# Divine Joy—a Response to Classical Theism, with Help from Thomas Aquinas

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## Abstract

Classical theism presents well-known difficulties with regard to understanding God's redemptive actions as genuinely responsive to created beings. This paper discusses Thomas Aquinas's treatment of divine joy as a way to reconsider classical theism's account of divine impassibility. The difficulty addressed is whether human beings can be truly said to "give" anything to God. The short answer typically is a firm "no." While there are good metaphysical and theological reasons for classical theism's notions of divine immutability, simplicity, and perfection, we can and should nuance this answer with his treatment of divine joy.

We generally speak of what *can* be given to God in terms of the devotional act of giving oneself—i.e., giving ourselves to God by becoming more like him. While clearly such does please God, we might wonder what such a narrative misses in terms of the proper notion of "gift." When a child presents their parent with a drawing, created from crayons and paper provided by the parent, is that not giving the parent something they would not have otherwise? This paper examines the classical theistic account of joy in God, i.e., paradigmatically as treated by Aquinas, as a context in which we can speak of what might seem impossible: a genuine sense of receptivity in God. First, we consider divine receptivity in the context of intra-trinitarian relations, which is controversial in itself. We go on, however, to consider how even created beings can be meaningfully said to give to God—by bringing God joy.

## Part one: Welcome to the Porch

The edifice that is classical theism has been built upon magisterial foundation stones telling us who God is and what God is like: God is eternal, perfect, simple,

immutable, transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and, perhaps above all, *good*—the creator, preserver, and governor of the world.[1] This is a good, strong building, and has reliably housed the Church historical, as "the view of the world common to all orthodox Christian thinkers until modern times."[2] The fundamental, distinctive quality of the household is that *everything* is from God—everything comes from him, belongs to him, and is an abundant, generous manifestation of his goodness. The Apostle Paul's doxology in Romans concludes: "For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Romans 11:36, NIV).[3]

There are, however, rules in classical theism. One of the main ones is that such a God must be impassible: "unable to be affected by things other than himself."[4] There are *no* passions in God, nor passive potencies. Stated another way, God's perfection entails that nothing can be added to him—creatures *give* nothing to God. Finally, any notion of "relation" with God exists *only* on the side of the creature—such relations do not actually exist from God's side. On these points,

1 See, for example, Brian Leftow, "Classical theism" in "God, concepts of" in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig, 98–102 (London: Routledge, 1998). The classic, historical articulation in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 4 states: "What is God? God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." (Reference to "Shorter Catechism," The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, https://opc.org/sc.html.) *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, engaging the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, affirms: "God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone *is* his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is.… In all his works God displays not only his kindness, goodness, grace and steadfast love, but also his trustworthiness, constancy, faithfulness and truth" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church,* Popular and definitive ed., English trans. of the Latin text *Libreria Editrice Vaticana* by Geoffrey Chapman [1999; Ottawa, ON: Concacan, 2000], Part One, Section Two, Chapter One, Article 1, sections 2 and 3, 213–214). United Methodist systematic theologian Thomas C. Oden, in his treatment of "what is most commonly stated in the central Christian tradition concerning God," starts his examination of the nature of God by observing: "Christian Scriptures and tradition view God as independent of all else that exists, that is, as: uncreated, underived, necessary, one, simple, infinite, immeasurable, eternal, self-sufficient, necessary being, the life of all that lives" (Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* [New York: HarperCollins, 2009], 39).

2 "Theism," in *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* ed. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1608.

3 All NIV references from the 2011 edition.

4 Leftow, "Classical theism," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* 98. Dustin Burlet provides a detailed examination of the traditional treatment of divine impassibility—i.e, that God is not and cannot be affected by things other than himself—with regard to God's nature, will, knowledge, and feelings (Dustin G. Burlet, "Impassible Yet Impassioned: The Doctrine of Divine Impassibility in Conversation with the Noachian Deluge of Genesis," *Didaskalia*, vol. 28 [2017–2018]: 96–128, at 98–99). See the theological, philosophical, and historical examination of the doctrine in *Confessing the Impassible God: the Biblical, Classical, & Confessional Doctrine of Divine Impassibility*, ed. Ronald S. Baines, Richard C. Barcellos, James P. Butler, Stefan T. Lindblad, James P. Renihan (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2015). For representations of four framings/versions of divine impassibility—i.e., strong impassibility (James E. Dolezal), qualified impassibility (Daniel Castelo), qualified passibility (John C. Peckham), and strong passibility (Thomas J. Oord), see *Divine impassibility: Four Views of God's Emotions and Suffering*, ed. Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

the theistic household rules are strict, as Thomas Aquinas's unambiguous doctrines make clear.[5] In classical theism, God is perfect, immutable, impassible, and not to be spoken of as "in relation to" anything.

