Article

Character Indelebilis and the Iconic Dimension of Ritual Actions

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Abstract: This paper focuses on one specific theological tool regarding some Christian ritual practices, i.e., the *character indelebilis* or indelible mark. Though the notion existed in some patristic sources, the theologoumenon was reframed in early scholasticism. Theologians of the 12th–13th century used the restricted code of Aristotelian psychology in order to better control theological predication and moved from baptismal theology to the theology of priesthood. Since Thomas Aquinas is the main theological reference in the development of the theologoumenon, special attention will be paid to his proposal. Revisiting the metaphorical nature of some of his statements and the iconic value he assigns to the indelible mark may contribute to a better understanding of the current theological debate.

1. Introduction

Ideengesichte methodology in cultural and theological studies risks privileging concepts over ritual practices. In Christian theology, sophisticated conceptual tools appeared after centuries of normative strategies regulating a core of ritual practices. Embodied obedience to Christ's ritual commands usually precedes theological reflection. This paper focuses on one specific theological tool regarding some Christian ritual practices, i.e., the *character indelebilis* or indelible mark. Though the notion existed in some patristic sources, esp. Augustine of Hippo, the theologoumenon was reframed in early scholasticism. In the first millennium, some ritual practices were interpreted in the light of symbolic formulas (metaphors), such as *sphragis*, *sigillum*, *lux*, or *signaculum*. The theological avantgarde of the 12th–13th century decided to use the restricted code of Aristotelian psychology in order to better control theological predication: as Thomas Aquinas declares metaphors should be reduced to their precise meaning (Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.4 q.1 a.1 co). Along with this process, the discussion moved from baptismal theology to the theology of priesthood, and it reflected on three main topics, the nature of the *character*, its efficacy, and its representational value. At the same time, liturgical commentaries from Amalarius of Metz (775–850) to Durandus (1230–1296) explained ritual actions not just as containers of sacred images but as ritual images themselves (Schaefer 1982; Meßner 1993). They were supposed to be performed and interpreted as symbolic forms. Since the notion of the indelible mark was able to bring together both ontological claims and representational functions, it became a standard feature in western sacramental imagery. Nevertheless, its reception-history has been controversial, especially after Luther's critical approach (e.g., Weimarer Ausgabe 1888, pp. 408, 567).

The first part of this paper reviews some key points in the historical development of the theologoumenon denominated *character indelebilis*. The aim is to identify those facts which come about in the ritual action and were designated as *character* from Paganus of Corbeil (12th cent.) onwards. The second part of the paper analyzes the proposal of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), considered a turning point in the development of the theologoumenon. Since the interpretation of his thought is controversial in some points, the aim of this article is to revisit his proposal in order to cast some light on this theological

conundrum. Special attention will be paid to the metaphorical nature of some of his statements and to the iconic value he assigns to the indelible mark.

2. Ritual Practices and Theological Interpretation up to Thomas Aquinas

The reflection on *character* arose from ritual practices and their embedded theological implications. If we take a look at the ritual policies of early Christian worship, it is not difficult to notice that: (a) not everyone can partake in the ritual actions of the community; (b) not all members of the group carry out the same functions; (c) the objective and public character of some ritual policies ensure the transmission of the group's identity beyond the personal circumstances of individuals.

These policies are not an exception in the big picture of religious ritual practices. Strategies of exclusion, divine agency, and objective ritual efficacy are phenomena common to many other religious traditions (Bell 1992, pp. 131–42). Even if the origin of these Christian policies should be understood in the light of their biblical milieu (e.g., circumcision; strategies of the self-representation of God before Israel and before the nations; transmission of divine blessing), the very fact they exist may intrigue us in the same way they have intrigued former generations. Why were catechumens dismissed before the beginning of the anaphora? Why were some members of the community excluded from eucharistic communion but accepted in the public penance process of reconciliation? Why were former Arians not re-baptized when joining the Catholic Church? Since Christian religion presents itself as a religion interested in the Truth itself and not just in the established conventions (*non consuetudo sed veritas*),[1] theologians attempted to answer these questions forging the notion of *character*. If it is true that ritual policies came first, it is remarkable to see the confidence in the capacity of human reason to explore and intellectually penetrate ritual practices (Rego 2018, pp. 356–57).

If the theology on *character* grew out of an interpretation of ritual practices and not from the theological exegesis of biblical passages, it is not surprising that the Scriptures do not offer too much information about this theologoumenon. Moreover, the diversity of the ritual practices of the Church explains why patristic and medieval authors distinguished different *dimensions* and *effects* within the variety of ritual practices. In order to name those dimensions and effects, metaphors contained in the Scriptures were first used and then "refined" by academic theology. When theological consensus about the existence of the *character indelebilis* was achieved, the official teaching of the Church confirmed its existence. At that point, *character* was no longer the final moment of a theological process trying to give a name to a complex reality. It became the starting point of unending academic discussion.[2]

Interestingly, official statements regarding *character* are extremely sober. Innocent III (1161–1216), and the councils of Florence (1431–1449) and Trent (1545–1563), later received by Vatican Council II (Lumen gentium nn. 11.21; Presbiterorum ordinis n. 2), simply define the existence of a reality called *character* that justifies certain liturgical practices. What this reality may be is left to theological debate. The same applies to the philosophical and theological categories with which to reflect on it. For this reason, those magisterial definition refers to *character* as "a certain (*quoddam*) sign distinguishing from one another" (Florence 1439, Denzinger and Hünermann 2012, n. 1313) or "a certain (*quoddam*) spiritual and indelible sign" (Trent 1557, Denzinger and Hünermann 2012, n. 1609; 1563, Denzinger and Hünermann 2012, nn. 1774.1776). The use of indefinite adjectives, such as *quoddam* ("a certain"), helps to understand the metaphoric nature of those statements. Metaphorical language, as understood in this paper, uses analogies in order to convey and explore some real aspects of meta-linguistic reality. These theological metaphors are not a figure of speech or stylistic artifice without any semantic implication. They have cognitive value as far as they are a metaphor of something. This tension *ad rem*, i.e., this constant reference to meta-linguistic reality, reveals their metaphorical nature that should avoid any attempt of either reification or disregard of ontological claims.

