

A TRIPTYCH ARTICLE

Then Face to Face

On Heaven, and on Telling What Has Been Defined
from What Has Been Guessed

The Four Last Things — Part IV

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1 The Postcard and the Measuring Reed

There is a moment near the end of the Apocalypse that nobody paints. An angel arrives with a measuring rod—“a measure of a reed of gold, to measure the city and the gates thereof and the wall”—and takes the dimensions of heaven. The result is reported with the flatness of a surveyor’s docket: “And the city lieth in a four-square: and the length thereof is as great as the breadth. And he measured the city with the golden reed for twelve thousand furlongs: and the length and the height and the breadth thereof are equal.”¹ Height equal to breadth: the holy city is a cube about fourteen hundred miles on a side, with walls of jasper and twelve gates each cut from a single pearl, and no temple in it, and no sun.

Set that beside the picture most people actually carry. In the picture there are clouds, and the clouds are load-bearing—souls stand on them. The souls have wings, or are about to be issued some. There is a gate with a saint behind a lectern, checking names. There are harps, one to a customer. There is a reunion: the people you loved, restored to you at their best ages, in a place that is recognisably a very good version of here. The picture is not wicked, and it is not empty. But almost none of it is in the Apocalypse, and the parts that are in the Apocalypse are not in it the way the picture assumes. The gates of pearl are there, but they stand open and are never shut, and nobody is stationed at them with a list.² Harps are there, but the first hands holding them are the four living creatures and the twenty-four ancients, and when the redeemed are given harps they are given “the harps of God” while standing on a sea of glass mingled with fire, which is not what the picture means by a harp.³ Wings are not there at all—not once, in the whole New Testament of this edition, given to a human being living or risen.

That gap is the subject of this article, and it runs in both directions, which is what makes it interesting. The devotional picture supplies a great deal that revelation never gave. And revelation, together with the Church’s definitions and the tradition’s hardest thinking, contains a great deal that the picture has quietly dropped—beginning with the fact that the central Catholic claim about heaven is not about a place at all, and is far stranger, far more specific, and far harder to believe than clouds.

1.1 Where this volume stands

This is the last of four studies on the four last things. Its companions took the three subjects that happen *to* a person: the death that no one can delegate; the judgment in which a life is finally told the truth about itself; and the refusal that can become final. Each of those is, in a sense, an event. Heaven is not an event. It is a state, and the tradition’s word for it—*beatitudo*, beatitude, blessedness—names not a location or a duration but a condition of a creature that has got what it is for.⁴ So the closing volume of a series about last things cannot simply add a fourth fact to three facts. It has to say what the whole sequence was for—and it has to do that without pretending to know more than it does.

1.2 Three registers, and why keeping them apart is the whole job

Almost everything a Catholic reader has ever heard about heaven belongs to one of three registers, and the registers have wildly different weights.

The first is what the Church has *defined*: a small number of propositions, promulgated in acts whose texts can be read, whose wording was fought over, and which bind. The core of it fits comfortably on one page, and it will be quoted here in full.

The second is what the tradition has *argued*: the immense and often magnificent structure of theological reasoning that stands on the defined core—Augustine on the risen body, Aquinas on the light of glory, Gregory Palamas on the uncreated energies, the schoolmen on the endowments of the glorified flesh. This material is not idle. Some of it is close to unanimous; some of it is the common teaching of theologians and can be denied only rashly; some of it is one school’s opinion, contradicted by another school in good standing. It is all reasoning, and reasoning can be wrong.

The third is what devotion has *imagined*: the clouds, the wings, the gate-keeper, the reunion scene. This register is not simply an error to be swept away—images are how most people hold onto anything, and the Church herself teaches in images because Scripture does.⁵ The trouble begins only when an image is cashed as a description—when “the Father’s house” stops being a promise of welcome and becomes a floor plan.

The discipline this article tries to keep is simple to state and unpleasant to apply: at every consequential claim, say which register it belongs to. The unpleasantness is that the honest answer shrinks the picture. A reader who wants heaven described will get less here than a devotional book would give. What is offered instead is a smaller thing that can bear weight: a certain core, marked as certain; a body of serious reasoning, marked as reasoning, with the disagreements left standing where the tradition left them standing; and a candid account of how much of the received picture is neither.

That last figure is worth stating at the outset, because it governs everything that follows. On the evidence assembled here, the great majority of what an ordinary Catholic “knows” about heaven—what the risen body will look like, how old it will be, what the blessed will do, whether they see one another, what the new earth will be like, how any of it feels—is theological speculation, and a good deal of it is speculation that its own authors explicitly marked as such and that later readers un-marked.⁶ Augustine, who supplied more of that picture than anyone, stopped twice in the middle of supplying it to say that he was guessing. Aquinas, reading Augustine on whether risen eyes will see God, notes drily that Augustine “speaks as one inquiring, and conditionally.”⁷ The tentativeness was in the sources from the beginning. It fell out somewhere between the sources and the holy card.

1.3 What is coming

The argument runs in the order the evidence actually has. It begins with the definitions, because they are the fixed points and because the story of how one of them was made—a pope preaching one thing and his successor defining the opposite, two years after his death—is the best available lesson in what a definition is and is not. It then asks the question the definitions raise and do not answer: whether a creature can see God at all, and if so how, working the Thomistic answer directly in the *Summa* rather than through summaries of it. It then puts the Christian East’s very different answer at its full strength, in its own authors, because that answer is not a curiosity but a live rival that reads the same Scripture and the same Fathers. It then takes up the body that rises, the degrees of glory, and the company—three places where the tradition’s confident detail and its actual warrant diverge most sharply. It closes by auditing the postcard against Scripture, and then by asking what the four last things add up to.

The governing claim, stated now so that the reader can watch it be tested rather than sprung at the end: what the Catholic Church has defined about heaven is a promise of an immediate, unmediated, personal seeing of God himself, given to creatures who cannot achieve it, differing in degree with charity, entailing the resurrection of the very bodies we now bear, and enjoyed in company—and that this defined core is both smaller and more extreme than the picture that has grown over it. Smaller, because nearly every furnishing has been added. More extreme, because the picture’s clouds and reunions are, by comparison, modest requests.

2 What Was Defined in 1336, and What It Cost

The best way into the Catholic doctrine of heaven is not through a catechism paragraph but through a quarrel, because the quarrel shows exactly where the load-bearing walls are.

2.1 A pope preaching the other side

On All Saints’ Day of 1331, and in further sermons over the following two years, Pope John XXII taught at Avignon that the souls of the just do not see the divine essence immediately after death. On his account they wait—consoled, in the presence of Christ’s humanity, but not yet admitted to the vision of God as he is—until the resurrection of the body and the general judgment. He had held the opinion before his election and continued to hold it as pope.⁸

The reaction was severe and instructive. Theologians called the view heretical. The University of Paris debated it; in December 1333 its theologians decided in favour of the immediate vision and petitioned the pope to confirm their decision, while pointing out—this is the part worth noticing—that the pope had given no decision on the question but had only advanced his personal opinion.⁹ John himself had written to the King of France in November 1333 insisting that so long as the Holy See had given no decision, theologians were perfectly free on the matter.