For some modern occupants of the theistic household, this narrative—even as it affirms the profound generosity of the divine—is nevertheless a source of some discomfort. It would appear to give but a thin account of the status of the human individual as meaningfully engaging with God. Some have difficulty recognizing in this account the interpersonal *relatedness* they see in the biblical account of God as Father and we as his adopted children.[6]

This perspective is, it should be said, not the same as turning away from or outright rejecting a Christian biblical account of the world. Those who distance themselves specifically from classical theism's portrayal of divine transcendence, and its entailments, may still nurture a love for God and seek to embrace a biblically faithful gospel theology. Dutch philosopher Rudi te Velde observes that in the modern religious mindset, there is commonly to be found an expectation of real relatedness: "The personal God of religion is a God with whom we can have a personal relationship, a God in whom we can trust, who is supposed to care for us and to listen to our prayers, etc."[7] As loving children of God, some may even feel they would like to be able to *give* something to God in a meaningful sense,

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5 E.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 1.16 (re: passive potencies); 1.28 (re: God's perfection/no defect/lack); 1.89 (re: passions); 2.12 (re: relations not real in God); 3.18 (re: that nothing can be added to God); *Summa theologiae* 1.3.4 ad 1 (re: that nothing can be added to God); 1–2.23.2 corp. (re: passions in general); *Compendium theologiae* 1.9 (re: passive potencies).

6 See, for example, Brian Leftow's engagement with this difficulty in "God's Impassibility, Immutability, and Eternality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas,* ed. Brian Davies and Eleanor Stump, 173–186 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. at 173–174. See also the Gospel Coalition book review by Matthew Y. Emerson of James E. Dolezal, *All that is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism,* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017), in *Themelios* 43.1 (Gospel Coalition, April 2018), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/all-that-is-in-god-evangelical-theology-challenge-of-classical-theism/

However, not all those who hold to the doctrine of divine impassibility understand it as indeed entailing divine unrelatedness. See Amos Winarto, "The Impassible God Who Cried," Themelios 41.2 (Gospel Coalition, August 2016), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-impassible-god-who-criedFor a detailed engagement with the doctrine of divine impassibility ranging from early church fathers through modern evangelical thought see Rob Lister, *God is impassible and impassioned: toward a theology of divine emotion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), and also the Gospel Coalition's careful analysis and review by John B. Song in *Themelios* 38.33 (Gospel Coalition, November 2013), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/god-is-impassible-and-impassioned-toward-a-theology-of-divine-emotion/.

7 Rudi A. te Velde, "The Divine Person(s): Trinity, Person, and Analogous Naming," in *The Oxford Handbook of The Trinity,* ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 359–370, at 359. See also: Te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologiae, Ashgate Studies* in the *History of Philosophical Theology,* series ed. Martin Stone, et al. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 1–3.

out of gratitude and love, even while acknowledging that all that is originates from and belongs to him already.[8]

As understandable as such an intuition may be, however, there is a risk. For those who intend to distance themselves from the theistic account of God but not from God himself, the effect may be the same. The problem with such a view, te Velde warns, is that in it "God is in danger of becoming 'too human,' a person whose intentions and actions are in principle understandable by us.[9] The consequence would be a fundamental loss of mystery, of the otherness of God."[10] The rejection of transcendence for the sake of gaining God as personally related to us risks loss of God as God.[11]

What, then, is to be done? Is a modern sense of relatedness with God fundamentally flawed? Must Christians choose between a desire for personal, mutual, relatedness with God and the theological stability provided through classical theism's transcendent account of God?

Te Velde, in his examination of what it means to say that God is "personal," observes that Thomas Aquinas's use of *analogy* allows us to speak meaningfully about relatedness in God—including the intimate connection with individual creatures established by the act of creation—without the risks of overly anthropomorphizing God.[12] He reminds us that, for Thomas, *all* human language naming

8 Giving to God *is* spoken of, even in classical theism, in terms of giving oneself to God through obedience. See, for example, Aquinas's treatment of devotion as the giving of oneself to the service of God (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2–2.82.1 corp.). As beautiful as the devotional giving of oneself to God is, and as important as it is to spiritual formation, for some it seems to fall short of what we actually mean by giving someone a *gift*.

9 Thomas is, of course, very clear that the Incarnation itself is supremely fitting of God, as the second Person of the Trinity. See, for example, Aquinas *Summa theologiae* III.1 s.c and corp. Note that in this text, Aquinas's ground for fittingness lies precisely in that the nature of divine goodness entails a desire to communicate oneself, to make oneself known. I take te Velde's caution here as reminding us that any human attempt to engage or know God (even with regard to Christ in the Incarnation) is an exercise of faith and an engagement with mystery. To approach God otherwise is to misunderstand the very nature of God.

10 Te Velde, "The Divine Person(s)," 359–360.

11 Augustine famously asserts: "We are speaking of God; what marvel, if you do not comprehend? For if you comprehend, He is not God." *Sermons on the New Testament* 67.5; trans. R.G. MacMullen, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888); revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/160367.htm; accessed 9/14/24.

It should be noted, however, that classical theism's commitment to divine transcendence is not a commitment to transcendence for its own sake, but rather as an entailment of an understanding of God as pure act (e.g., Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.3 corp.). That is, if change is the movement from potency to act (e.g., Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 1.13.9), and there is no potency in God (God is pure act), then God does not change. Thus, predications that entail change, or passion, are not properly to be made of God—i.e., God is transcendent.

