

Understanding Christ's Satisfaction Today

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Anselm's theory of satisfaction atonement has come under fire from many quarters. Satisfaction is understood to be tied up with violence and to promote oppression, child abuse, and a self-destructive spirituality. The problem, however, is not simply that St. Anselm employed forensic language and highlighted justice over mercy. The difficulty lies in a proper understanding of the nature and non-existence of evil, the sovereignty of providence over suffering, and God's transcendent solution to the problem of evil. Such insights were commonplace for the early Christians and well articulated in St. Augustine and Boethius. It is in this context that I will propose to read St. Anselm and to understand the meaning of satisfaction atonement with the help of Fr. Bernard Lonergan's appropriation of St. Anselm's disjunction aut poena, aut satisfactio.

“[T]he common understanding of Catholic theology in the West,” observes William David Folsey, “appears to be unsatisfactory by reason of what might be called a juridical over-kill.”¹ J. Denny Weaver offers the following: “The link between satisfaction atonement and systems of retributive justice cannot be denied.”² As writers like Folsey and Weaver interpret satisfaction atonement, there exists a profound difficulty in reconciling divine goodness and mercy with the requirements of satisfaction. The perceived problem is that any explanation of satisfaction attributes to God, either implicitly or explicitly, the quality of vengeance or the capacity for violence. As a result, anyone interested in preserving one of the many theological insights or biblical doctrines that fall under the heading ‘atonement’ or the reconciliation of God and the world through Christ’s blood must scramble to differentiate atonement from satisfaction. The problem, however, is not simply with Anselm. Within the narrative theologies of James Alison and Weaver, sin and evil become natural categories. They are incorporated into a single concept of redemption and separated out from the reign of God. God can have nothing to do with what a commonsense approach to the issue of suffering declares to be evil. Weaver, especially, thinks of evil on the analogy of corporeal forms, much as the young Augustine in the *Confessions* did. Evil is a positive force capable of accumulation. Alison treats sin as explicable within the framework of Rene Girard’s theory of mimetic desire and the mechanism of scapegoating.³ Raymund Schwager states explicitly that he aims at a unified concept of the redemption that incorporates evil within a single understanding. Further, all violence, including

¹ William David Folsey, *The Meaning of Expiation Today* (dissertation), Pontificia Universita S. Tommaso D’Aquino, Vatican (1982), 37.

² J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 3.

³ Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 262. Alison’s position is confusing. He asserts that there is no possible explanation for sin, which sounds like Augustine’s position. However, his reason is not that sin lacks intelligibility, but that humans lack the ability to give an explanation for anything. In spite of this, Alison does offer a Girardian ‘explanation’ for sin from an anthropological and a developmental perspective.

punishment, is ranged under the substantial, generic principle called evil.⁴ The problem, then, appears to be that Anselm's theory of satisfaction amounts to the necessary death of Jesus as payment to a vengeful and violent God of a debt incurred by humanity. The real difficulty, however, is not that Anselm attributed vengeance to God or that following his argument we must do so. This problem only arises when we fail to take note of the nature of evil and of Christian efforts to understand punishment in the context of transcendent wisdom.

Another problem associated with the effort to separate atonement from satisfaction recurs in the many attempts to recover a classical theory of atonement in the wake of Gustav Aulen's *Christus Victor*. On Aulen's reading of the Fathers and of Luther, Christ's sacrifice amounts to an overcoming of divine wrath and a reconciliation within God of justice and mercy. Thus, a dualism within God that is destructive of divine simplicity becomes the operative metaphysics behind such 'classical' theories of atonement.

