

*Recensione*

## **Thomas Aquinas on Seeing God. The Beatific Vision in his *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences* IV.49.2**

**Translated and Introduced by Katja Krause**

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With *Thomas Aquinas on Seeing God* Katja Krause undoubtedly fills a gap within the scholarship of Thomas Aquinas's account of beatific vision. Although several studies have dealt with this topic, most of them have overlooked Aquinas's youthful position developed in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, focusing only on *Summa theologiae*, I, question 12.

The main purpose of this book is to offer a complete English translation of Aquinas's *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences*, Book IV, distinction 49, question 7, articles 1-7. After an extensive historical as well as doctrinal introduction (p. 3-76), we can find the translation of the seven articles of distinction 49 (p. 79-222); at the very beginning of the translation of each article, Krause introduces the main issues addressed by Aquinas and the solutions offered by him. At the end of the volume Krause also offers a useful glossary of the technical terms (p. 241-254).

The Latin text, on which Krause's translation is based, is taken from the pre-critical edition provided to the author by the *Commissio Leonina*: the critical edition of Aquinas's *Commentary on the Sentences* «is currently being prepared but is not yet available in print» (p. 6-7). The Latin text of Book IV is transmitted by two families of codices: «the former stems from the tradition of the University of Paris in three exemplars, the latter from an Italian tradition» (p. 71). As Krause mentions, she also consulted the Parma edition (1852 -1873, reprinted 1948-1950). In her translation Krause provides all the cross-references from the pre-

critical edition of *Leonina* and implements them with cross-references to the texts of Albert the Great.

Krause's translation is complete in so far as she translates all Latin technical terms without exception. The method adopted by Krause is founded on an adherence to the Latin letter «as much as the requirements of the English language would allow» (p. 74). Krause's choice to reproduce, wherever possible, «the same Latin term with the same English term» is certainly the most appropriate from a philological perspective; the glossary at the end of the book is very helpful to immediately identify the exceptions to this practice. Of course, the lack of Latin text at the side of the English translation, first, makes it difficult to appreciate Krause's lexical choices and, second, prevents their eventual discussion.

This volume is clearly more than a mere translation: in her in-depth introduction Krause outlines, in fact, the historical and doctrinal framework within which Aquinas's youthful conception of the beatific vision is inscribed. In the intentions of Krause, such an introduction functions as a «guidebook to the actors who preceded and surrounded Aquinas, to the debates that they conducted, to the ideas that they suggested, and to the frameworks of thought that they entertained, at times in contrast to and at times in accord with Aquinas» (p. 4). Through it, the reader can understand the sources discussed by Aquinas in proposing his own account on the beatific vision (Avicenna, Averroes, pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, Albert the Great). This also allows grasping the novelty of Aquinas's proposal via the comparison with the positions of predecessors on the same topic.

With respect to the issue of the beatific vision, Krause identifies two different viewpoints, both marked in the Scripture: the first, ascribable to the first Epistle of John, provides an optimistic view as it considers the vision of God as a «true possibility»; the second, from St. Paul, offers a «much more pessimistic view» (p. 9), according to which God cannot be directly seen by the blessed. For Krause, Aquinas's account can be rightfully taken as an example of the optimistic view: for Aquinas, in fact, who endorses «Augustine's doctrine wholeheartedly» (p. 12), God can be seen «directly in His own substance» (p. 12), though such a vision is intrinsically limited by the capacities of created human intellect.

Now, let me briefly summarize the content of articles 1-7. In article 1 Aquinas addresses the question of whether the blessed can achieve the vision of God through His essence. Aquinas's reply focuses on the act of knowing «between God and the disembodied soul of the blessed» (p. 79). In article 2 Aquinas rejects the idea that God can be seen through a corporeal vision since He is a «completely immaterial and incorporeal being» (p. 119). In article 3, then, he rejects the idea that the blessed can attain a comprehensive vision of God's essence since this would undermine «the transcendence of divine simplicity and infinity» (p. 133). In article 4 Aquinas distinguishes different degrees of a vision of divine essence that the blessed can achieve. This difference among the degrees of clarity of vision depends on the quantity the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*) received by the intellect of the blessed: the more the light of glory illuminates the

intellect of the blessed, the more clearly, they will see God. In article 5 Aquinas deals with the question of whether, given that the blessed see God through His essence, they can see «all things that God sees in Himself» (p. 166). He denies such a possibility to the blessed on the grounds that, as demonstrated in article 3, every finite and created intellect cannot achieve a comprehensive vision of God's essence: indeed, although supported by the light of glory, the intellect of the blessed is not as perfect, immutable, simple, and infinite as the divine essence. In article 6 Aquinas tackles the question of whether a created intellect can enjoy the vision of God through His essence by its own natural powers. Aquinas's reply is negative: the intellect of the blessed can reach the vision of God only by the granting of the light of glory. Aquinas uses another term, namely "disposition", precisely to indicate how God literally arranges, through the light of glory, «the human soul in such a way that it may be affected by the divine essence in the beatific vision» (p. 179). Lastly, in article 7 Aquinas asks if human intellect can enjoy the beatific vision «already in this life on the basis of natural means» (p. 194). Aquinas's reply is negative: in earthly life, no created intellect can enjoy the beatific vision «except miraculously and for a brief time span only» (p. 79). According to Aquinas, in fact, ultimate happiness, which coincides with the direct vision of God through His essence, «is an ultimate end, and this life is unquestionably devoid of it» (p. 195). This means that without the light of glory, which is a supernatural disposition of human or angelic intellect received by God, no rational creature can achieve ultimate happiness.

In the introduction to the volume Krause lingers on the debts incurred by Aquinas in formulating his youthful position on the beatific vision, notably Augustine, the Arabic tradition, pseudo-Dionysius, and by Albert the Great as well. In particular, she emphasizes the influence exerted by Albert the Great, showing that the method adopted by Aquinas in his investigation clearly shows traces of Albert the Great's teaching. As a matter of fact, Aquinas, following Albert's methodology, does not limit himself to restate the Scriptural account according to which the direct intellectual vision of God represents a true possibility «of ultimate fulfilment to the Christian believer in a life to come» (p. 9); but he explains the meaning of his theological position by means of philosophical patterns gathered in particular from the Arabic tradition.

In addition to being an enlightening reading for non-specialist readers interested in the theological topic of the blessedness, this volume proves to be a new benchmark for any subsequent study on Aquinas's account of the beatific vision since it offers scholars an insightful perspective on Aquinas's youthful theory, essential for recognizing the differences and developments between the *Commentary on the Sentences* and the *Summa theologiae*.