12 Te Velde, "The Divine Person(s)," 361–362; 368–369.

God is analogical.[13] But, we should add, this is not a hindrance, or a dead end, for human discourse and knowledge about God—rather, it is the entryway that makes such discourse and knowledge possible, and arises from the genuine analogy of being we share with God. Because God contains within himself the perfections of all his creations but is profoundly distinct from them as the radical cause of all that is, both univocity and equivocation alike are to be excluded from our understanding of how human language addresses God and indeed from our understanding of how the very being of humanity images God. The truth of the matter is to be found in the mean between them. God is not entirely like us, yet not entirely unlike either—God is "the same in a different way."[14] Thus, the Thomistic notion of analogy humbles us with regard to how much we can claim to say about God, but it also gives us warrant to explore areas of thought about God with a cautious amount of confidence and even freedom.[15]

The limited freedom that analogy provides us is perhaps a bit like a back porch on our household of classical theism.[16] The back porch is still part of the house, and house rules still apply, but one is allowed more informality there in how one does things. There is perhaps even some gray area of what is and is not allowed—sometimes we are specifically sent out onto the porch to do things that are unfitting inside the house. It may be that on the back porch of classical theism's house we might be able to consider an *analogous* sense of meaningful interrelatedness

13 Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 115–118. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.4.3 corp; 1.13.3 corp; 5 corp. Ref: Latin text based on the Leonine Edition, 1888–1906; English trans. Laurence Shapcote of the English Dominican Province, https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST. This claim is made in reference to *literal* human language naming God. We do speak metaphorically about God, as do Scriptures, and Thomas affirms the importance of doing so. See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.1.10. See also the discussion in *Canadian-American Theological Review* 12, 2 (2023)—the issue presents an extended engagement with classical theism, including the theme of analogical language about God.

14 Te Velde, "The Divine Person(s)," 362.

15 See Ian Paul's entry "Metaphor" in the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 507–510. Paul examines the theological significance of metaphor in scripture, using Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of language and interpretation. Ricoeur identifies a "paradox" element at work in all metaphor—that something both is and is not like something else—and that such a device makes meaningful articulations about the thing possible that could not be expressed in literal propositional form (508). Ricoeur's treatment also, however, cautions us to remember that metaphor, insofar as it selects some aspects for comparison and leaves others out, is fundamentally an act of interpretation (509). It is in this way that metaphor both enables us to think and speak truths about the divine that we might otherwise not be able to articulate with the language of precision, and at the same time calls for the intellectual humility so appropriate to any hermeneutical endeavor.

16 It should be remembered that, in Thomas, the limited correlation between things predicated analogously of creature and of Creator points to realities that are more proper to God than they are to us, not less. Thus, while in this project we are seeking a meaningful way in which to speak of relational properties such as "delight" with regard to God, the reality of "divine delight" is not less than it is in humans, but immeasurably more so. See: Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.13 corp. In this way, we can understand Aquinas's mode of analogy as ultimately providing a positive sense of who God is and what God is like, serving as a helpful counterpoint to criticisms of classical theism as "overly apophatic."

between God and humanity. We will consider the ways in which we can think of something like receptivity in God, such that his children can be said to be able to give him gifts. Of course, that may turn out to be too far, and we may be sent off the porch to go wash off our feet with the hose before we come back in the house. We will see.

Our porch discourse on the possibility of relatedness and receptivity in God will take its shape from Thomas's own treatment of something that might not seem that it can be said of God: the experience of the passions of delight and joy.

## Part two: Delight and Joy in God

Despite the uncompromising claim throughout orthodox Christianity that there are *no* passions in God, it is equally undeniable that God does experience both joy and delight. We see ample evidence of this both in scripture, and in the magisterium. What this *means*, however, is less obvious. Augustine, in *De civitatae Dei*, defines joy as "love possessing and enjoying what it loves."[17] In his well-known treatment of things that are to be enjoyed, distinguished from things that are to be used, Augustine defines enjoyment as clinging to something with love for its own sake.[18] Augustine goes on to identify God as the only thing we should hold as a true object of enjoyment (i.e., loved for itself alone), and all other things loved for the sake of something else—namely, God. Thomas applies these principles also to God's love of his own self and of his creation.[19] For some twelfth-century theologians, the knotty question with regard to Augustine's definitions was whether they suggest an unseemly positing of God as an object of human desire, i.e., as something which one hopes to possess and gain from.[20] Hugh of Saint-Victor can be seen as having little patience for such worries about casting love as desire for the beloved, even with regard to the divine, asserting: "Those who say these things do not understand the character of love."[21] This view could perhaps be taken as an antecedent of our modern Christian's intuition that God indeed enjoys his creation—i.e., loves it on its own terms, and not merely as a mirror by which he is actually loving himself. Such claims do appear to be at odds with the principles of classical theism. This is, however, the heart of our inquiry, so we will continue and see if there is room for

17 Augustine, *De civitatae Dei*, 14.7.
18 Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 1.3–1.4.
19 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.19.2 corp.
20 Michael S. Sherwin, "Aquinas, Augustine, and the Medieval Scholastic Crisis concerning Charity," in *Aquinas the Augustinian*, ed. Michael Dauphinais, Barry David, and Matthew Levering (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 185–195.
21 Hugh of Saint-Victor, *De sacramentis PL* 176: 534. Location reference from Sherwin, "Aquinas, Augustine, and the Medieval Scholastic Crisis Concerning Charity," 188; note also Sherwin's bibliographic reference to Robert Wielockx, "La discussion scolastique sur l'amour d'Anselme de Laon à Pierre Lombard d'après les imprimés et les inédits" (PhD diss., Catholic University of Louvain, 1981), 194–195.

such a concern in classical theism, looking for help in Thomas's language about delight and joy, and how they are experienced in God.