Theological metaphors referred to *character* developed from restricted code metaphors to elaborate code metaphors. Restricted code metaphors work better in situations in which speakers share a great deal of common knowledge. Their use of language is economical and rich. Restricted code communication can convey a vast amount of meaning with a few words. Here words are charged with a complex set of connotations and act as indexes, pointing to information that remains unsaid. Restricted code metaphors are characteristic of homiletic contexts and rely mostly on biblical and liturgical imagery. They are very helpful to put *something* before our eyes. They may fall short when a critical mind starts asking what exactly that *something* is. Below is a brief survey of restricted code metaphors used from Augustine up to Alexander of Hales to point to the existence of something called *character* (Finkenzeller 1980, pp. 74–77, 111–18; Galot 1958; Häring 1955, 1956a, 1956b). One may notice that most of them were used to explain Christian initiation practices.

(1) The baptismal rite itself. It is important to stress this original use by Augustine because later, the epistemic center of the notion will move from the ritual act to its effect. This ambivalence can be exemplified in the theory of the *character compositus* of Paganus of Corbeil and in Peter Lombard (c. 1096–1160) who speaks of *character* as both an active rite (*actione abluentis*) and a passive effect (*passione abluti*) (Häring 1956b, pp. 189–91, 194);

(2) Consecration. Like the case of sacred buildings or vessels this *consecratio* points to the permanent effect of some ritual actions that separate Christians from non-Christians and call for special divine protection;

(3) Wedding ring or pledge. This metaphor highlights that the ritual act gives something. This *something* recalls the existence of a bond with God and as the *consecratio* guarantees his efficacious protection;

(4) Seal (*sphragis / sigillum / signaculum*). This metaphor explores and conveys the effect of the indelible mark that the liturgical rite impresses on Christians just as the seal of the owner or the general marks the flesh of slaves, sheep, or warriors. This image has been used to underline the fact that (a) there is a trinitarian dimension of the *character* since the Father impresses the seal of the Spirit, whose form is the form of the (incarnated) Son, in the souls of Christians; (b) since even traitors cannot delete this mark, it will have the eschatological function of distinguishing in the afterlife those who have been faithful or not to their Christian vocation; (c) it also helps to distinguish Christians from non-Christians (external boundaries), and some Christians from other Christians (internal structure of the ecclesial community); (d) this mark entails the rights and duties to act on behalf of the owner of the seal (i.e., *character* as *deputation*);

(5) Ornament (*decor*) of the soul. Since the permanent effect does not change human nature, it is described as light embellishing the soul without any personal merit and giving knowledge of supernatural realities.

Alternatively, elaborate code metaphors are used in contexts in which everyone is expected to understand *clearly* both the metaphor and the reference. They require thorough explanations and terminological disambiguation. This form of communication is typical of academic works. Since scholastic theologians conceived theology as *sacra scientia*, they privileged elaborate code metaphors in order to better control their theological imagination. Their trust in controlled human language was founded in the Incarnation. Since Christ used human language to convey God's love, their aim was not a rationalization of the Mystery, but rather a purification of human language for a better understanding of divine realities. Just one example of this methodological premise is Aquinas' statement regarding one of the aforementioned baptismal metaphors: "if it is said metaphorically, then it is necessary that the metaphor be reduced to its a precise meaning (*ad proprietatem*)" (Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.4 q.1 a.1 co). At the same time, Aquinas affirmed that human language cannot completely comprehend divine realities. Therefore, theological language remains always symbolic or metaphorical (Aquinatis 1889–1906, I, q. 13). Consistent with this methodological approach Aquinas frequently nuanced his *reductio ad proprietatem* adding

particles such as *quodammodo* or *quaedam*. Unfortunately, the symbolic dimension of his subtle language is not always understood.

The turning point between the first millennium and early scholasticism was the discussion about the nature of that *something* called *character*. In this context, authors such as Paganus of Corbie and Huguccio of Ferrara (†1210) made an important distinction between two ambits of intervention of the Holy Spirit in liturgical actions (Galot 1958, p. 55). The first ambit was related to the action of the Spirit justifying sinners and setting in motion the slow process of assimilating them to the Trinity through ritual and non-ritual practices. This process of deification is called *sanctification* and requires *divine grace* as the base for the meritorious human acts. The second ambit of the action of the Spirit was the one that evolved into the technical notion of *character sacramentalis*. This *character* did not relate directly to the process of deification of the subject. Instead, it had a specific function in Christian life.

The reflection on the function of this gift of the Spirit varies in each author. It appears that the disparity of the proposals stems from the desire to articulate the following facts: (a) Roman tradition considers three ritual actions (Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination) unrepeatable when they are performed according to the ritual form of the faith of the Church. (b) Those three ritual actions have a permanent effect on the subject that, different to grace, cannot be lost; in that sense, sacramental *character* conveys the idea of an irreversible, unending, ineradicable presence of the Spirit always calling Christian sinners from within them back to communion with God in the Church. (c) Christ, or the Trinity in Christ, is said to be the only possible author of the supernatural effect called *character*. Different explanations will be given to clarify how divine and human actions concur in order to produce that supernatural effect. The Holy Trinity actuates that effect *with*, or *through*, or *with occasion of* the human ministry of the Church. Regardless of the value of each proposal, it is important to stress that human mediation stays at the very core of the debate. (d) Despite the minister's lack of moral virtues and/or the bad moral dispositions of the faithful, the permanent effect of these liturgical actions is always accomplished as long as the ritual action is performed according to the intention of the Church (i.e., in freedom, with the same aim or purpose, and following the ritual form determined by the Church).