On 3 December 1334, the day before he died, John XXII issued the bull *Ne super his*. It is a short and rather careful document, and its central sentence deserves to be read slowly:

*Fatemur siquidem et credimus, quod animae purgatae separatae a corporibus sunt in caelo, caelorum regno et paradiso et cum Christo in consortio angelorum congregatae et vident Deum de communi lege ac divinam essentiam facie ad faciem clare, in quantum status et condicio compatitur animae separatae.*¹⁰

He confesses that the purified souls do see God and the divine essence face to face, clearly. And then he adds seven words that a lawyer would circle: *in quantum status et condicio compatitur animae separatae*—so far as the state and condition of a separated soul allows. Whether that is a genuine retraction or a retraction with the door left ajar is a question this article does not need to settle. What matters is that everyone at the time could see the door.

2.2 The definition

His successor closed it. Jacques Fournier—a Cistercian, a Paris doctor of theology, and, by the account of the standard older reference, a man who heard out the defenders of the deferred vision and then spent four months with a commission of theologians in patristic research before publishing—was elected on 20 December 1334 and promulgated the apostolic constitution *Benedictus Deus* on 29 January 1336.¹¹ The doctrinal core, as it is received in the standard collection, runs:

*Hac in perpetuum valitura Constitutione auctoritate Apostolica diffinimus: quod secundum communem Dei ordinationem animae sanctorum omnium... etiam ante resurrectionem suorum corporum et iudicium generale... fuerunt, sunt et erunt in caelo, caelorum regno et paradiso caelesti cum Christo, sanctorum Angelorum consortio congregatae, ac post Domini Jesu Christi passionem et mortem viderunt et vident divinam essentiam visione intuitiva et etiam faciali, nulla mediante creatura in ratione obiecti visi se habente, sed divina essentia immediate se nude, clare et aperte eis ostendente, quodque sic videntes eadem divina essentia perfruuntur, necnon quod ex tali visione et fruitione eorum animae, qui iam decesserunt, sunt vere beatae et habent vitam et requiem aeternam.*¹²

The official English of the central clause, as the Catechism quotes it, reads: these souls “have seen and do see the divine essence with an intuitive vision, and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature.”¹³

Read the Latin phrase by phrase and the definition turns out to be doing several distinct jobs at once.

Secundum communem Dei ordinationem—according to God’s common ordering. The constitution defines what ordinarily happens, and does not pronounce on whether God may dispose otherwise in a particular case. It is a general law, stated as a general law.

Etiam ante resurrectionem suorum corporum et iudicium generale—even before they take up their bodies again and before the general judgment. This is the point of the whole document, the exact proposition John XXII had denied. The soul does not wait for the resurrection to see God.

Post Domini Jesu Christi passionem et mortem—since the Passion and death of the Lord. The vision is not a natural entitlement of separated souls; it dates from a historical event. The just of the old covenant, expressly included in the enumeration, saw nothing of the kind before Calvary.

Viderunt et vident divinam essentiam—have seen and do see the divine essence. Not God’s effects; not God’s glory as distinct from God; the divine essence.

Visione intuitiva et etiam faciali—by an intuitive vision, and even facial. “Intuitive” excludes the discursive, inferential knowing by which a mind reasons from effects to a cause. “Facial” is Saint Paul’s word, taken from “we see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face.”¹⁴

Nulla mediante creatura in ratione obiecti visi se habente—no creature intervening *in the role of an object seen*. This is the most carefully machined phrase in the document, and the qualifier is everything. What is excluded is a created *object* standing between the mind and God, some image or likeness or delegated glory that the blessed would see instead of God. What is not excluded, because it is not the same thing, is a created *capacity* in the seer by which God himself is seen. That distinction is not a later evasion; it is the drafting, and the next section shows a theologian occupying the space it leaves open sixty years before the definition was written.

Sunt vere beatae et habent vitam et requiem aeternam—they are truly blessed and have eternal life and rest. The constitution goes on to add that this vision and enjoyment “void the acts of faith and hope in them, inasmuch as faith and hope are properly theological virtues,” and that once begun it continues without any interruption up to the last judgment and thereafter for ever.¹⁵

2.3 What the definition does not say

An honest reading has to be as attentive to the silences as to the words, and here the silences are enormous.

The constitution says nothing about how a finite mind performs an act of which it is not naturally capable. It says nothing about what the vision is *like*. It says nothing about whether the vision admits of degrees. It says nothing about what the risen body contributes, beyond noting that the vision precedes the body's return. It says nothing about place: heaven appears as *caelum*, *caelorum regnum*, *paradisus caelestis*, and those are the terms of the received formula, not a topography. It says nothing about the company of the blessed except that they are gathered "in the fellowship of the holy angels"—a phrase inherited from John XXII's own bull two years earlier. It says nothing about time, activity, memory, recognition, growth, or any of the questions a bereaved person actually asks.

This is worth dwelling on because it establishes the proportions of everything that follows. On the single most important question about heaven the Church has spoken with maximum solemnity and minimum extent. Everything else in the received picture—and it is a very great deal—either comes from Scripture read as Scripture, or from the reasoning of theologians, or from nowhere.

2.4 Two more fixed points

Two later definitions bear directly on this article's subject, and both should be on the table from the start.

The Council of Florence, in the bull of union with the Greeks *Laetentur caeli* of 6 July 1439, defined that the souls of those who die with no stain of sin, and those purified after death, "are received at once into heaven and see clearly God himself, three and one, as he is—yet in accordance with the diversity of merits, one more perfectly than another."¹⁶ Two additions to 1336 are made there, and both are consequential: the vision is of God *sicuti est*, "as he is," the phrase of the First Epistle of John;¹⁷ and it is unequal—*alium alio perfectius*, one more perfectly than another, in proportion to merits. The degrees of glory are not a pious embellishment. They are defined.

The Fourth Lateran Council, in the profession of faith *Firmiter* of 1215, defined of the resurrection only this: all "will rise again with their own bodies which they now bear, to receive according to their works, whether they have been good or evil."¹⁸ *Cum suis propriis corporibus, quae nunc gestant*: with their own proper bodies, the ones they are carrying around at present. That is the whole of it. Every further specification—the qualities of the risen body, its age, its powers, its appearance—is theology, and the section on the risen body below will show how much theology there is and how frankly its best authors admitted what they were doing.