Thomas in general identifies the difference between delight and joy as one of aspect. In his *Summa contra gentiles,* he identifies both as "as kind of repose of the will in the object of willing," though he goes on to assert that delight (in the proper sense) is caused by a good that is conjoined, whereas joy *can* be caused by goods that are not, i.e., by other things.[22] One delights in things that are completely intimate within and present to oneself—things that one is *naturally* connected to. One can find joy in things that are exterior to oneself—things that require one to extend themselves rationally to in order to connect with.[23]

Thomas affirms that delight and joy are indeed passions (with reference to Augustine).[24] How, then, are they present in God? In the *Summa contra gentiles* account Thomas differentiates between operations of the sensitive appetite and the intellective appetite (the will).[25] He asserts that, as present in the divine, joy and delight are operations of the *will*, and thus are not passions, an explanation he reaffirms later in the *Summa theologiae*:

> Therefore acts of the sensitive appetite, inasmuch as they have annexed to them some bodily change, are called passions; whereas acts of the will are not so called. Love, therefore, and joy and delight are passions; in so far as they denote acts of the intellective appetite, they are not passions. It is in this latter sense that they are in God.[26]

Thus, in both accounts, Thomas concludes that delight and joy are not incompatible with divine perfection. This doctrine of Thomas's is an important foundation

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22 Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 1.90 at "Item": "*Gaudium et delectato est quaedam quietatio voluntatis in suo volito*;" and at "Est igitur." Ref.: *Summa contra gentiles*; Latin text based on the 1961 Marietti edition: *Liber de veritate catholicae Fidei contra errores infidelium seu Summa contra gentiles*, textus Leoninus diligenter recognitus, cura et studio P. Marc, coadiuv. C. Pera et P. Caramello (Marietti, Taurini-Romae, 1961); the 1961 Marietti edition is a reproduction of the text of the earlier Leonine editions of 1918, 1926, and 1930, with some small corrections; English trans. of *Book 1* by Anton C. Pegis; ed. Joseph Kenny (New York: Hanover House, 1955–1977), https://isidore.co/aquinas/ContraGentiles.htm.

23 Thomas's later treatment, in the *Summa theologiae*, depicts delight as the larger category, including both natural/bodily and rational/soul as objects of enjoyment; he depicts joy as the smaller category containing *only* the rational objects (*ST* 1–2.31.3). Thus, delight can be said of irrational animals, but not joy. Said another way, delights that belong to (or require) the apprehension of reason are said to cause joy (*ST* 1–2.31.4).

24 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1–2.31.1 s.c., with reference to Augustine, *De civitatae Dei* ix and xiv.

25 Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 1.90 at "Ex hoc autem."

26 Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 1.90 at "Sunt autem;" *Summa theologiae* 1.20.1 ad 1: "*Sic igitur actus appetitus sensitivi, inquantum habent transmutationem corporalem annexam, passiones dicuntur, non autem actus voluntatis. Amor igitur et gaudium et delectatio, secundum quod significant actus appetitus sensitivi, passiones sunt, non autem secundum quod significant actus appetitus intellectivi. Et sic ponuntur in Deo.*"

for the intuition we are examining, i.e., that we can meaningfully speak of giving gifts to God.

We must go on to ask, though, what it is that God delights and takes joy in. The *Summa contra gentiles* account states clearly that God delights preeminently in himself:

> Now God is supremely at rest in himself, who is the principle object of his will, as finding all sufficiency in himself. Therefore, by his will he rejoices and delights supremely in himself.[27]

Thomas, however, does not stop there. Using the distinction introduced earlier between delight (i.e., in a conjoined good) and joy (i.e., in a separated good/*de exteriori*), Thomas can affirm that "properly speaking, God delights in himself, but rejoices in himself in other things," and in fact "rejoices in every good."[28] Why does God rejoice in other things in this way? We recall (from the *Summa contra gentiles* account) that one delights in what is naturally conjoined; one rejoices in what one goes outside of oneself to be joined with. Thomas's account of divine delight and joy in the *Summa theologiae* (Prima Pars) considers the difficulty of how it can be said that God loves things other than, or outside of, himself. Thomas responds by connecting the action of God as the creator, cause, and sustainer of all goodness to the stance of a lover toward a beloved, showing that indeed God *goes outside* of himself, willingly, on behalf of his creation:

> A lover is placed outside himself, and made to pass into the object of his love, inasmuch as he wills good to the beloved; and works for that good by his providence even as he works for his own. Hence [quoting Dionysius]… "we must make bold to say even this, that He Himself, the cause of all things, by His abounding love and goodness, is placed outside Himself by His providence for all existing things."[29]

Later in the *Summa theologiae* account (in the Prima Secundae), Thomas frames the question a bit differently, showing that we can find delight in others by *bringing them in* to one's own self:

> Another's actions, if they be good, are reckoned as one's own good,

27 Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 1.90 at "Item": "*Deus autem in seipso, qui est suum principale volitum, maxime quietatur, utpote in se omnem sufficientiam habens. Ipse igitur per suam voluntatem in se maxime gaudet et delectatur.*"

28 Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 1.90 at "Est igitur": "*Ex quo patet quod Deus proprie in seipso delectatur, gaudet autem et in se et in aliis*," and at "Amplius,": "*Relinquitur igutur quod Deus de omni bono gaudet*."

29 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.20.2 ad 1: "… *amans sic fit extra se in amatum translatus, inquantum vult amato bonum, et operatur per suam providentiam, sicut et sibi. Unde et Dionysius dicit, IV cap. De Div. Nom.,* audendum est autem et hoc pro veritate dicere, quod et ipse omnium cuasa, per abundantiam amativae bonitatis, extra seipsum fit ad omnia existentia providentiis."