In trying to keep all these facts together, theologians moved from baptismal theology to the theology of priesthood via the new focus on sacramental mediation. In fact, the term *character* was used by Augustine as a conceptual tool to help determine the external boundaries of the Church, i.e., the ecclesiality of a particular (schismatic) group. When the praxis of re-baptisms and re-ordinations was no longer perceived as an important theological issue, early scholastic scholars re-framed the theological agenda regarding *character* in two directions.

First, the sacramental *character* would no longer be considered the ritual act itself (*sacramentum tantum*) but an invisible effect of it; a particular effect because, as we have seen, it should be clearly distinguished from the ultimate effect called "grace" (*res tantum*). This intermediate position of *character* as an effect of the rite and sign/cause of the grace (*res et sacramentum*) expedited the process that placed the *character* in the section of "effects" of the new theological treatise *De sacramentis in genere*. At the end of this process, the *Summa Theologiæ* of Thomas Aquinas was the first to include *character* in the position that it still usually occupies today, i.e., as the other general effect of sacraments besides grace.

Second, when the ecclesiality of some schismatic groups ceased to be a problem, the theological attention focused on the intra-ecclesial distinction between ordained clergy and non-ordained faithful. The new pastoral challenge became the guarantee of the visible presence of God's action in the Church, especially in the context of an illiterate and unworthy clergy. In this sense, the objectivity offered by the *character* will be related to notions such as *ex opere operato*, *in persona Christi capitis*, and *sacra potestas*.

3. Revisiting Thomas Aquinas on Sacramental *Character*

It is undisputed that the theologian who has had the most enduring influence in the debate on sacramental *character* is Thomas Aquinas. He sets out from the inheritance of the masters of the 12th century and is aware that the doctrine on *character* is rather new on the theological agenda. Interestingly, while Aquinas dedicates entire pages to the *character* in his Commentary on the Sentences (1252–1256), he avoids it completely in his *Summa contra Gentiles* (between 1259 and 1265) and takes it up again in his *Summa* Theologiæ (1265–1274). This fact underlines the freedom with which he employs theological technical language. The point is not to impose certain terminology but to pay attention to facts and to try to express them properly according to the characteristics of the addressee.

In the *Summa Theologiæ*, Aquinas showed a great deal of originality in presenting the new trends of the theology of the sacramental *character* and in putting forward his own synthesis. Not all the details will be taken up in this paper. It will suffice to point out some of his insights and limitations. I am aware that in this presentation, I separate myself from some common interpretations of Aquinas.

3.1. Remarks on Methodology

Aquinas' starting point was twofold. On the one hand, he knew that the new theologoumenon was on the theological agenda and he could not avoid dealing with it. On the other hand, he knew that ritual practices, and not just speculative theories, were at the root of the problem (i.e., Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.4 q.1 a.4 qc.2 s.c). It is worthwhile stressing that Thomas' position on the liturgy was conservative. According to our current standards, one could also say that his methodology was limited from a historical point of view. One clear example is the statement that the priestly *character* is impressed at the moment of the handing over of the chalice as the central moment of the ordination rite (Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.24 q.2 a.3 co.).[3] Nevertheless, his trust in the rationality of the rite is surprising. Ritual practices can be thought about because their ritual form is a fruit of the wisdom of the Spirit in the life of the Church (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.83 a.5 s.c.; IIIq.72 a.12 co). Thomas' first big methodological presupposition is that the ritual practices known to him should be conserved. Theologians are called to justify them and think *from* them.

The second assumption in Aquinas' understanding of *character* is "balanced apophatism". As we will see later on, Aquinas was very aware that supernatural realities, such as sacramental *characters* cannot be fully understood with human categories. At the same time, those realities, have an impact on human structures. As far as they enter within the sphere of human experience, they can be partially grasped with concepts and described with words. Therefore, Aquinas studied the supernatural reality of *character* operating an "apophatic reduction". He reduced it to philosophical and theological categories ("*character* is not properly in a genus or species but is reducible (*reducitur*) to the second species of quality" Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.63 a.2 co; Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.4 q.1 a.1 ad 2) but carefully added balancing particles, such as "quandam" or "quodammodo" ("character conveys a certain (*quandam*) spiritual power" III q.63 a.2 co). The function of these particles is to avoid complete reduction or assimilation of divine gifts to human structures and human understanding.

The third main presupposition is the place assigned to the sections on the sacraments within the structure of the *Summa Theologiæ*. As is well known, Aquinas located the first section in the *II-II pars* in the context of the anabatic dimension of the sacraments (technically speaking, the *usus sacramentorum*). However, he specified that the discussion of the *usus sacramenti* would be in the *III pars* (Aquinatis 1889–1906, II-II q.89 pr). The approach to the sacraments in the *III pars* is quite different from that of the *II-II pars*. In the *III pars*, the main interest focuses on the katabatic movement of sanctification and in the *efficacia sacramentorum*. The deferment of the discussion to the *III pars* was convenient for Aquinas because it allowed him to talk first about Christ and his priesthood, a key element of his sacramental theology. As we will see, he paid a heavy price for this methodological decision.