2.5 What a definition is for

It is tempting to read the 1336 affair as an embarrassment to be explained away, and equally tempting to read it as a scandal. It is neither; it is a demonstration of how the machinery is supposed to work and, on this occasion, did. A pope held and preached an opinion. Theologians said he was wrong, in public, at length, and he conceded that until the Holy See had decided they were free to say so. He was not asked to be infallible about something he had not defined, and he did not claim to be. When a definition finally came, it came from a successor, after a commission and four months in the Fathers, and it was drafted with the precision of a legal instrument by a man who had studied the objections.

The lesson for a reader of this article is the operative one. The Catholic Church has said less about heaven than her devotional literature suggests, and what she has said she has said in language that repays being read as carefully as it was written. The rest of this study is an attempt to take the rest of the tradition just as seriously—which means, above all, refusing to give it the weight of the paragraphs just quoted.

3 Whether a Creature Can See God

The definition of 1336 asserts something that a considerable weight of Scripture appears to deny outright. Any account of heaven that does not feel that pressure has not read the texts.

3.1 The texts that say no

Moses asks to see the divine glory and is refused in terms: “Thou canst not see my face: for man shall not see me, and live.” He is placed in a cleft of rock, covered by a hand while the glory passes, and permitted only what is behind: “thou shalt see my back parts: but my face thou canst not see.”¹⁹ The Fourth Gospel opens its prologue with a flat negative: “No man hath seen God at any time: the only begotten Son who is in the Bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”²⁰ The First Epistle to Timothy is stronger still, and is not speaking of this life only: God “only hath immortality and inhabiteth light inaccessible: whom no man hath seen, nor can see.”²¹

The Greek Fathers pressed these texts as hard as they can be pressed. John Chrysostom, preaching on the prologue, works through every Old Testament theophany—Isaiah on the throne, Ezechiel above the cherubim, Daniel’s Ancient of Days, Jacob who took his name from seeing God—and disposes of them all: “all these were instances of (His) condescension, not the vision of the Essence itself unveiled. For had they seen the very Nature, they would not have beheld It under different forms, since that is simple, without form, or parts, or bounding lines.” Then he extends the denial past the human race: “what God really is, not only have not the prophets seen, but not even angels nor archangels.” And he states the principle: “How can any created nature even see the Uncreated?”²²

John of Damascus, gathering the Greek tradition three centuries later, makes the same point as a doctrine of God rather than an exegesis: “what He is in His essence and nature is absolutely incomprehensible and unknowable”; “God then is infinite and incomprehensible and all that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility.”²³

It is worth registering how strong this is before going further. These are not marginal voices; the Damascene is the standard dogmatic manual of the Christian East and was quarried by the Latin schoolmen as well. And Aquinas, opening the question in which he will defend the vision of the divine essence, does not soften the objection: he puts Chrysostom first, in his own words—“not only the prophets, but neither the angels nor the archangels have seen that which is God”—and adds Dionysius denying that God is the object of sense, imagination, opinion, reason, or knowledge.²⁴

3.2 The texts that say yes

Against them stands a smaller but very insistent set. “Blessed are the clean of heart: for they shall see God.”²⁵ “We see now through a glass in a dark manner: but then face to face. Now I know in part: but then I shall know even as I am known.”²⁶ “We know that when he shall appear we shall be like to him: because we shall see him as he is.”²⁷ And, at the very end of the Apocalypse, in the description of the city: “And they shall see his face: and his name shall be on their foreheads.”²⁸

The problem is not that some texts are obscure. It is that both sets are clear and they point opposite ways. The whole subsequent history of the doctrine—Latin and Greek—is a history of two different reconciliations, and neither tradition ever simply dropped one side.

3.3 Aquinas’s opening move, and its limits

The Latin reconciliation is worked out most fully in the twelfth question of the first part of the *Summa theologiae*, thirteen articles on how God is known by creatures. Because this material is usually met in summary, and because summaries of it are unreliable in a specific way—they tend to make the light of glory into a thing seen rather than a power of seeing—it is worth reading in the text.

Article one asks whether any created intellect can see the essence of God. Aquinas begins by conceding the force of the difficulty in his own image: God is supremely knowable in himself, but “what is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect, on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light.”²⁹ Some who considered this, he says, held that no created intellect can ever see God’s essence.

He then gives two reasons for rejecting that position, and they are of different kinds, which matters.

The first is theological and he says so: “as the ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of his intellect; if we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either

never attain to beatitude, or its beatitude would consist in something else beside God; *which is opposed to faith*.”³⁰ That is an argument from within revelation, and it presupposes the very thing a sceptic would question.

The second is the famous one: “there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees; and thence arises wonder in men. But if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void.” Conclusion: “Hence it must be absolutely granted that the blessed see the essence of God.”³¹

How much that second argument proves has been disputed among Thomists for centuries—whether the desire in question is a properly natural appetite or an elicited one, and whether an argument from it can establish anything about a gratuitous supernatural end without compromising the gratuity. This article names the dispute and does not adjudicate it, because nothing here depends on the outcome: for a Catholic reader the fact of the vision is settled by the definition of 1336, and Aquinas’s argument functions as an explanation of a datum rather than as its proof.³² What the argument does establish, and this is not nothing, is that the Latin tradition thought the vision was owed an explanation—that a creature’s arrival at the sight of God is continuous with what a mind is for, rather than an arbitrary prize.

Answering Chrysostom and Dionysius, Aquinas makes the move on which everything afterwards turns: “Both of these authorities speak of the vision of comprehension.”³³ To see is one thing; to comprehend is another. Hold that distinction; the seventh article will cash it.

3.4 Why no created likeness will do

Article two asks whether the divine essence is seen through an image or created likeness—a species, in the technical sense, standing in the mind for the thing known, as the likeness of a stone in the eye and not the stone itself. Aquinas gives three reasons why nothing of the sort can serve.

First, on Dionysius’s principle, “by the likeness of a lower order of things, higher things can in no way be known”—no bodily image gives an incorporeal essence, and much less can any created species give the divine one. Second, the essence of God is his very existence, “which cannot be said of any created form; and so no created form can be the similitude representing the essence of God to the seer.” Third, the divine essence “is uncircumscribed, and contains in itself super-eminently whatever can be signified or understood by the created intellect,” and no created form can represent that, because every created form is determinate—some particular measure of wisdom, or power, or being.³⁴

Then comes the sentence that decides the shape of the whole doctrine: “Hence to say that God is seen by some similitude, is to say that the divine essence is not seen at all; which is false.”³⁵ There is no middle option. Either the mind is joined to God himself as the object it knows, or it is not seeing God. Written around 1265–1268, that is precisely the exclusion the constitution of 1336 would promulgate: *nulla mediante creatura in ratione obiecti visi*.