> by reason of the power of love, which makes a man to regard his friend as one with himself.[30]

Taken together, these accounts show God's generous love bridging the gap between and created beings by both going outside of himself to reach us and drawing us in to be one with himself.

Without pressing the precise operations of joy and delight beyond what Thomas himself does, we can see the main shape of his account of divine pleasure emerging. We can see that God *does* take pleasure in things, and that some of those things are exterior to himself. We can see that God's generous, munificent, gratuitous love toward us is precisely that by which God also delights in us.[31]

That God delights supremely in himself is entirely unsurprising, and seems to not require that we qualify that God is not *properly* delighting specifically in us, but rather in his own goodness. This seems so clearly obvious—i.e., that all goodness, all that is loveable and desirable, originates radically in God—that it seems unnecessary and perhaps even infelicitous to append it to every articulation of divine joy in his creation, as if to say: "God takes joy in you, but only as actually taking joy in his own goodness." We certainly do not see God speaking that way in scripture—quite the opposite: we see God going out of his way to unstintingly communicate his genuine parental, friendly love for us.[32]

Thus far in our inquiry, we have seen that the existence of created beings can be meaningfully said to give joy, or delight, to God. We understand that we are speaking analogically when we use these terms, but, as we stated earlier, this is an affirming as well as a limiting condition. We might speak of this divine joy, in

30 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1–2.32.5 corp.: "*ipsae operationes aliorum, si sint bonae, aestimantur ut bonum proprium, propter vim amoris, qui facit aestimare amicum quasi eundem sibi*."

31 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2–2.23.1. See also, preeminently, Christ's naming of his followers as his friends, in John 15. Thomas C. Oden, in his expansive treatment of classic Christianity, notes Augustine's intuition that "God's joy is so joyful that it would be less joyful if it never had anyone else with which to share its depth of joy" ( Augustine, *Confessions* 11:1–10). See Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology Volume One: The Living God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 254. Oden's use of Augustine references *The Library of Christian Classics,* ed. J. Baillie, J.T. McNiell, and H.P. Van Dusen, 26 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953–1961), VII, 244–252.

32 See, for example, Michael P. Knowles on the notion of God revealing himself at Sinai paradigmatically as *present* to his people, in *The Unfolding Mystery of the Divine Name: The God of Sinai in Our Midst* (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2012). See also Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing YHWH's Name at Sinai: A Reexamination of the Name Command of the Decalogue,* Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement 19 (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018), and *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2019).

On the notion of the scriptural narrative of divine interest in and care for created beings, specifically in conversation/contrast with the difficult entailments of divine perfection and impassibility, see Brian Leftow in "Perfect Being Theology and Friendship," in *The question of God's perfection: Jewish and Christian essays on the God of the Bible and Talmud*, ed. Yoram Hazony and Dru Johnson (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 104–110.

Note also Aquinas's depiction of human/divine relations as "friendship" (*amicitia*), a notion he introduces in his treatments on charity (see: Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1–2.65.5 corp.; 2–2.23.1 corp.)

terms of our household of classical theism, as God wanting photographs of his children hanging in the rooms, not just affirmations of his own divine goodness. Of course, we as his children are in reality a manifestation of God's goodness, as offspring indeed are, but we are also individuals, and not merely mirrors.[33] God, as it were, takes delight and joy in looking at our faces. We are not merely anonymous placeholders for the glory and goodness of God. Thomas affirms this in *Summa contra gentiles*, where he treats providential care of human beings (i.e., rational creatures) as uniquely directed "for their own sake" (*propter se*).[34]

We have, however, not yet arrived at a notion of human beings *giving* anything to God, or, stated otherwise, of God *receiving* anything from his creation. Here we will need to proceed with yet more caution.[35]

## Part three: Receptivity in God: Intra-trinitarian relations

The one context in which we can speak of receptivity in God with relative ease is

33 This tension between the notion of humans understood as manifestations of the divine and at the same time as meaningful individuals can be illumined by the scholastic question of the theological status of individual created beings. Bonaventure famously critiqued scholastic philosophy as accounting for beings in terms of their essences, missing entirely their creational significance as vestiges, or reflections, of God (see: Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaemeron* 12, 15 [*Opera Omnia* 5, 386]). While Thomas (one of the targets of Bonaventure's critique) does indeed affirm that, in philosophical terms, divine knowledge of created beings occurs primarily with regard to the perfection of creation as a whole (e.g., Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 2.84.5; 3.17.1; *Super Sententia* 2.17.2.2 ad 6; *Sententia De anima* 18 resp.; *Summa theologiae* 1.73.1 corp) he does go on to provide a magisterial, robust narrative across his corpus of divine love and care that is directed toward human individuals (e.g., Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.65.2 corp.; *Summa contra gentiles* 3.112; 4.23.11—this last specifically regarding God's love as extended to individuals in time). Robert Pasnau notes Thomas's assertion that human individuals contribute the perfection of the universe only as to their species (or as the good of a part for the whole); however, he states, "this is not a conclusion that Aquinas wants," because "human beings are qualitatively different [from sheep and oxen] in this regard." By contrast, Pasnau concludes, in Thomas's narrative "it is indeed the central feature of God's relationship to us that he does care: he loves us and takes joy in us, he is provident and merciful toward us." Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of* Summa theologiae *Ia 75–89* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 401, 403–404. See also: Wayne J. Hankey, "God's Care for Individuals: What Neoplatonism gives to a Christian Doctrine of Providence," *Quaestiones Disputatae* 2, nos. 1 & 2 (Spring–Fall 2011): 4–36.