Of course, as Dr. Wilkins has shown in his explication of Bernard Lonergan's appropriation of Anselm's disjunction *aut poena aut satisfactio*, satisfaction need not be equated with retribution.⁵ Also, we ought to take seriously the historical point concerning the formulation of the theorem of the supernatural and the differentiation of theological and philosophical methods after Anselm. Yet, Anselm himself seems to have been more sensitive to the problems that the theorem of the supernatural helped to solve than do his modern critiques. The necessity of Christ's death is not a logical or absolute necessity. Anselm attributed any necessity to divine and not to human wisdom. Thus the necessity of the cross, as indicated by Jesus and the Evangelists in the form of the divine *dei* (it must be) is best handled theologically and not philosophically. Lastly, the more faithful reading of Anselm and Aquinas offered by Lonergan within the context of reconciliation and pardon and on the analogy of the sacrament of penance opens on to a spiritual theology that promotes human liberation from sin and violence. Lonergan preserves the insight that sin makes no sense—it has no 'why.' It is not a substantial principle that explains anything. It cannot play an explanatory role in the redemption. The only explanation for the cross is divine wisdom and goodness. The cross is God's transcendent solution to the problem of evil. This is not to say that what is unjust according to reason becomes just when intelligence is ratcheted up to infinity. Reason itself is capable of apprehending the absurdity of sin and acknowledging its own limitations in conceiving of a solution to that absurdity. Further, there is a differentiation of orders that has been articulated most clearly by Thomas Aquinas according to which the relevant questions themselves may be distinguished in a way not available to Anselm.

⁴ Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption*, trans. by Williams and Haddon (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 164-5 & 198-9. Schwager differs from the others in that, following Barth, he asserts that judgment and anger are aspects of love. Divine wrath and the possibility of damnation point to God's respect for and preservation of human freedom (sinners are handed over to the inner logic of their perverted desires) and his hatred of sin, which according to Romans 1: 18-32 is revealed from heaven.

⁵ Jeremy Wilkins, "Lonergan's Appropriation of Anselm's Disjunction *Aut poena aut satisfactio*," a paper delivered at the Third Saint Anselm Conference at Saint Anselm College (Manchester, NH), April 23, 2004.

Here we are beginning with divine wisdom, which is properly supernatural and out of all proportion to the native human capacity for knowledge, and we are seeking some understanding of this mystery. In principle there is a unity of truth even though a mystery is beyond but not contradictory to human reason. It would be impious to attribute blatant injustice to God. Yet, the Father willed the death of the Son because of sin and as a ransom to death. There is a twofold problem that I will attend to in this paper. The first is to establish solid ground on which to keep satisfaction and punishment distinct. The second is to outline the penitential context of satisfaction theory in a way that preserves divine simplicity and divine hatred of sin, and respects the absence of any intelligibility in sin.

The first problem concerns punishment and whether punishment is an evil that ought not to be attributed to God. A classic Christian treatment of punishment as a good is the text *The Instructor* by Clement of Alexandria. Clement's understanding of the office of the Instructor is richly informed by the divine pedagogy of Israel and the way of the wise person in opposition to the fool in the Old Testament, as well as Plato's *Gorgias*. Clement understood punishment in terms of a corrective to unrighteousness, a foolish way of life, slavery to sin, and a disordered nature. The goal of punishment is piety, wisdom, holiness, and the perfection of human nature. It is therefore good and beneficial for a sinner to be punished. "Revenge," Clement wrote, "is retribution for evil, imposed for the advantage of him who takes revenge."⁶ God's anger follows from God's love and aims at the good of the sinner. Anselm began with the premise that human beings had sinned grievously and that in doing so they incurred a debt or assumed a condition of original injustice from which they could not extricate themselves. His arguments centered on Christ's sacrifice as the only means by which human beings may be reconciled with God and the corrective function of punishment is all but neglected. He was not concerned so much with the rationale of divine punishment as the justice of it. Nevertheless, there is an ordered relationship between the flight from a state of justice and the proclivity to sin, or the penal character of sin. In *De Concordia* Anselm wrote of Adam and Eve that:

once they abandoned the state of justice, they abandoned happiness. And the will which they received as good and for their own good, still seethes with a longing for the advantages which they cannot help but want. And because they cannot recover the lost genuine advantages befitting a rational creature, they turn to the spurious advantages which befit brute animals and characterize bestial appetites.⁷