3.5 Not with the eyes

Article three settles a question that the devotional imagination almost always gets wrong, and settles it against the imagination. Can the essence of God be seen with the bodily eye? No: “It is impossible for God to be seen by the sense of sight, or by any other sense, or faculty of the sensitive power. For every such kind of power is the act of a corporeal organ. . . Hence no power of that kind can go beyond corporeal things. For God is incorporeal. . . Hence He cannot be seen by the sense or the imagination, but only by the intellect.”³⁶

Job’s “in my flesh I shall see my God” is therefore not a promise about eyeballs: it means “that man existing in the flesh after the resurrection will see God.”³⁷ The vision of God is an act of a mind, not of an organ. Every picture in which the blessed *look at* something has already, at that moment, stopped depicting the beatific vision and started depicting something else.

3.6 The light of glory, read where it is actually written

Article four asks whether a created intellect can see the divine essence by its own natural powers. The answer turns on a principle Aquinas has used all through the *Summa*: a knower knows according to the mode of its own nature. What exists only in individual matter is connatural to us; separate immaterial natures are connatural to angels; “to

know self-subsistent being is natural to the divine intellect alone.” Therefore: “the created intellect cannot see the essence of God, unless God by His grace unites Himself to the created intellect, as an object made intelligible to it.”³⁸

Article five then asks what the creature needs on its own side, and this is where the *lumen gloriae*—the light of glory—appears. The argument is short:

“Everything which is raised up to what exceeds its nature, must be prepared by some disposition above its nature; as, for example, if air is to receive the form of fire, it must be prepared by some disposition for such a form. But when any created intellect sees the essence of God, the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect. Hence it is necessary that some supernatural disposition should be added to the intellect in order that it may be raised up to such a great and sublime height. . . it is necessary that the power of understanding should be added by divine grace. Now this increase of the intellectual powers is called the illumination of the intellect. . . By this light the blessed are made ‘deiform’—i.e. like to God, according to the saying: ‘When He shall appear we shall be like to Him, and . . . we shall see Him as He is.’ ”³⁹

Two clarifications in the replies do more work than the body of the article, and they are exactly what popular accounts lose.

The first: the created light is not needed to make God intelligible—he is that of himself—but “in order to enable the intellect to understand in the same way as a habit makes a power abler to act. Even so corporeal light is necessary as regards external sight, inasmuch as it makes the medium actually transparent.”⁴⁰ The second, and decisive: “This light is required to see the divine essence, not as a similitude in which God is seen, but as a perfection of the intellect, strengthening it to see God. Therefore it may be said that this light is to be described not as a medium in which God is seen, but as one by which He is seen; *and such a medium does not take away the immediate vision of God.*”⁴¹

That is the whole of it, and it is more modest than the phrase “light of glory” usually sounds. The light of glory is not a radiance the blessed look at. It is not a lens they look through. It is a strengthening of the mind itself, a habit-like elevation, so that a created intellect can do what no created intellect can naturally do. The eye is changed; nothing is interposed.

A third reply adds the boundary: this light “cannot be natural to a creature unless the creature has a divine nature; which is impossible.”⁴² No creature can be born able to see God. Whatever heaven is, it is on this account not the flowering of a capacity we already have.

This is one point at which the Latin school theology touches something more than school theology. The Council of Vienne, in the constitution *Ad nostrum qui* of 1312, listed among the condemned errors of the Beghards and Beguines the proposition “that every intellectual nature is naturally blessed in itself, and that the soul does not need the light of glory elevating it to see God and to enjoy him blessedly.”⁴³ What is condemned there is a compound—natural beatitude plus no need of elevation—and the condemnation of an error is not the canonisation of a particular explanation of the truth it violates. But it does mean that the general shape of the Latin answer is not merely one school’s preference.

3.7 Seeing without comprehending

Article seven completes the reconciliation, and it is the article that keeps the whole Latin account from arrogance. Do those who see the essence of God comprehend him? Aquinas answers with a sentence of Augustine: “To comprehend God is impossible for any created intellect; but ‘for the mind to attain to God in some degree is great beatitude.’ ”⁴⁴

The proof is arithmetical in feel. To comprehend a thing is to know it as fully as it is knowable. A thing is knowable in proportion to its actuality; God’s being is infinite, so God is infinitely knowable; a created intellect knows the divine essence more or less perfectly according as it receives a greater or lesser light of glory; and a created light received in a created intellect cannot be infinite. “Hence it is impossible that it should comprehend God.”⁴⁵

Article eight draws the further consequence, which readers of devotional literature will find surprising: the blessed, seeing the divine essence, do *not* see in it everything God does or could do. Effects are seen in a cause to the extent that the cause is comprehended; God is not comprehended; therefore “no created intellect in seeing God can know all that God does or can do”—though “of what God does or can do any intellect can know the more, the more perfectly it sees God.”⁴⁶ Omniscience is not a side-effect of beatitude. The blessed are not issued the answers.

So the Latin answer, stated whole: the blessed truly see God’s own essence, immediately, with no created thing standing in as the object; they do so by a created strengthening of the mind that God gives and no nature possesses; and they never come to the end of him. The infinite remains infinite to them for ever. Whatever else eternity is, on this account it is not a completed inspection.

3.8 What weight all this carries

It should be said plainly, because the next sections depend on it: almost none of what has just been laid out is defined doctrine.

Defined: that the blessed see the divine essence, intuitively and facially, with no creature intervening as the object seen (1336); that they see God as he is, unequally, according to merits (1439). Condemned in a compound form: the denial that the soul needs an elevating light (1312). Everything else in this section—the analysis of *species*, the impossibility of a bodily vision, the account of the light of glory as a *medium quo*, the demonstration that comprehension is impossible, the denial that the blessed see all possibles—is the reasoning of a theologian, received with immense authority in the West and with good reason, but reasoning nonetheless.

It is also, in one respect, an unusually honest piece of reasoning, and the honesty is easy to miss. Having asserted that a creature sees God, Aquinas spends the second half of the question saying what that does not mean: not with the eyes, not through an image, not by nature, not comprehensively, not exhaustively, not with all knowledge thrown in. The Latin account of heaven is often accused of intellectualist confidence. Read at the text, it is a chain of denials around a single affirmation—which is roughly what the Christian East says the doctrine of God should look like, and which makes the disagreement between them stranger and more serious than a caricature of either would suggest.

4 The Answer the East Gave Instead

Two years after *Benedictus Deus* was promulgated at Avignon, a monk of Athos began writing a defence of hesychast prayer that would end by committing the Byzantine Church to a doctrine of the vision of God formally incompatible with the constitution’s central clause. Gregory Palamas composed the nine treatises now called the *Triads* between 1338 and 1341; there is no sign that either side was answering the other, and the collision is all the more instructive for being unintended.⁴⁷

This section states the Eastern position at its strongest, in its own authors, and then asks—without pretending the question is easy—whether it contradicts what the Catholic Church defined. It is placed here, before the sections on the body and the degrees and the company, because it is not an aside. It is the one place where a serious, ancient, and unbroken tradition, reading the same Scriptures and quoting the same Fathers, says that the Latin account of heaven’s central act is wrong.