3.2. Sacramental Character, Theandric Actions, and Public Configuration with Christ

If the nature of *character* is analyzed in the context of the katabatic movement of sanctification, it should not surprise that Aquinas saw the actions transmitting divine gifts as the main function of sacramental *character*. Indeed, for him the most characteristic feature of the *character* (although not the only one) was accomplished in the instrumentality of the minister during the process of sanctification, that is, in those actions through which grace is given. This explains that Aquinas' main reference to *character* from the first millennium turned out to be not Augustine but Pseudo Dionysius ("from whom the first tradition of the *character* has come to us" Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib. 4 d.4 q.1 a.1 co). According to Aquinas, the true theological problem was not whether baptism or holy orders might be repeated. Instead, he was more interested in explaining what Pseudo Dionysius called *theandric action* and Aquinas translated as *divinamvirilem* or *divinamhumanam* (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.19 a.1 ad 1). Thanks to this synergy Christians become, like Christ's humanity, not only receivers of God's deification (divine) but also capable of communicating divine gifts ("divinum et communicantem divinorum" Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib. 4 d.4 q.1 a.1 co; Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q. 22 a.4 co; III q.63 a.2 co). That may also explain why Aquinas moved from the anointing metaphors of John 3:5-6 (and to some extent Paul) to the metaphor of Christ as the *character* of the God the Father according to Hebrews 1,3 (something that we find already in Alexander of Hales, Ott 1969, p. 97). One might wonder whether this shift may also reflect the progressive Christological concentration of western theology of *character*, to the detriment of its pneumatological dimension.

It is important to stress that already in his Commentary on the Sentences, Aquinas set *character* in the context of operations, and not in the context of being: "the *character* of Christ configures someone to the actions of Christ (*ad actiones Christi*)" (Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.4 q.1 a.1 ad 3). *Character* is a divine gift that brings with it a new capacity of *acting* ("exercise (*exercere*) spiritual activities" ibid. ad 5), not a new way of *being*. This is one of the reasons that explain his (apparently too complicated) double configuration with Christ, one via *grace*, another via *character*. In Aquinas, the distinction between *grace* and *character* became a structural feature. The grace-configuration with Christ is the most important one because it relates to the way of being (the essence of the soul) reaching the most intimate core of the subject ("grace, considered in itself, perfects the essence of the soul, in so far as it is a certain participated likeness of the divine being (*esse*)" Aquinatis (1889–1906), III q.62 a.2 co). In a different way, configuration through *character* has to do with *some* specific spiritual actions ("actiones spirituales *aliquas*" Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.4 q.1 a.3 qc.3 ad 1) that ensure the public manifestation of particular operations of Christ's priesthood through which the divine economy of salvation is actuated (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q. 69 a. 9 ad 1).

According to Aquinas, the primary aim of the configuration via *character* was not the personal sanctification of the singular Christian, but rather to guarantee the public and ecclesial dimension of Christ's priesthood on this earth. For this reason, Aquinas affirmed that those who received the baptism of blood were configurated to Christ *realiter* and *expressius* but this type of baptism did not impress any *character* (Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.4 q.3 a.3 qc.3 co). He also stated that if someone were sanctified in the maternal womb, he or she would have to go through the baptismal rite "in order to be conformed to Christ's other members by receiving the character" (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.68 a.1 ad 3).

Sacramental *characters* follow the logic of the public dimension of the salvific plan of God, i.e., salvation mediated through human structures. According to Aquinas, salvation came from personal contact with God's power (*virtus divina*) mediated through Christ's humanity (*virtus passionis Christi*). This contact or *copulatio* happens through *faith* and the *sacraments of faith*: "the power of Christ's Passion (*virtus passionis Christi*) is united (*copulatur*) to us by faith and the sacraments" (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.62 a.6 co; in III q.62 a.5 co.: quodammodo copulatur). The notion of "sacraments of faith" includes the presence of physical mediations (*exteriores res*) that Christ uses to encounter his Spouse. In fact, "the contact that comes from faith is produced by an act of the soul, whereas the

contact that comes from the sacraments, is produced by making use of exterior things (*per usum exteriorum rerum*)" (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.62 a.6 co).

The distinction between *fides* and *sacramenta fidei* has a soteriological frame. Salvation comes always from God, but it has been *physically* mediated through Christ's humanity only from his incarnation onwards. Those who could never physically meet Christ (or His Body, the Church) can be saved "per fidem". Those who have been given the opportunity to have physical contact with the Body of Christ can be saved *through* that physical contact (*continuatio*) that happens "per usum exteriorum rerum". Aquinas understood Christ's humanity, and its prolongation in the Church, as a noticeable and tangible *instrument* that mediates the "virtus divina". This mediation is the core of Christ's priestly activity. Christians are incorporated into Christ's priestly activity through sacramental *characters*. Therefore, sacramental *characters* have an intrinsic Christological, public, and ecclesial dimension. They are meant to *build* the Church as the structured public body of Christ (Nicolas 1986, p. 465).

3.3. The Functional Ontology of Sacramental Characters

That sacramental *characters* are above all at the service of the public priestly actions of Christ through his Church goes hand in hand with Thomas' belief that there was only one priest, the only mediator, the Man Jesus Christ (1 Tim 2:5). The notion of priesthood and the notion of mediation were for Aquinas two expressions of the same reality. Both refer to visible and physical actions through which the Trinity bestows salvation through Christ's humanity, and to the visible and physical actions through which Christ gives glory and recognition to God the Father with his Body.

Christ's priesthood or mediation depends on his human structures ("Christ was a priest, not as God, but as man" Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.22 a.3 ad 1). For that reason, God's decision to configure the human structures of Christians to Christ's in order to perpetuate the visible exercise of Christ's priesthood on this earth is not unreasonable. Aquinas saw the baptized faithful and ordained ministers as *instrumenta* (or *organa*) *extrinseca* at the service of the public priestly actions of Christ (cf. Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.64 a.3 co). They became priests *in Christ*. As part of their mission, members of the Church receive sacramental *characters*, that is "certain participations of Christ's Priesthood, flowing from Christ Himself" (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.63 a.3 co.) These participations in Christ's priestly actions are actions as well (*character as act* or *actus characteris*) that require a spiritual instrumental potency (character as potency, Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.63 a.2 co, Schillebeeckx [1952] 2004, p. 427).