Anselm did not doubt that punishment is aimed at the will and that "since all things are subject to God's disposing, whatever happens to a person by way of aiding free will either to receive or maintain" justice is attributed to grace,⁸ yet he did not make it a habit to indulge in that sort of speculation concerning the salutary character of suffering and punishment that one finds in Augustine or Boethius, who both affirmed that every fortune is good. Anselm treated all punishment and suffering as having a moral character. It was a mark of one's injustice before

⁶ *The Instructor*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, I.8.

⁷ *De Concordia*, trans. by Thomas Bermingham, in *Anselm of Canterbury. The Major Works*, ed Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 435-474. Chapter 3, section 13.

⁸ *Ibid.* Chapter 3, section 4.

God and it is always just for God to punish wherever there is guilt. Punishment for Anselm is not primarily a matter of rehabilitation but of submission of the will.

Accordingly, when Anselm composed his *Cur Deus Homo?* he simply rejected the possibility that punishment would bring about the restoration of justice and the completion of the divine plan of creation. The sinner does not escape the ordering will of God because “if he wishes to escape from a will that issues orders, he runs beneath a will that inflicts punishment.”⁹ However, in the state of injustice, the soul cannot turn itself from its illicit loves and submit itself to God. The will suffering punishment is subjected involuntarily to the sovereignty of God. For this reason, a punished sinner is not an adequate substitute for the fallen angels. There remains an absence of willing obedience. An individual who has not made recompense for an insult to God’s honor could attain neither restoration to that state of justice prior to sin nor blessedness.¹⁰ No being, therefore, can be saved through punishment or according to strict justice, yet punishment is not for that reason unjust. Justice is a quality of the will acting according to right reason. God acts according to infinite wisdom and is for that reason preeminently just.¹¹ It might appear as though God’s will to preserve justice and God’s will to save human beings are contradictory.

Anselm distinguished between what God willed and what God permitted.¹² Yet, further systematic control over our understanding of the relationship of the evil of punishment to the good of salvation is needed. Punishment is understood here as the deprivation of some human good. The issue, as Charles Hefling points out, is that the relationship between fault and punishment: “the fact that punishment [including all the suffering associated with the state of injustice] is the consequence of fault or that fault gives rise to punishment...does belong to the order of the universe which, as chosen by an infinitely good will in accord with infinite wisdom, is a just order.”¹³ The universal law or immanent principle of creation was formulated by Augustine in terms of the law that virtue never goes unrewarded and vice never unpunished. God, the universal ruler, has established a created order in which sin is permitted, but also in which all things are ordered to the removal of evil from his realm. The removal of evil is the elimination of vice and perfection of virtue in the heart. Yet, as Augustine remarks, no one is made happy against her will. Thus, no one is made virtuous against her will. The real problem lies here, in the need for a further intervention of grace in the correction of the will. However,

⁹ *Why God Became Man*, trans. by Janet Fairweather, in *Anselm of Canterbury. The Major Works*, 260-356. Book 1, chapter 15. The unity of will, here, distinguished on the side of the human subject is one principle that Aulen’s interpretation of atonement abandoned.

¹⁰ *Why God Became Man*, 1.19.

¹¹ Since the punishment of sinners cannot bring about salvation, neither could the punishment of Christ. Anselm denies that Christ was in any way punished. Christ was innocent, and to punish an innocent person would be contrary to divine wisdom and goodness. Yet, Anselm averred, it could be said that the Father willed Christ’s death to the extent that he did not prevent it. The Father willed salvation and willed Christ’s death as the most appropriate means according to divine wisdom and goodness to bring about salvation, i.e., the Father was unwilling that salvation be brought about by any other means.

¹² *Why God Became Man*, 1.15.