4.1 The root: Basil on what comes down to us

The distinction that Palamas would defend is not a fourteenth-century invention, and the Eastern case is much weaker if it is presented as one. Its classical statement is a letter of Basil of Caesarea, written in the 370s against the Eunomians—who held that the human mind can know God’s essence, since God is simple and his essence is what the word “unbegotten” names.

Basil’s reply distinguishes what God does from what God is:

“We say that we know the greatness of God, His power, His wisdom, His goodness, His providence over us, and the justness of His judgment; but not His very essence. . . . The operations are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.”⁴⁸

Note what the letter is doing. It is not saying that we know only creatures. Basil’s “operations” are God’s—his power, wisdom, goodness, providence—and knowing them is knowing *God*. What is denied is that any of them, or all

of them together, delivers the essence. The Eunomian error, on this reading, is a category mistake about what an account of God can be.

Gregory of Nyssa, Basil's brother, drew the consequence for the life to come, and it is the piece of the Eastern case that the Latin tradition has the most trouble absorbing. If God is infinite, then a creature's participation in him cannot be a state; it must be a motion without end. The soul is a vessel that grows by being filled:

“The All-creating Wisdom fashioned these souls, these receptacles with free wills, as vessels as it were, for this very purpose, that there should be some capacities able to receive His blessings and become continually larger with the inpouring of the stream. Such are the wonders that the participation in the Divine blessings works: it makes him into whom they come larger and more capacious; from his capacity to receive it gets for the receiver an actual increase in bulk as well, and he never stops enlarging.”⁴⁹

Set that beside the Latin picture of an intellect raised by the light of glory to an unchanging vision, and the difference of temperament is obvious before any technical dispute begins. On Gregory's account there is no last word about a creature's knowledge of God, because there is no last word about God.

4.2 Palamas, at full strength

By the fourteenth century the question had become sharp, and it had become practical. Athonite monks claimed to see, in prayer, an uncreated light—the light of Tabor, the light of the Transfiguration. Barlaam of Calabria attacked the claim: either what they see is God's essence, which is impossible, or it is a created effect, in which case calling it uncreated is blasphemy. Palamas's answer is that the disjunction is false, and his defence of that is one of the most rigorous pieces of theology the Byzantine world produced.

First, the denial, stated without hedging. God does allow himself to be seen face to face, not in enigmas; he attaches himself to the worthy as a soul to its body; he dwells in them entirely and they in him. And then:

“But you should not consider that God allows Himself to be seen in His superessential essence, but according to His deifying gift and energy, the grace of adoption, the uncreated deification, the enhypostatic illumination.”⁵⁰

Second, the positive claim, which is the point of the whole system: what is given in deification is not a created substitute for God. “The deification of divinised angels and men is not the superessential essence of God, but the energy of this essence.”⁵¹ And: “The deifying gift of the Spirit thus cannot be equated with the superessential essence of God. It is the deifying energy of this divine essence, yet not the totality of this energy, even though it is indivisible in itself.”⁵²

Third, the metaphysics that keeps this from dissolving God into parts. Palamas argues that the divine powers—knowing, foreknowing, creating, providing, deifying—cannot be created, since a God who acquired them would once have been imperfect; therefore they are as unoriginate as the essence. But they are not each an essence:

“Nonetheless, there is only one unoriginate essence, the essence of God; none of the powers that inhere in it is an essence, so that all necessarily and always are in the divine essence. . . Here is the manifest, sure and recognised teaching of the Church!”⁵³

“Essence and energy are thus not totally identical in God, even though He is entirely manifest in every energy, His essence being indivisible.”⁵⁴ And the essence stands beyond them: “The superessential essence of God is thus not to be identified with the energies, even with those without beginning; from which it follows that it is not only transcendent to any energy whatsoever, but that it transcends them ‘to an infinite degree and an infinite number of times’.”⁵⁵

Fourth, the consequence for the life to come, which is why this belongs in an article on heaven and not only in a history of Byzantine controversy. What the apostles saw on Tabor, Palamas says, was “the very Kingdom of God, eternal and endless, the very light beyond intellection and unapproachable”—seen with bodily eyes, but with eyes that had been opened—and this same uncreated light “even in the age to come, will be ceaselessly visible only to the saints.”⁵⁶

That is the Eastern answer entire. God is really seen, really participated, really possessed—and what is seen, participated, and possessed is God, uncreated, not a creature; but it is God in his energies, and the essence remains for ever beyond reach, in this age and in the age to come.

4.3 The case for it, stated without hedging

It is easy, and useless, to treat this as an eccentricity. Take the case at its best; there are at least four reasons why a serious reader might find it the stronger account.

It takes the modal negative seriously. “Whom no man hath seen, nor can see” is not a statement about the present life. Latin exegesis has to read the “cannot” as relative to unaided nature; the Eastern reading takes it at face value, and it is not obvious which reading is doing more violence to the sentence.

It secures the reality of deification without a created intermediary. The Latin account has the creature elevated by a created light. Palamas’s objection to created grace is not obscurantism: if the whole created order is on one side of a line and God on the other, then a created disposition, however exalted, is on the creature’s side, and the encounter’s decisive term is a creature. The energies are on God’s side of the line. Whatever else it costs, that answer costs nothing in the reality of the contact.

It matches the Fathers it cites, and they are the same Fathers. Chrysostom’s “not even angels nor archangels”; the Damascene’s “all that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility”; Basil’s “His essence remains beyond our reach.” Aquinas answers Chrysostom by saying he is speaking of comprehension. That is a possible reading. It is not the only one, and it is not the one Chrysostom’s own argument invites: his premise is that a created nature cannot see the Uncreated, which is a claim about the seeing, not about its completeness.

It has a better account of eternity. If God is infinite and the blessed intellect finite, then the Latin vision must be a fixed finite grasp of an infinite object—and the natural question is why it does not grow. Gregory of Nyssa’s endless enlargement gives eternity something to do. The Latin tradition has answers here, but they are answers to a question the Eastern account never has to ask.

4.4 Reception, at a stated ceiling

The Palamite position was not left as one theologian’s opinion. It was endorsed by the monastic community of Athos in the document known as the Hagioritic Tome, then by a council at Constantinople in 1341 that rebuked Barlaam; Palamas was afterwards condemned and imprisoned during the civil war, and then vindicated by further councils in 1347 and, decisively, in 1351, against the objections of Gregory Akindynos and Nicephorus Gregoras. He was made archbishop of Thessalonica in 1347.⁵⁷ Akindynos’s position, as the same account describes it, is worth registering because it is startlingly close to the Latin one: “For him God was identical with His essence, and a vision of God, if it was to be admitted as a possibility, was a vision either of that divine essence itself, or of its created manifestations. No real distinctions were conceivable in the uncreated Being of God himself.”⁵⁸ The tradition that prevailed in the East prevailed against a position that a Latin scholastic would have recognised as roughly his own.