Aquinas used the theandric actions of Christ as a paradigm for explaining how Christians are configured to Christ's priesthood, i.e., how divine action and human action interplay in Christian rituals. His refusal of concomitant explanations (two actions working separately at the same time) and dispositive ones (the human action as a condition of a subsequent divine action) is well known: those theories reduce the importance of the theandric action because the human element remains *juxtaposed* or *extrinsic* to the divine action (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.62 a.1 co; III q.62 a.4 co). These explanations are not consistent with the radicality with which the divine Word has assumed the human structures of the *flesh* (John 1:14).

According to Aquinas, the best way to approach sacramental theandry was by considering the "*per*" and the "*in*" ("through which" and "in which") that the human structures provide to the divine salvific actions ("the saving power must flow from Christ's Godhead *through* his humanity *into* the sacraments (per eius humanitatem in ipsa sacramenta)" III q.62 a.5 co.) Thanks to the mediation of this human "through and in", the divine salvific action is fully divine and fully human, completely *ex Deo* and *ex homine*. The Trinity manifests its inclusive power by joining human structures, that is, the humanity of the Logos (*instrumentum coniunctum*) and his expanded humanity, i.e., the body and souls of the members of the Church (*instrumentum separatum*) to his salvific action.

In analogy to the relationship between the human and divine natures in Christ, Aquinas saw the sacramental theandric actions as the result of two different forces that

work together while respecting the characteristics of their own dynamism. In fact, after the incarnation salvation does not come only *ex Deo* but also *ex homine*. The *ex homine* element is involved in both directions of Christ's priestly mediation: the descendent communication (*traditio*) of grace from God (katabatic direction); and the acceptance (*susceptio*) of God's gifts and God's *protestatio* or glorification (anabatic direction). Interestingly, as far as it regards the katabatic direction, the *ex homine* element adds nothing to the divine principle of justification and sanctification, the *virtus divina*. It only provides the modality of *contact* with it ("the proper work of the human operation is to enter in contact (*contactus*)" Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.19 a.1 ad 5), that is, the "*per*" and the "*in*" of the human structures.

The active role of Christ's human structures in the process of salvation is key to understanding Aquinas' approach to sacramental *characters*. Sacramental *characters* are divine gifts allowing Christians to join actively Christ's priestly actions. They are the "empowerment" human structures need in order to become divine and communicators of divine things ("divinum atque communicatorum divinorum" Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.4 q.1 a.1 co; Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q. 63 a.2 co). They are like the "Augmented Reality device" human nature requires so that theandric actions can happen.

In fact, since the distance between God and his creatures is infinite, Aquinas concluded that human structures were radically incapable of theandric actions without some kind of divine empowerment. At the same time, the fact that human salvation passes through Christ's human structures moves Aquinas to discard any understanding of the human mediation of Christ's priesthood as something external or purely passive. Sacramental *characters* are the theological device Aquinas used to solve this difficulty.

Regarding the supernatural dimension of theandric actions, Aquinas presented the *character* as a divine gift that requires faith and cannot be fully grasped by human intellects. The unavailability of the gift prevents any misunderstanding of the *character* as a magic power. The faith required for the reception and exercise of sacramental *characters* is the faith of the Church. As far as the subject's faith matches and expresses the faith of the Church regarding that particular action, sacramental *characters* can come into play. Furthermore, the divine nature of the gift means that it cannot be comprehended by human intellects and expressed with human language. It can only be "reduced" analogically to one of our human structures. For this reason, Aquinas carefully added particles such as "quodam" or "quodammodo" again and again (e.g., "quandam similitudinem" Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.63 a.1 ad 2). The function of these particles was to guarantee the apophatic dimension of God's gifts.

As far as it concerns the human dimension of theandric actions, Aquinas reminded us that for an action to be human, the involvement of the human structures is required. The human subject must "possess" the act in order to for it to be hers or his. Theandric actions are possible only if the human subject has control over the "supernatural capacity" (i.e., *character*) facilitating the theandric actions. The human subject must be able to regulate its use. Aquinas gave the name *usus sacramenti* to the act of putting the theandric capacity into action (e.g., Aquinatis 1980, Super I Cor., cap.11 vs. 25). The *usus sacramenti* has three main forms: the acceptance (*susceptio*) of the divine grace (esp. related to Baptism), the manifestation (*protestatio*) of the personal self-giving to God (esp. related to Confirmation), and the communication (*traditio*) of the divine grace to others (esp. related to Holy Orders). At the same time, Aquinas denied a complete possession of the theandric act (not of the capacity of putting it into action) on the part of Christians. The source of the salvific action cannot be any human structure. Human beings can only be *instrumental* regarding the *virtus divina*. Therefore, the salvific action is something that is *contained in* and *flows through* human structures ("a certain instrumental power transient (*fluens*) and incomplete in its natural being" Aquinatis (1889–1906), III q.62 a.3 co). Sacramental *characters* are those supernatural capacities that Christians enact in order to allow Christ's human and divine actions to flow through them.

Aquinas stressed the *in* and *through* of the human structures because human beings are not passive instruments of divine activity in theandric actions. The *virtutem*

creatam or distinctive efficiency of the human acts (e.g., speech acts, gestures) is required (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.78 a.4 co). Otherwise, those actions would not be *ex homine*. According to his Christological model, Aquinas considered that God had extended to other human creatures the gift of uniting their own power of action to the divine salvific action without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.