¹³ Charles Hefling, “A Perhaps Permanently Valid Achievement: Lonergan on Christ’s Satisfaction,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 10(1992), 51-76, here 57-58.

grace does not stand in contradiction to the law immanent in creation. Rather, grace completes nature. The universal order governing creation, then, includes four suborders, which Lonergan, following Aquinas, identified as: 1. good gives rise to good; 2. evil gives rise to evil; 3. good gives rise to evil; and 4. evil gives rise to good. God directly wills 1 (good from good) as the normative order of the universe. God only indirectly wills 2, according to which one kind of evil (the evil of sin) leads to another (the evil of punishment). God in no way wills but permits 3, according to which a good will freely sins. Lastly, God only wills 4 (good from evil) as the mystery of the cross or the divine transcendent solution to the problem of evil.

The justice of punishment follows from the divine will ordering all things according to infinite wisdom. We must face two questions here. Was Christ punished in our place? And, in what sense was his death necessary? The first is fairly straightforward. Anselm denied that God punished Christ. Jesus did not deserve punishment and it would be unjust to exact retribution on an innocent person. What Christ suffered, however, was that which constitutes part of our earned punishment. That Christ suffered only part of our penalty is evident from the fact that he did not suffer the loss of the genuine advantages belonging to a rational nature. Further, what he did suffer, he suffered voluntarily. When Anselm spoke of Christ's death as necessary, he distinguished absolute necessity from a qualified necessity. The latter is a consequent necessity and is consequent to divine wisdom and benevolence. "The Father," he argued, "wished the death of the Son in the sense that it was not his will that the world should be saved by any means, as I have said, other than that a man should perform an action of this magnitude."¹⁴ God willed to release humanity from the power of sin and death in the mode of satisfaction rather than that of punishment. The Son as divine shared this will. The sufficient motive for the cross is his goodness and his consequent love of his creation. We may find it easier to reconcile divine justice and mercy if we recover an appreciation for the beneficial character of punishment and keep in mind the distinction between the immanent created principle according to which providence rules all things and the transcendent or supernatural solution to the problem of evil. As the suborders are not contradictory but are subsumed under the universal will, neither are the divine acts or the orders of justice and mercy contradictories. Retribution, properly understood as different from revenge, is not contradictory to divine goodness.

We now turn to the second problem treated in this paper: the penitential context of satisfaction. This context is conceptually quite different from the context in which retribution is exacted. Satisfaction is defined as seeking and granting pardon for an offense. Lonergan understood satisfaction to mean "a willing acceptance or taking-on of punishment so that pardon may be appropriately granted."¹⁵ The difference between satisfaction and retribution is important. Punishment in the context of retribution means the loss of some human good against one's will. Satisfaction also takes place in the context of an appropriate request for pardon. This request "is appropriate to the same extent that detestation of the offense and sorrow over it are

¹⁴ *Why God Became Man* 1.9.

¹⁵ Hefling, "A Perhaps Permanently Valid Achievement: Lonergan on Christ's Satisfaction", 63.

manifested.”¹⁶ By contrast, punishment may lead to regret or even to sorrow, but such feelings are not part of the intelligible context of retribution. Note that the context in which satisfaction takes place “says nothing about fault, one way of the other, and so nothing about dessert or guilt or debt or obligation or liability on the part of the person who undergoes punishment.”¹⁷ For this reason, satisfaction may also be made for another in the context of friendship. That Christ willingly took on some of the punishment human beings deserve has been stated already. Unlike its human analogue, however, in which friendship precedes the offer of satisfaction, Christ’s supernatural action includes the grace that restores human beings to friendship with God.