4.5 Is this a contradiction?

Here the article has to state a judgment and mark it as its own.

Project synthesis: whether *Benedictus Deus* and the Palamite doctrine formally contradict

Claim. The two traditions genuinely contradict each other on one proposition and agree on more than the polemics of either side usually allow. They agree that the blessed really see and possess God himself and not a creature substituted for him; that God is never comprehended; that the capacity to see is wholly given and never natural; and that what is seen is uncreated. They differ on whether the term of the vision is the divine *ousia*. Whether that difference is a formal contradiction turns entirely on whether the Latin *essentia* of 1336 and the Palamite *ousia* are the same concept—and on the evidence reached here they are probably not, because the Latin term is defined by its identity with God’s own act of existing and therefore covers whatever is really God, while the Palamite term is defined by a real contrast with the energies *within* what is really God. On that reading, 1336 denies that any creature stands between the mind and God, which Palamas also denies; and Palamas denies that the *ousia* as contrasted with the energies is the term of the vision, which 1336 never asserts, because the distinction it is drafted against is a different one. The residual, real disagreement is then not about heaven directly but about the doctrine of God: whether there is a real distinction in God between essence and energies.

Strongest counterargument, at full strength. The terms are the same, and the appeal to a merely conceptual difference is the oldest and least honest move in ecumenical apologetics. Both traditions received *ousia/essentia* from the same Greek theological vocabulary through the same Fathers and the same Trinitarian dogma, where the word must mean one thing or Nicaea means nothing. The Byzantines of the fourteenth century were not ignorant of the Latin claim; Akindynos stated it in almost the words of the Latin schools and was condemned for it. Palamas’s own formulations are not agnostic about the extension of *ousia*: he says the essence transcends the energies “to an infinite degree and an infinite number of times” and “surpasses energy to the extent that the subject of an action surpasses its object”—language which makes the *ousia* the more ultimate reality, precisely the reality the Latin definition says is seen. Meanwhile the Latin side has always understood *essentia* in 1336 to mean God as he is in himself, and Florence in 1439 wrote *sicuti est* into the definition to say so. Two traditions that both intend “God as he most truly is” and disagree about whether it is seen are contradicting one another, and no amount of terminological archaeology dissolves that. The Second Vatican Council’s statement that Eastern and Western theological expressions are “often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting” is about theological expression, is qualified by “often,” and cannot license treating a solemn definition as one idiom among several.⁵⁹

What would change the judgment. A single identified text, read at its own locus in an edition that can be named, in which a Palamite authority—Palamas himself or the acts of 1341, 1347, or 1351—uses *ousia* with the Latin extension, that is, as simply “God as he is, identical with his own existing,” and denies that it is seen. That would establish the formal contradiction. Conversely, an identified magisterial text construing the *divina essentia* of *Benedictus Deus* as excluding a real distinction between essence and energies in God would do the same from the other side. This article has reached neither, and—this is the operative limitation—has not read the conciliar acts at all. The judgment above is therefore held at low confidence and should be treated as a proposal about where to look, not as a finding.

Two further honesty notes belong here. First, the Catholic Church has never, in any act this article has read, condemned Palamas by name or defined against the essence–energies distinction; the fourteenth-century councils that settled the matter for the Byzantine Church were not received in the West, and *Benedictus Deus* was not drafted against them. Second, the East’s reading is not, and must not be presented as, a lesser or more cautious version of the Latin one. It is a different and complete account, with its own metaphysics, its own exegesis, its own ascetical practice, and its own answer to the question of what a creature’s eternity is. A Catholic reader who ends this section thinking the Greeks were merely being modest about the same thing has not understood the position, and will misjudge everything the next sections have to say about what heaven is like.

5 The Body That Rises

There is a problem sitting inside the definition of 1336, and the Church has never resolved it because it was never asked to. If the souls of the just are “truly blessed” and “have eternal life and rest” *before* they take up their bodies again, what is the resurrection for? On the face of it the constitution appears to have made the body a postscript to beatitude—an event that happens later to people who already have everything.

The tradition’s answer to that question is the best available specimen of the whole problem this article is about: a small defined core, a serious and mostly convincing theological answer built on it, and, growing out of the answer, several centuries of detailed description that its own authors flagged as guesswork and later readers did not.

5.1 What is actually defined

Very little, and it is worth being exact about how little.

The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 defined that all “will rise again with their own bodies which they now bear, to receive according to their works.”⁶⁰ Two things are secured by that clause and nothing else is. First, the resurrection is universal—the wicked rise too, which by itself disposes of any reading of the resurrection as a reward. Second, and this is the load-bearing word, the bodies are *our own, propria*, the ones “we now bear.” Whatever transformation is involved, the risen body is not a replacement issued at the door.

The Catechism, summarising, says the “how” is beyond us and says it flatly: “This ‘how’ exceeds our imagination and understanding; it is accessible only to faith.”⁶¹

5.2 What Scripture says, and where it stops

Paul is asked the question directly—“But some man will say: How do the dead rise again? Or with what manner of body shall they come?”—and his answer is famous for being an answer and easy to misread as a description.⁶² He begins by refusing the terms of the question: “that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die first. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not the body that shall be: but bare grain, as of wheat, or of some of the rest. But God giveth it a body as he will.”⁶³ A seed is genuinely continuous with the plant and gives no information about what the plant looks like. That is the analogy, and it is chosen to close the question, not to open it.

He then supplies four contrasts and stops:

“It is sown in corruption: it shall rise in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour: it shall rise in glory. It is sown in weakness: it shall rise in power. It is sown a natural body: it shall rise a spiritual body.”⁶⁴

Four abstract nouns. Incorruption, glory, power, spirit. Nothing about appearance, age, dimension, or activity. And a few verses later, a text that cuts against the direction devotional imagination usually takes: “flesh and blood cannot possess the kingdom of God: neither shall corruption possess incorruption.”⁶⁵ Whatever the risen body is, it is not simply this body continued.

Elsewhere the New Testament adds a norm rather than a description: Christ “will reform the body of our lowliness, made like to the body of his glory.”⁶⁶ The pattern is the risen Christ, and what the Gospels say about the risen Christ is itself carefully strange—recognisable and not recognised, eating fish, passing through doors. And the First Epistle of John declines the whole question in one sentence: “it hath not yet appeared what we shall be.”⁶⁷

5.3 Why the body matters if the soul is already blessed

The best Latin answer to the problem this section opened with is given, with characteristic economy, in the *Summa*’s treatise on happiness—and it was written before the controversy of the 1330s, which makes it a useful control.