34 Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 3.112.

35 See Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt's depiction of the complex distinctions between real and only-logical relations, in his narrative of "John" seeing "Mary" walking down the street, but not the reverse—resulting in a "relation" that is mixed and not genuinely mutual, insofar as the real relatedness exists only on the part of creation, not God. See: Frederick C. Bauerschmidt, *Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ*, Christian Theology in Context, ed. Timothy Gorringe, Serene Jones, and Graham Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 114–119.

By contrast, Terence E. Fretheim has argued that the biblical narrative of God's relation to Israel entails a "logically prior question," i.e., the way in which such a relation "presupposes a certain way in which God is related to the world"—a relation which Fretheim claims is real and has integrity ("which is presumably the only kind of relation God could have"). Such a genuine relation is made possible, Fretheim asserts, be the divine willingness to forego certain powers and assume certain limitations. See: Terence E. Fretheim, *The Summering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, ed. Walter Brueggemann and John R. Donahue (Philadelphia: Dortress, 1984), 35–36.

with regard to the intra-trinitarian relations—but even then, only on the part of the Son and of the Spirit. Thomas shows us that it pertains to the perfection of God that the Son receive his nature from the Father, and the Spirit from the Father and the Son—though he also clarifies that the term "receive" (*recipere*) is said of God analogously, not univocally, with regard to how it is said of creatures.[36] He further clarifies that such a receiving does not entail a lack—rather, this act of reception is precisely what *constitutes* the Persons of the Son and the Spirit.[37] The divine perfection can be said to "need" the multiplicity of the trinitarian Persons, insofar as God would not be perfect otherwise, while affirming that there is absolutely no lack in God.[38] Finally, Thomas asserts that the Person of the Father, in contrast to the Son and Spirit, receives nothing at all, from anyone.[39]

It is not, however, only the divine nature that is shared and received among the trinitarian Persons. Thomas's treatment of the Persons in *De potentia* question 10 suggests, on Michael Higgins's reading, that trinitarian multiplicity paradigmatically illumines the receptive, mutual, relational nature of joy:

> Thus, we have already seen that God would be dead, devoid of intellect and will, and less than absolutely perfect were God not a God in multiple Persons. We see now that such a lonely God would be a *joyless* God. The Father can only take joy *in Himself* if He does so "*in the Son*"; were the divine joy not the joy of one Person *in another*, there would be no such divine joy at all.… Thus, according to Thomas, a God *without* a Word would be a God without joy, and a God *with* a Word must be a God in multiple Persons: the divine joy must be shared joy, or it cannot be at all.[40]

36 Aquinas, I *Sententia* 44.1.1 ad 2, III *Sententia* 4.1.2.2 ad 2, and *Summa theologiae* 1.33.3.ad 2 (regarding analogy); *Summa theologiae* 1.27.3 and 4, 1.36, 1.41.3, and *Summa contra gentiles* 4.8 at "Ex eo autem" (regarding receptivity). See also Michael Joseph Higgins on varying interpretations of Thomas on the relationship between receiving and perfection in God in "'A Mark of Perfection:' Receiving and Perfection in Aquinas's Trinitarian Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 25.3 (July 2023), 435–455.

37 Aquinas, *Q.D. De potentia* 10.1 ad 13; *Summa contra gentiles* 4.8 at "Ex eo autem;" *Summa theologiae* 1.29.4.

38 Aquinas, *Contra errores Graecorum* 1.7.

39 Aquinas, *Q.D. De potentia* 10.4 ad 10.

40 Michael Joseph Higgins, *Giving Perfections, Receiving Perfections: The Essential Divine Attributes in Aquinas's Trinitarian Theology* (diss., Catholic University of America, 2017) 125–126, italics by author. ProQuest 10746510. Reference to Aquinas, *Q.D. De potentia* 10.5, and ad 3. See also Aquinas, I *Sententia* 2.1.4, regarding the plurality of persons in God: "Therefore there must be many distinct things within the unity of the divine essence. This same thing is argued from the perfection of the divine beatitude, which asserts the highest joy, which cannot be possessed without companionship" (*Hoc idem arguitur ex perfectione divinae beatitudinis, quae ponit summum gaudium quod sine consortio haberi non potest*). Reference to Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis. Books 1 and 2.* Latin text originally based on the 1858 Parma Edition, transcribed by Roberto Busa. Subsequently revised by the Aquinas Institute according to the Mandonnet edition. English translation in progress, the Aquinas Institute, Lander, WY, https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Sent.I; https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Sent.II.

