hilary, in Matth. xvii].

Article 4. Whether the testimony of the Father's voice, saying, "This is My beloved Son," was fittingly added?

Objection 1. It would seem that the testimony of the Father's voice, saying, "This is My beloved Son," was not fittingly added; for, as it is written (Job 33:14), "God speaketh once, and repeateth not the selfsame thing the second time." But the Father's voice had testified to this at the time of (Christ's) baptism. Therefore it was not fitting that He should bear witness to it a second time.

Objection 2. Further, at the baptism the Holy Ghost appeared

The bright cloud signifies the glory of the Holy Ghost or the "power of the Father," as Origen says (Tract. iii in Matth.), by which in the glory to come the saints will be covered. Or, again, it may be said fittingly that it signifies the clarity of the world redeemed, which clarity will cover the saints as a tent. Hence when Peter proposed to make tents, "a bright cloud overshadowed" the disciples.

Article 3. Whether the witnesses of the transfiguration were fittingly chosen?

Objection 1. It would seem that the witnesses of the transfiguration were unfittingly chosen. For everyone is a better witness of things that he knows. But at the time of Christ's transfiguration no one but the angels had as yet any knowledge from experience of the glory to come. Therefore the witnesses of the transfiguration should have been angels rather than men.

Objection 2. Further, truth, not fiction, is becoming in a witness of the truth. Now, Moses and Elias were there, not really, but only in appearance; for a gloss on Luke 9:30, "They were Moses and Elias,"

says: "It must be observed that Moses and Elias were there neither in body nor in soul"; but that those bodies were formed "of some available matter. It is also credible that this was the result of the angelic ministries, through the angels impersonating them." Therefore it seems that they were unsuitable witnesses.

Objection 3. Further, it is said (Acts 10:43) that "all the prophets give testimony" to Christ. Therefore not only Moses and Elias, but also all the prophets, should have been present as witnesses.

Objection 4. Further, Christ's glory is promised as a reward to all the faithful (2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 3:21), in whom He wished by His transfiguration to enkindle a desire of that glory. Therefore He should have taken not only Peter, James, and John, but all His disciples, to be witnesses of His transfiguration.

On the contrary is the authority of the Gospel.

I answer that, Christ wished to be transfigured in order to show men His glory, and to arouse men to a desire of it, as stated above (Article 1). Now men are brought to the glory of eternal beatitude by Christ—not only those who lived after Him, but also those who

preceded Him; therefore, when He was approaching His Passion, both "the multitude that followed" and that "which went before, cried saying: 'Hosanna,'" as related Matthew 21:9, beseeching Him, as it were, to save them. Consequently it was fitting that witnesses should be present from among those who preceded Him—namely, Moses and Elias—and from those who followed after Him—namely, Peter, James, and John—that "in the mouth of two or three witnesses" this word might stand.

Reply to Objection 1.

By His transfiguration Christ manifested to His disciples the glory of His body, which belongs to men only. It was therefore fitting that He should choose men and not angels as witnesses.

Reply to Objection 2.

This gloss is said to be taken from a book entitled *On the Marvels of Holy Scripture*. It is not an authentic work, but is wrongly ascribed to St. Augustine; consequently we need not stand by it. For Jerome says on Matthew 17:3: "Observe that when the Scribes and Pharisees asked for a sign from heaven, He refused to give one; whereas here in order to increase the apostles' faith, He gives a sign from heaven, Elias coming down thence, whither he had

ascended, and Moses arising from the nether world." This is not to be understood as though the soul of Moses was reunited to his body, but that his soul appeared through some assumed body, just as the angels do. But Elias appeared in his own body, not that he was brought down from the empyrean heaven, but from some place on high whither he was taken up in the fiery chariot.

Reply to Objection 3.

As Chrysostom says on Matthew 17:3: "Moses and Elias are brought forward for many reasons." And, first of all, "because the multitude said He was Elias or Jeremias or one of the prophets, He brings the leaders of the prophets with Him; that hereby at least they might see the difference between the servants and their Lord." Another reason was ". . . that Moses gave the Law . . . while Elias . . . was jealous for the glory of God." Therefore by appearing together with Christ, they show how falsely the Jews "accused Him of transgressing the Law, and of blasphemously appropriating to Himself the glory of God." A third reason was "to show that He has power of death and life, and that He is the judge of the dead and the living; by bringing with Him Moses who had died, and Elias who still lived." A fourth reason was because, as Luke says (9:31), "they

spoke" with Him "of His decease that He should accomplish in Jerusalem," i.e. of His Passion and death. Therefore, "in order to strengthen the hearts of His disciples with a view to this," He sets before them those who had exposed themselves to death for God's sake: since Moses braved death in opposing Pharaoh, and Elias in opposing Achab. A fifth reason was that "He wished His disciples to imitate the meekness of Moses and the zeal of Elias." Hilary adds a sixth reason—namely, in order to signify that He had been foretold by the Law, which Moses gave them, and by the prophets, of whom Elias was the principal.

Reply to Objection 4.

Lofty mysteries should not be immediately explained to everyone, but should be handed down through superiors to others in their proper turn. Consequently, as Chrysostom says (on Matthew 17:3), "He took these three as being superior to the rest." For "Peter excelled in the love" he bore to Christ and in the power bestowed on him; John in the privilege of Christ's love for him on account of his virginity, and, again, on account of his being privileged to be an Evangelist; James on account of the privilege of martyrdom. Nevertheless He did not wish them to tell others what they had seen before His Resurrection; "lest,"