Aquinas asks whether the body is necessary for happiness, and answers that perfect happiness does not depend on it: the intellect needs the body only for the images by which it works, and the divine essence is not seen through images, so “without the body the soul can be happy.” He notes, and rejects as false “both by authority and by reason,” the view that “the souls of saints, when separated from their bodies, do not attain to that Happiness until the Day of Judgment”—the very position a pope would take up sixty years later.⁶⁸

But he then says something subtler, in two replies that are the real answer. The separated soul’s desire “is entirely at rest, as regards the thing desired. . . . But it is not wholly at rest, as regards the desirer, since it does not possess that good in every way that it would wish to possess it.” And therefore: “after the body has been resumed, Happiness increases not in intensity, but in extent.”⁶⁹

That is as good an answer as the question admits. The vision does not get better. The person does. A human being is not a soul temporarily inconvenienced by matter; a soul without its body has everything it wants and is not yet everything it is. The resurrection does not add to God; it finishes the creature that is looking at him.

5.4 Augustine, guessing, and saying so

Almost every specific thing a Western Christian believes about the risen body can be traced to the last book of *The City of God*, and reading those chapters is a strange experience, because Augustine keeps interrupting himself to say he does not know.

He argues that all will rise at the age of the prime of life, on the ground that Christ rose at the stature in which he died and that “the world’s wisest men have fixed the bloom of youth at about the age of thirty”—while immediately allowing that even if someone insists everyone rises in the form in which they died, “we need not spend much labour in disputing with him.”⁷⁰ He argues that women rise as women, against those who inferred from “a perfect man” that all would rise male: “For my part, they seem to be wiser who make no doubt that both sexes shall rise. . . . the sex of woman is not a vice, but nature.”⁷¹ He argues that bodily blemishes are removed while the substance remains, that whatever has been taken from the body is restored to it, and that even a body ground to powder and scattered to the winds is not beyond the Creator—“no, not a hair of its head shall perish.”⁷²

And then, in the same chapter, this:

“But what this spiritual body shall be, and how great its grace, I fear it were but rash to pronounce, seeing that we have as yet no experience of it.”⁷³

Eight chapters later, taking up whether the risen will see God with bodily eyes, he says it again and more strongly. He begins: “I do not say what I see, but I say what I believe.” He works through the question at length—Eliseus saw his servant at a distance without eyes, so the saints will hardly need eyes; but the eyes will still have their office; perhaps they will be given a power of seeing incorporeal things; perhaps instead God will be so known that we shall see him “in ourselves, in one another, in Himself, in the new heavens and the new earth, in every created thing which shall then exist”—and he brackets the whole inquiry:

“But as we do not know what degree of perfection the spiritual body shall attain,—for here we speak of a matter of which we have no experience, and upon which the authority of Scripture does not definitely pronounce,—it is necessary that the words of the Book of Wisdom be illustrated in us: ‘The thoughts of mortal men are timid, and our forecastings uncertain.’ ”⁷⁴

“The authority of Scripture does not definitely pronounce.” That sentence stands in the middle of the single most influential Western text on the risen body, and it applies, by Augustine’s own reckoning, to most of what surrounds it.

Aquinas noticed. Quoting Augustine’s speculation about glorified eyes as an objection, he replies in six words that ought to be printed on the flyleaf of every book about heaven: “Augustine speaks as one inquiring, and conditionally.”⁷⁵

5.5 The four gifts, and where they come from

The high medieval schools systematised the risen body’s properties into four: impassibility, subtlety, agility, and clarity, drawn out of Paul’s four contrasts. In the printed *Summa theologiae* they occupy questions 82 to 85 of the Supplement, and the Supplement is where a reader ought to slow down.

Thomas Aquinas did not write it. He stopped work on the *Summa* in December 1273 and died the following March, leaving the third part unfinished; the Supplement was assembled after his death out of his much earlier commentary on the *Sentences*, by a compiler whose identity the standard older reference discusses without settling—attributed by some to Peter of Auvergne and by others to Henry of Gorkum, with the Leonine editors rejecting both, and the most probable candidate being Reginald of Piperno, his secretary.⁷⁶ The material is genuinely his and genuinely early, rearranged by someone else. That is not a reason to dismiss it. It is a reason not to quote it as though it were the considered teaching of the mature *Summa*.

What is in it is a mixture, and the mixture is instructive. Some of it is sober. On clarity, the compiled text says the brightness of the risen body “will result from the overflow of the soul’s glory into the body,” since “whatever is received into anything is received not according to the mode of the source whence it flows, but according to the mode of the recipient”—so that the body will differ in brightness as the soul differs in merit, as Paul says of star and star.⁷⁷ That is an argument from a principle, and the principle is the one that runs through the whole system: glory descends from the soul’s vision, not from a cosmetic applied to matter.

Some of it is a long way out. The question on subtlety spends four articles on whether a glorified body can occupy the same place as another body; the question on agility asks whether the saints will ever actually move, and whether their movement is instantaneous.⁷⁸ And here is the detail worth having: the answer to the last question is *no*, and the reason is a piece of rigorous physics. A body moving from A to B must at some time be neither wholly at A nor wholly at B; the alternatives are exhaustively enumerated and disposed of; “it is altogether impossible for a body to pass from one place to another, unless it pass through every interval.” The glorified body “will never attain to the dignity of the spiritual nature, just as it will never cease to be a body.”⁷⁹

Even in the most speculative corner of the tradition, the discipline holds: a risen body is still a body, and the argument is run to the end rather than resolved by piety. What is missing is not rigour. What is missing is data—and the Supplement, unlike Augustine, does not stop to say so.

Further out still lie the aureoles: the additional crowns assigned to virgins, martyrs, and doctors over and above the essential reward, discussed across thirteen articles, including whether an aureole is due to the angels, to Christ, and to the body.⁸⁰ There is nothing scandalous in this. Distinguishing an essential from an accidental reward is a reasonable

thing to do, and Scripture does speak of crowns. But the reader should be clear about what has happened between Lateran IV's "their own bodies which they now bear" and a determination of whether virgins outrank martyrs. A great deal of thinking has happened. No further revelation has.

5.6 Sorting it

Defined: the resurrection is universal; it is of our own bodies; it occurs at the last day. Taught with the whole weight of Scripture and the constant tradition: the risen body is incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and "spiritual"; it is conformed to Christ's; personal identity survives—the Catechism says the elect "retain, or rather find, their true identity, their own name."⁸¹ Common theological teaching, well-argued and not defined: that beatitude increases in extent and not in intensity when the body returns; that clarity overflows from the soul; that impassibility, subtlety, agility, and clarity are the properties of the glorified body.