Higgins's account goes so far as to suggest that in Thomas's treatment of divine joy we see hints of what might be thought of as the Son *giving* to the Father. Nicholas Healy's account of intra-trinitarian giving goes yet further, reading in Thomas (with the help of Hans Urs von Balthasar) an account of the created world itself as a gift that Christ gives to God through his mission of redemption.[41] Healy starts with interpreting the Chalcedonian notion of Christ as "truly God" as "a trinitarian exchange among Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit," one in which "Christ assumes responsibility for representing and including within his person not only a single human nature, but the whole of humanity, and ultimately the whole of creation."[42] Healy goes on to show how Christ turns this assumption of the created world into a gift to the Godhead:

> Christ gives himself as Eucharist by receiving the world, despite its sinful condition, as a gift that expresses and mediates the divine love of the Father and the Holy Spirit. It is the Eucharist that enables Christ to fulfill his mission of ensheltering the world within his body and thus within the divine life.[43]

We see, on Healy's account, how the world becomes a gift to God *as given by Christ*—the location, and occasion, of the actualizing of the redemptive love of God. We can go on to ask whether there is a more specific, *active* role of created beings in this gift. Healy thinks so:

> Not only does Christ receive the world as a gift, but he communicates a share in his own receiving and giving. In the Eucharist we are taken into Christ's missionary gift to the world… the gift that we bring [to others] is the reception of the divine self-communication in history by receiving the reality of the world as an expression of trinitarian love—that is, by receiving the world as a gift from God and *for God*.[44]

We can therefore see how human, concrete, particular actions contribute to, and

41 Healy, in conversation with Balthasar, examines the creational implications of the distinction and the relation between *esse* and essence in Thomas—i.e., the "gift" of concrete manifestness that essence insofar as it is contraction to particularized existence gives to non-subsistent *esse*, a state of fruitful difference that is "generously allowed by *esse* itself—essence truly 'affects' *esse* without for all that depriving it of its simple fulness and perfection," Nicholas J. Healy III, "The World as Gift," *Communio* 32 (Fall 2005), 395–406, at 400–401; Aquinas, *Q.D. De potentia* 7.2 ad 9; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5: *The Last Act,* trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 521. See also Layton Boyd Friesen, *Secular nonviolence and the theo-drama of peace : anabaptist ethics and the Catholic Christology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (London: T&T Clark, 2022).

42 Healy, "The World as Gift," 403.

43 Healy, "The World as Gift," 405.

44 Healy, "The World as Gift," 405–406, italics by author.

indeed fulfill, Christ's mission—and thereby meaningfully *give* to God.[45] The gift we give to God is to individualize and particularize the divine act of redemption, both in our own lives and as passed along into the lives of others.[46]

A reader may observe that such giving is directed precisely not "at" God, but toward other beings, and thus has actually *not* accomplished giving something to God. I'm not sure that is true. We recall Thomas's notion of a need in God that does not indicate a lack. How would God's redemptive mission toward a concrete, material creation be carried out *except* with the collaboration of concrete, material beings? Christ's gift to the Godhead is the graced *actions* of redeemed human beings, not just the human beings themselves. Of course, the reader may further object that even in such a case, it is *Christ* giving the gift, not humans themselves. However, just as with the unsurprising reality we noted that God delights supremely in himself, it is equally unsurprising that human beings' contribution (gift) to divine joy would be enacted through Christ. This would seem to be a marvelous entailment of Christ's status as fully divine and fully human. Christ, in his divinized humanity, enables humanity to do what must otherwise be thought of as radically impossible: giving to God.[47]

Christ, through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, draws each of us into the inner life of the Godhead. Through the sonship that is extended to us by adoption,

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45 In Thomas's treatments of gift and giving, it is illumining to note the etymology at work in the constellation of terms Thomas employs, and the resultant mutual relationship between the stance of the giver and of the receiver of a gift. Insofar as Thomas uses *gratia* for both grace and gratitude, the grace of the giver and the gratitude of the receiver are placed in conversation with each other—they are the participating poles in the event of giving. E.g. (drawn from *ST* 2–2.106—comparisons here are made using the translations of the Dominican Fathers): in article one, Thomas uses *gratia* for 'thankfulness,' and *gratitudo* for 'gratitude'; in article 2, Thomas renders 'thanksgiving' as *gratiarum actio,* and 'grace' as *gratia*; in article 3, we see Thomas use *grate* for the sense of 'gratefully'; and in article 4, quoting Seneca, Thomas uses the plural *grates* ('thanks') for 'gratitude.'

46 In Thomas, we can see this account of creation as a gift contributing to divine joy—a gift which is ongoingly given and received through the Eucharist—in the Tertia Pars of the *ST*: Christ, through his incarnation and earthly ministry, a ministry extended to later generations through the sacraments, bestows divine things on people, and allows them to become partakers of the divine nature (Q22.1); we are invited to become members of Christ himself, and to be thus united to God (Q62.1 and 5); through this adoption as real sons, we are drawn into the shared life of the Trinity (Q23.2), including the very "enjoyment of God, by which also God Himself is happy and rich in Himself (*ST* 3.1 corp.: "*Quae quidem consistit in fruitione Dei, per quam etiam ipse Deus beatus est et per seipsum dives*").

47 Admittedly, the verse just before Paul's "For from him," declaration in Romans 11 (referenced at the opening of the paper), does say "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" However, the implication in Job's text (which Paul is quoting) is the notion of a person *not* recognizing that all that is good comes gratuitously from God. By contrast, Christ's words in his prayer of John 17 employ exactly this kind of generous language including human beings into the life and work of the Godhead: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:20–23 NIV).

which Thomas identifies as a work of grace, we participate in the intra-trinitarian activities of the Son.[48] Te Velde, with whom we began our inquiry, marvels at this miracle: "At the centre of Christian faith stands the conviction that the inaccessible mystery of God has opened itself for us, that we somehow, through his incarnate Son, are called to share the divine life."[49] This includes, as we have seen, presenting as gift the concrete contexts of the created world, redeemed, reformed, and returned to relationship with God. A meaningful gift indeed.[50]

We return, in conclusion, to our image of the household of classical theism, a home in which everything is from God and is a manifestation of his goodness. We recall that God's delight in us, in our created individuality, was imagined as a desire to hang up photographs of us, so that he could enjoy looking at our faces. We might now add a new element to this image, one that affirms the appropriateness—even *inside* the house of classical theism, i.e., in accordance with its rules and cherished principles—of the suggestion that human beings can give gifts to God. We might imagine graced human acts as drawings from a child that a parent

48 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 3.23 corp. and ad 3.