Since *character* is a new operational potency given to the human subject, *character* is an "accident" (Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.4 q.1 a.3 qc.2 co). According to Aquinas, an accident is not something unnecessary or unimportant, but rather something *inherent-in-another* or *not-existing-in-se*. Accidents have no existence of their own (García López 2001, p. 213). They exist and can only exist in and by the substance that sustains them. When Aquinas tried to ascribe these "accidents" (*characters*) to any of the human structures he knew, Aquinas concluded that sacramental *characters* are closer to "qualities" than to any other accidental determination of the human soul. Between the different kinds of qualities that Aristotelian psychology had individuated, the supernatural gift of the *character* is apophatically "reduced" to the notion of *disposition* or *operational principle* (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III, q.63 a.2 co). *Characters* are just principles of theandric actions. They empower human structures to collaborate with certain divine actions (functional ontology).

Paradoxically, sacramental *characters* become *of the human subject* (because they have been given to her or him), but they are not *human accidents* (they cannot come from any human substance). For this reason, scholastic theologians tried to identify the "part" of the soul in which the sacramental *characters* fit in. Aquinas "placed" this supernatural accident in the context of the human intellect (Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.4 q.1 a.3 qc.3). Aquinas wanted to stress that *characters* are faculties at the service of the public faith of the Church and not at the service of the moral development of the individual subject. In other words, the exercise of *characters* does not require the moral perfection of the subject (this depending mostly on a good or bad will), but rather the intention of enacting the faith of the Church.

In conclusion, sacramental *characters* are *certain divine potencies* allowing Christians to use their own spiritual and sensitives faculties as *instruments* of Christ's public exercise of his priesthood. Christians possess those potencies not as a part of their own nature, but rather as gifts coming from outside of their anthropological structures. At the same time, the gifts are really given. Therefore, Christians have sacramental *characters* at their disposal and decide about their use under certain conditions.

3.4. The Exercise of Sacramental Characters: Parameters

Christians can employ and decide about the use of sacramental *characters* according to certain parameters. The exercise of the sacramental *character* has conditions because it is not a magic power wholly at the subject's disposal. The final synergetic (*divinamvirilis*) operation does not depend on human initiative and thus can be said to belong less to the subject than other acts of worship that they carry out with the help of grace.

Aquinas indicated two of the main conditions for the exercise of sacramental *characters*. The first condition is the full humanity of the act (that includes knowledge and free will). The second one stresses the ecclesial dimension of the theandric actions. In other words, singular human beings can become instruments of divine action as far as they align themselves with the divine will. This alignment happens when obedience to the *ecclesial form* of the rite is respected. The intention of doing what the Church does is an essential requirement for the existence of theandric collaboration. As we have seen, *characters* are mainly at the service of the public exercise of Christ's priesthood, rather than for the growth of the individual in holiness. In this ecclesiological context, one can better understand Aquinas' notion of *deputatio.* Sacramental *characters* have an ontological and a "legal" dimension (Schillebeeckx [1952] 2004, p. 416). In the case of Baptism and Confirmation, the *deputatio* is an immediate consequence of the ontological gift of the *character* ("the sacraments of the New Law produce a character, in so far as by them we are appointed (*deputamur*) to the worship of God according to the rite of the Christian religion"

Aquinatis (1889–1906), III q.63 a.2 co). That said, Aquinas' refusal of the sacramentality (and *character*!) of the episcopal ordination makes it difficult to evaluate the ontological and "legal" value of the ecclesial *deputatio* in the case of holy orders. The tension between the *potestas ordinis* and the *potestas jurisdictionis* will accompany the catholic debate on the priesthood for many centuries.

In any case, the *intention* of doing what the *faith of the Church* wants to do and its actual *enactment* is necessary and enough. On the other hand, the individual faith of the singular person is required for the individual *fruitfulness* of the theandric actions. That explains why the supernatural effects of sacramental actions can be actuated despite the unworthiness of both the ministers and the participants in the rite.

3.5. The Iconic Dimension of the Sacramental Characters in the Ritual Actions

The last point we would like to review is the iconic dimension of the *ritual actions* of the Christians, both ordained and non-ordained faithful. The iconic dimension of the sacramental *characters* is related to the debate on who operates *in persona Christi*. Modern catholic controversial theology on priesthood has stressed this aspect often quoting Aquinas' texts. As we will see, Aquinas' understanding of this expression is articulated and more complex than its *vulgata* presentation.

Aquinas' starting point was soteriological. He wanted to understand how divine salvation had been dispensed through history, that is, before Christ, in Christ's life, and after Christ's Ascension. As we have already seen, divine salvation comes only from God (*virtus divina*). According to Aquinas, this *divine power* embraces any period of history before or after Christ ("this power is in touch with all places and times by its presence (præsentialiter)" Aquinatis (1889–1906), III, q.56, a.1, ad 3) making salvific virtual contacts (*contactus virtualis*, ibid.) possible. At the same time, Aquinas was very aware of the uniqueness of Christ's mediation. This uniqueness requires that the human act of faith necessary for salvation includes a reference to Christ. How could this happen before the historical moment of the incarnation? Aquinas' response was straightforward. He recalls 1 Cor 10:11 ("these things happened to them by way of the figure (*in figura*, Vulgate)") and concluded that there must have existed *figuræ* of Christ given by God to all those who lived before Christ.

In order to put in contact the human act of faith with the incarnated Logos, those *figuræ*, which Aquinas also called *ræpresentationes* or *assimilationes*, must have a similar formality to Christ's flesh. They must have a likeness (*similitudo*) with the form of Christ's flesh. By *similitudo,* Aquinas meant the relation established by the presence of one same formal aspect (*relatio ex unitate qualitatis*) in the original and its representation (e.g., Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.1 d.2 q.1 a.5 expos). In other words, it is enough for the *figura* to have a similar formality (*qualitas*) to Christ's flesh *in any aspect whatsoever*. In fact, "the truth corresponds to the figure in some respects (quantum ad aliquid)" (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.48 a.3 ad 1). This broad sense explains why Aquinas, following the typological reading of the Scripture, considered very different realities, such as the paschal lamb or the altar, as *figuræ* of the flesh of Christ (e.g., Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q. 46 a. 4 co; III q. 47 a.2 ad 1).