Earlier I indicated that, for Anselm, punishment itself did not lead to salvation. Further, punishment and suffering in Augustine and Boethius required the presence of virtue that enabled the individual to derive any benefit from the loss of some good. The evil of punishment that accompanies the evil of sin may or may not lead to the good of pardon. Anselm provided a theory that helps us to understand how grace transforms the natural order. Reflecting on the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, Augustine affirmed that even where God makes a person obstinate as a natural penalty for abandoning righteousness, we may not conclude that God makes a person worse. Penal blindness without grace is, however, of no intrinsic value. It is an evil and is, therefore, nothing. One may be led to conclude, and many have, that those who are punished without grace are predestined to damnation. The difficulty is that it is not easy to discover a clear distinction between nature and grace in Augustine; but as we move through Anselm to Aquinas, it is perhaps possible to see in the development of satisfaction theory a movement toward a specifically supernatural response to sin. Punishment does lead to salvation in the context of satisfaction in which the power of grace transforms evil into good. By his obedience and passion, Christ expressed the sorrow for sin and the hatred of sin that we cannot express.¹⁸ We are made capable of expressing an appropriate sorrow for sin through participation in the cross of Christ.

Sin in the context of Anselm’s theory remains absurd. Injustice, as he so often asserted, is nothing; it does not exist. What we call evil is an absence of good. It has no power to cause anything to happen, especially the death of the Incarnate Word. The cause of our punishments is divine wrath, which is not unjust for being against our will. Likewise the cause of Christ’s sacrifice is divine love that overcomes evil and human sinfulness in the most wonderful manner.

In focusing on satisfaction as the mode according to which humans are released from the power of death and sin by Christ’s sacrifice, Anselm nonetheless affirmed that the magnitude of the divine action in Christ is inexhaustible. Keeping in mind the distinction of orders, it is clear that what might be meant by the ‘instrumentalization’ of Christ’s suffering—that is to say, Christ chose to suffer as a means to our salvation—cannot be attributed theologically to the divine will. God’s own transcendent goodness is the sufficient motive for God’s act of creation, his love of

¹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷ Ibid., 64.

¹⁸ See Lonergan, “The Redemption,” *Collected Works 6* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 3-28. Here, 22-23.

creatures, his providence, and his acts of redemption. Anselm affirmed the fittingness of the cross in all the complexity and richness of the Christian tradition. His narrow focus in the *Cur Deus homo?* should not, I think, be taken as a rejection of that tradition. His treatise addresses one question in an intellectual or theoretic manner. That question, I take it, concerns why the savior must be a God-man. Anselm's reflection is on the work of Christ for the sake of a better understanding the constitution of Christ as a Divine Person in two natures. Today we might say that only an infinite being could apprehend the full injustice of deliberate sin and could feel the full horror and sadness of the offense to God. Thus, only a God-man could express the sorrow necessary for punishment to lead to salvation.

Just as Lonergan understood and handed down satisfaction theory to us today, Anselm's theory is rich in its implications for human conversion and transformation. By distinguishing among the various suborders and emphasizing the transcendent character of God's solution to the problem of evil, Lonergan preserved and highlighted the fact that sin and evil are social surds. That is, they lack intelligibility and the power to accomplish anything good. Christ's cross is not a model for self-destruction or oppression. Rather, it establishes the form of Christian life: self-denial for the sake of self-donation. Self-denial has the quality of being an identification with the victims of one's failures to live reasonably and responsibly, a sincere expression of sorrow, and a willingness to forego the illusory benefits of one's irresponsibility. Lonergan's theology of redemption provides theoretic support to the kind of evangelical poverty found in the writings of Gustavo Gutierrez and in Gandhi's interpretation of the Golden Rule. Gandhi wrote that the Golden Rule means resolutely to refuse to have what millions of people cannot have. Satisfaction theory supports a spirituality of identification with the poor and of detachment from and even rejection of the dubious advantages of systems established and governed by irrationality and irresponsibility. Again, there is no room, as Anselm also stressed in his "Mediation on Redemption," for melancholy or self-loathing. The Christian response to the Passion is gratitude and hope: gratitude for the gift of repentance and hope in the promise of resurrection. The Christian who lives according to the new law of Christ summarized in the Beatitudes and the 'hard sayings' and who appropriately expresses sorrow and hatred of sin participates in Christ's conquest of sin and death.