49 Te Velde, "The Divine Person," 360. Te Velde does caution, however, that such a divine invitation to intersubjectivity must be envisioned "without the typical modern romantic *experience* of the inner life of the other.… God is God, with a nature altogether different from that of human beings." "The Divine Person," 362.

50 Thomas Speed Blair Mount, of the South African Theological Seminary, provides an alternative narrative of divine relatedness. Mount presents a careful history and analysis of the development of passibilist views of the divine nature, with a special eye for implications within practical theology. He observes that passibilist theology prioritizes existentialist concerns over metaphysical ones, as contrasted with impassibilist emphasis upon ontological commitments (Mount, 2). He critiques "the hegemony of passibilist theological construals since the last quarter of the twentieth century… within the conservative evangelical sub-tradition," and argues that "qualified impassibilist existential arguments" best fit the biblical record and evangelical theological commitments, with significant import for pastoral concerns. Mount specifically considers and critiques the perspective of Fretheim noted earlier (n31), among others in a selected sample, and charges Fretheim with caricaturing impassibilist theologians as "espousing a metaphysically inert and relationally impassive God incapable of affect or genuine personal interactions with His creation" (Mount, 212). Mount understands the passibilist view as grounded in three flawed assumptions: 1. impassibility as an entailment of Greek philosophy's influence upon Christianity, 2. a conflation of "impassibility" with "impassivity," and 3. "the late modern notion that—in order to be genuine—love must be bilateral, reciprocal and vulnerable to feeling the other's pain" (227–232). Mount summarizes the weakness of the passibilist view by asserting that its commitments require God to be dependent upon his creation in order to be fulfilled (233). Mount identifies contemporary adherents to the impassibilist view: Norm Geisler, Wayne House, Doug Wilson, Oliver Crisp, D. Stephen Long, and Brian Davies, among others. Thomas Speed Blair Mount, "Existential Dimensions of the Contemporary Impassibility Debate: A Pastoral Approach to the Question of Divine Suffering Within the Context of Conservative Evangelicalism," (PhD diss., South African Theological Seminary, 2015).

Other examples of proponents of divine impassibility are Kevin Vanhoozer, Matthew Levering, James E. Dolezal, Michael Allen, and David Bentley Hart.

Note that in the view of this essay, not all of those who would defend divine impassibility (including, perhaps, Mount) would object to its claims about divine relationality, including its reading of Thomas Aquinas. Nevertheless, the conversation engages deep waters, touching the very heart of the nature of God, and therefore is to be approached with care and humility.

puts on the refrigerator door. There is an important difference between a photograph and a drawing.[51] The photograph celebrates the life of the child and affirms their unique place within the family given to them by their parents' love and care. A drawing, however, does something different. Every single thing about the child's life comes to them from the parents—everything in the house is only there because of the parents' care and provision, including the very paper and crayons used to make the drawing. However, when the child presents their drawing to the parent, they are in a meaningful way giving the parent something they would not have had otherwise. It cannot really be said they *lacked* it, and they possessed the literal paper and crayons already, but the parents would have been less perfected, less complete, without the ideas and thoughts and the individual activity expressed in the drawing.[52] I think in a certain limited, *analogous*, sense it is right to say that our concrete human lives and activities adorn God's refrigerator door, as gifts to him in a meaningful way. I think they give him joy.

51 John Franklin considers the way in which human art, while naturally subordinate to the divine act of creation, without competition builds upon and visions it afresh, and in doing so parallels the theological hope that is found in scripture's eschatological orientation: "… the presence of art in the world, whatever expression it may take, is in some way, a sign of hope—the idea that there is more than meets the eye and that the story is not yet complete. To be clear, I am not referring to the content of the art but simply the fact of it—the reality that we as human beings are entrusted with the capacity to create—albeit in a way distinct from the way God has done the work of creation. So I am suggesting that art is characterized by an eschatological quality that points us to look beyond the immediate—beyond appearances. Similarly, the biblical narrative invites us to engage the imagination and look beyond our current situation—underwritten by an eschatological vision of hope." John Franklin, "Beyond Appearances: Imagination and the Biblical Narrative," in *The Arts and the Bible*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Wendy Porter (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2024), 123.

52 W. David O. Taylor explores the interplay between the work of an artist and the life of the Christ-follower in *Glimpses of the New Creation: Worship and the Formative Power of the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019). In an appendix offering advice to artists, he states: "Think of your work as a way to participate in the priestly vocation of Christ. This means, among other things, that your calling through the work that you do for the church's worship is to offer the things of God to the world and, likewise, to offer the things of the world back to God, Your calling is to offer the life of God—the good, true merciful, comforting, forgiving, hopeful encouraging, redemptive, holy life of God—to the people of God. Your calling is also to offer the lives of the people—the confident and the humble, whole and broken, heartfelt and half-hearted, faithful and faithless lives—back to God in love" (Taylor, *Glimpses,* 174–175).