Interestingly, according to Aquinas the representational mechanism of the *figuræ* as such is the same before and after Christ. All of them are *ræpresentationes per similitudo*, that is, *signs* of Christ's flesh. They all require the mechanism of the intentional movement towards the image "as an image" (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q. 25 a.3 co), i.e., the mechanism of an intentional act of the soul that does not stop the movement of the act of faith at the level of the image itself (that would be idolatry), but, passing *through* the mediation of the *figura* or sensible sign ("aliquod signum sensibile" Super Io., cap. 3 l. 1) the intentional act reaches the reality itself, that is, the *virtus divina*.

Two characteristics of the *figuræ* or signs of Christ after the incarnation are that (a) they not only signify the *virtus divina* but also mediate this *virtus* through Christ's flesh; for these reasons, the *figuræ* of this historical period signify more explicitly Christ's flesh than the *figuræ* before the incarnation (Aquinatis 1953, Super Heb., ch. 10 l. 1); and (b) the *figuræ*

after the incarnation not only signify Christ's flesh but, also mediate Christ's katabatic and anabatic priestly acts.[4] In this sense, sacramental *characters* will be thought of as the means with which Christ transforms the ritual activity of the members of his Body in *figuræ*, in signs that manifest his priestly acts. Therefore, the public acts of worship that Christians perform are more than the individual's response to God. They become visible *signs*, *icons* of Christ's priestly acts (e.g., "the celebration of this sacrament [the Eucharist] is a certain image representing Christ's Passion, which is the true sacrifice" Aquinatis (1889–1906), III, q.83, ad 1 co).

From this point of view, we turn to Aquinas' use of the expressions *in persona Christi*, *in persona Ecclesiæ*, and similar ones. As an initial remark, we should remember that Thomas did not speak of *configuration*. Instead, he spoke of *quædam configuratio* (a certain kind of configuration).

As far as it regards the ordained ministers of a Christian community, Aquinas saw them as (a) *images* of the *autoritas/potestas Christi*, who rules and vivifies his Body with his grace at particular moments; (b) as *images* that represent the public acts of worship *of the whole Church* (Aquinatis 1889–1906, II-II q. 83 a. 12 co). Consequently, though Aquinas did use the expression *in persona Christi* (or others such as *Christum typum gerere*, or *in nomine Christi*), he preserved the ecclesiological dimension of the priestly *character*. Aquinas reminds us that whenever there is a sacramental contact *through an image*, then an insurmountable "iconic difference" emerges. In the first place, the minister never ceases being himself (the configuration with Christ does not happen at the personal level). In the second place, the ordained minister always acts as a minister of the Church (inquantum est Ecclesiae minister, Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.64 a.6 ad 2); that is, the priest can act *in persona Christi* because he is "representing" the act that the whole Church does ("only [the priest] can perform the act of the whole Church that consecrates the Eucharist" Aquinatis (1947) Super Sent., lib.4 d.24 q.2 a.2 ad 2; see also lib. 4 d. 8 q. 2 a. 1 qc. 4 ad 4; Aquinatis 1889–1906, III, q. 64 a. 5 ad 1; III, q. 64 a. 6 ad 2). Without these two dimensions of the "iconic difference", we would not be dealing with an image but with reality itself ("it would no longer be a likeness (*similitudo*), but the truth itself" III q. 46 a. 4 ad 1). There would be no ecclesial mediation, but a direct encounter with Christ. This immediacy will characterize the heavenly condition or *status gloriæ*. In the present status of the Church, contact with Christ is mediated by images or signs because it is based on the exercise of faith: "the sacraments are proportioned to faith, through which the truth is seen through a glass (*in speculo*) and in a dark manner (*in ænigmate*) "(Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.80 a.2 ad 2). For this reason, Aquinas privileges the point of view of the *sign* in his study of the sacraments ("but here we speak of sacraments in a special sense, as implying their condition of sign, and in this way, a sacrament is a kind of sign" Aquinatis 1889–1906, III, q.60, a.1. co.)

Therefore, Aquinas had no problem in presenting the mediation of the minister who acts *in persona Christi* as a fictional representation: «as if Christ uttered [those words] being present (*præsentialiter*)» (Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.78 a.5 co.; "as if Christ were present" Aquinatis (1951), Super Mt., cap.26 l.3). This fictional dimension (*ac si*, as if…) of the priestly *character* has not been sufficiently received in modern presentations of Aquinas' theology. The person of Christ does not substitute the person of the minister during the ritual act. Christ does not present himself without the mediation of his Church. Instead, Christ uses the human structures of some members of his Body to actuate determined acts of sanctification and glorification of the Father. Just one more example: "if only one priest is present, it is understood that he fulfills this sacrament in the power of the entire Church whose minister he is, and which he represents (*personam gerit*)" (Aquinatis 1961, Contra Gentiles, lib. 4 cap. 73 n. 9, 9).

4. Appraisal and Conclusions

According to Otto Herman Pesch (2010, p. 699), the catholic doctrine on the priestly indelible mark is the greatest stumbling block for Lutheran theology on priesthood. The main critique of catholic doctrine would be that it introduces a qualitative difference

between clerics and lay people, especially since clerics are seen as a *medium* for something that only can be asked for and implored, i.e., the gift of the Spirit.

In my opinion, by forgetting Aquinas' ecclesial and fictional dimension of *character* and the distinction between grace-configuration and *character*-configuration, great confusion has been caused. Scheeben's conception of *character* as "dignity" has contributed not a little to such a state of things (Scheeben [1865] 1941, pp. 479–81; Journet [1962] 1998, pp. 201–3). Theological imagination stopped looking at *character* as the way in which Christ's worship and sanctifying actions become visible and public through the actions of the different Church members and it started to be seen as an increase in Christian dignity[5] and one more element in the process of personal sanctification. This misunderstanding was fueled by a certain unilateral interpretation of Christ's priesthood. In the context of a controversial theology against protestants, Catholic theologians stiffened the notions of ministry and priesthood reducing its *public* and *active* dimensions to the ordained priests. Only ordained priests were ontologically configured to Christ. Only ordained priests could act *in persona Christi* and *in nomine Ecclesiæ*. The priesthood of the laity was imperfect, spiritual, and a derivation of the ordained priesthood (Tanquerey 1938, p. 281; Schmaus 1958, p. 527; Schmidt 1960, p. 78). The "ontological" claims of the catholic priesthood were defended against the "functionalistic" understanding of protestant priesthood without noticing that many times this was a false alternative, at least if the problem was studied under the light of Aquinas' "functional ontology" of sacramental *characters*.

At the same time, it is also true that Aquinas himself has a part in this simplification. In the first place, Aquinas qualified baptismal *character* as a *passive* potency, as opposed to the *active* potency of holy orders. Although the reception of the sacraments fits well with the model of passive potency, this does not seem to be the case in the other acts of worship, i.e., the active *protestatio fidei* acts of the baptized, such as vocal prayers and *sacrifices* (Aquinatis 1889–1906, II-II q.81 a.3; Christ's protestatio as a sacrifice in Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.22 aa.2–3). These acts include ritual actions, such as the divine office or the offering of the *sacrifice* of the Mass. Here Aquinas paid the price of placing the study of the *character* in the *III pars* of the *Summa Theologiæ*. As we saw, this operation stressed the katabatic dimension of Christ's priesthood. From this point of view, the main "activity" of the baptized faithful during the sacramental rites was to receive grace. Further, what happens with the anabatic dimension of Christ's priesthood? This dimension is extremely reduced in the *III pars* because it was partially studied in the *I-II pars* and the *II-II pars* from the point of view of the human structures and human acts. Therefore, it is not clear whether ritual acts, such as common prayer (*officium divinum*), required the active potency of *character* (e.g., "prayer is twofold. One is the private prayer that one offers to God as an individual person; the second is the public prayer that one offers to God in the person of the whole Church, as it is clear in the prayers that are said in the church by the priests "Aquinatis 1980, Super I Cor., cap.11 l.2).

That Aquinas was not clear on this point is well shown in the reception of his ideas by modern theologians. For many of these authors, the passive potency of baptismal *character* does not allow the Christian faithful to celebrate actively the divine office or to *offer* the sacrifice of the Mass with the priest, but only through "his hands" (e.g., Schillebeeckx [1952] 2004, p. 438). This conception had grave consequences for liturgical life. The theological model of passive/active *characters* fitted well with the process of clericalization of the Catholic liturgy according to which only ordained priests could act "actively" *in persona Christi* and *in nomine Ecclesiæ*. For this reason, only priests could "celebrate" the liturgy, while the baptized could only "participate".

This affirmation has been reversed in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n. 48 (Vatican Council II [1962–1965] 2014) and in the recent official teaching of the Catholic Church (Catechism 2000, nn. 1142–44). For example, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n. 100 encourages reciting the divine office, either with the priests, or among themselves, or even individually, presupposing that lay people within a group or alone (and without the presence of the priest) pray the Liturgy of the Hours in the name of the whole Church without any other deputation

than their baptismal *character*. Their common priesthood is not seen as a derivation of the priesthood of ordained priests, but as a *different* modality of exercise of Christ's priesthood (Pascher 1966, p. 216; Congar 1971, p. 791). This does not mean that any baptized person can make present any priestly act of Christ at any moment. It just implies that the expression *in persona Christi* can be well understood when it is placed at the ontological level of functional operations. Ordained priests *are not essentially more Christ* than other Christians. It only means that they can put their human activity at the service of determined actions of Christ at a precise moment and always as the "mouth" of the Church. If it is true that non-ordained faithful cannot act *in persona Christi capitis,* it is also true that all the baptized are members of the priestly people of God and, hence, they have proper participation in Christ's priesthood. Because they are members of the priestly Body of Christ, Christ can use their human structures during the rite to render "visible" *some* of his priestly acts. In this case, they do not act *in persona Christi capitis*, they act *in persona Christi corporis*.

Notes

1　According to Tertullian, Christ has named himself truth, not custom: "Dominus noster Christus veritatem se, non consuetudinem, cognominavit" (Tertullianus 1954, p. 1209).

2　*Salmanticensis* commentators of Aquinas complain that "there is such a thick crop of statements, such a mixture of opinions, that even the mere review of them can cause distaste" (Cursus Theologicus 1878, disp. 5, dub. 2, n. 11, p. 420b).

3　The *tradition instrumentorum* started to be considered by the most of the theologians as the central moment of priestly ordination instead of the handing of the hands with the consecratory prayer only in the 13th century (Ott 1969, pp. 94–95).

4　Aquinas speaks of the sacramenta of the Old Law as *fidei protestationes* or *signa protestantia fidem* (e.g., Aquinatis 1889–1906, III q.61 a.4 co; III q.62 a.6 co). The fundamental distinction with the *fidei protestationes* of the New Testament consists in the "per" of the transmission of grace, not in the "per" as signification of the Christ's form.

5　Even Aquinas follows the Pseudo Dyionisian understanding of the hierarchical structure of beings and affirms that those who are inferior are illuminated and perfected by those who are superior, and hence "pontifical dignity exceeds all other dignities" Aquinatis (1953), Super Heb., cap.5 l.1).

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