Speculation, marked as such by its own best author: the age of the risen, their stature, their appearance, the fate of hair and fingernails, whether the eyes see God, how movement works, and every question of the form "what will it be like?" Augustine wrote most of it and disclaimed it twice. Aquinas read the disclaimer and repeated it.

And two things the tradition, so far as this article has read it, simply does not teach: that the risen will be reunited in the manner devotional writing describes—the sitting down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a real promise, but it is a promise of a feast in the kingdom, not a scene at a gate⁸²—and that the risen body will be young, beautiful, and thirty. That last is Augustine's opinion, offered with a shrug, and it has had a career its author would have found startling.

6 Star Differeth from Star

Heaven is unequal. That is not a pious speculation or a medieval hierarchy imported into the Gospel; it is defined doctrine, in the same sentence that defines the vision itself, and it is one of the points on which the modern devotional picture has drifted furthest from the received teaching without anyone announcing a change.

6.1 The definition, and the texts behind it

The Council of Florence in 1439 defined that the purified souls are received at once into heaven and see clearly God himself, three and one, as he is—*pro meritorum tamen diversitate alium alio perfectius*, "yet, in accordance with the diversity of merits, one more perfectly than another."⁸³ The Council of Trent, in the decree on justification of 1547, anathematised anyone who denies that a justified person truly merits, by good works done through God's grace and Christ's merit, "an increase of grace, eternal life and—if he dies in grace—the attainment of that eternal life, and even an increase of glory."⁸⁴ *Gloriae augmentum*: an increase of glory, truly merited. The Second Vatican Council states the same fact descriptively of the Church in its three states—the pilgrims, those being purified, and those in glory—saying that "all in various ways and degrees are in communion in the same charity of God and neighbor."⁸⁵

Behind the definitions stands one text and, in the tradition's actual argumentation, mainly one. Paul, in the middle of the resurrection chapter: "One is the glory of the sun, another the glory of the moon, and another the glory of the stars. For star differeth from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead."⁸⁶ It is that verse, not the more famous "In my Father's house there are many mansions," that Aquinas puts in the *sed contra* when he asks whether one of the blessed sees God more perfectly than another.⁸⁷

6.2 The mechanism, and what it excludes

Article six of the twelfth question is short and its argument is worth following exactly, because what it rules out is more interesting than what it rules in.

The difference cannot be on the side of the object: God is one, and the blessed do not see him through a likeness that could be sharper in one mind than another. "The same object will be presented to all—viz. the essence of God."⁸⁸

So no one in heaven has a better God than anyone else, and nothing is withheld from the lesser. That single point disposes of most of what makes the doctrine of degrees sound repellent.

Nor can the difference be a difference of natural intellectual power. Aquinas raises the objection himself and treats it as decisive: if the sharper mind saw more, then rank in glory would follow rank in nature, “and this is incongruous; since equality with angels is promised to men as their beatitude.”⁸⁹ Heaven is not graded by intelligence, and it is not graded by learning, office, or anything else a natural endowment could measure.

What remains is the light of glory, and the light is measured by charity:

“Hence the intellect which has more of the light of glory will see God the more perfectly; and he will have a fuller participation of the light of glory who has more charity; because where there is the greater charity, there is the more desire; and desire in a certain degree makes the one desiring apt and prepared to receive the object desired. Hence he who possesses the more charity, will see God the more perfectly, and will be the more beatified.”⁹⁰

The mechanism, then, is not payment but capacity. Desire widens what desires. A life of charity does not accumulate credit to be exchanged at the end for a better seat; it enlarges the person, and the enlargement is what shows in glory. This is why the doctrine of degrees and the doctrine of grace do not collide: the charity that measures the capacity is itself infused, so the whole scale is a scale of gifts received, and Trent’s canon is careful to say in one breath that the works are God’s gifts and the man’s merits.

6.3 How equality and difference are held together

Three things hold the doctrine together, and all three are in the sources rather than in the apologetics.

The object is common. Everyone in the city has God, and has him immediately, and has all of him—no one is looking at a smaller God. What differs is the seeing, not the seen. Aquinas is explicit that the vision is not by a likeness at all, so there is no sense in which the lesser blessed have a blurrier picture of the same thing; they have less capacity for an object that is wholly given to each.

Everyone is full. The tradition’s way of putting this comes from Augustine, in the chapter on the eternal felicity of the city of God, and it is worth quoting at length because it is the classical answer:

“But who can conceive, not to say describe, what degrees of honour and glory shall be awarded to the various degrees of merit? Yet it cannot be doubted that there shall be degrees. And in that blessed city there shall be this great blessing, that no inferior shall envy any superior, as now the archangels are not envied by the angels, because no one will wish to be what he has not received, though bound in strictest concord with him who has received; as in the body the finger does not seek to be the eye, though both members are harmoniously included in the complete structure of the body. And thus, along with his gift, greater or less, each shall receive this further gift of contentment to desire no more than he has.”⁹¹

Notice what Augustine does and does not claim. He asserts the fact of degrees as beyond doubt and declares their content inconceivable in the same sentence. And he adds a second gift on top of the first: contentment, given with the measure, so that the measure cannot be experienced as a deprivation. Whether that is a satisfying answer to a modern reader’s sense of justice is a fair question. It is at any rate the answer, and it is not the answer of a man who thinks heaven is a prize table.

The scale is charity, which is nobody’s achievement. If the ranking ran on cleverness, or courage, or public service, it would be a ranking of things people can compare. It runs on the love of God, which is infused, which is hidden, and which no one can measure in himself, let alone in anyone else. The doctrine of degrees, correctly stated, ends every conversation about who is greater rather than starting one.

6.4 The Eastern way of holding the same thing

Gregory of Nyssa’s account offers a different reconciliation, and it is worth setting beside the Latin one rather than against it. On his account the soul is a vessel enlarged by what fills it, so that “he never stops enlarging”; the capacity that measures beatitude is not a fixed allotment but a growth without limit.⁹² If that is right, then the difference

between the greater and the lesser blessed is not a permanent rank but a place in a motion that never stops—which dissolves the offence of the doctrine at the cost of raising a question the Latin tradition would want answered, namely how an unending increase squares with the rest that *Benedictus Deus* says the blessed already have.

This article does not adjudicate that, and notes only that the two accounts are not obviously incompatible: an unchanging vision of an infinite object and an unending enlargement of the seer are different pictures of the same situation, and nothing defined by the Catholic Church rules out the second. What is defined is the inequality and its measure, not its permanence in every respect.

6.5 What is speculation here

A good deal, and it is easy to spot once the criterion is applied.

The doctrine of the aureoles—the additional crowns of virgins, martyrs, and doctors, with the question of which is greatest—is school theology built on the essential-versus-accidental-reward distinction. The distinction is reasonable and the elaboration is not defined.⁹³ Any assignment of persons to degrees is speculation of a worse kind, since it requires knowledge of interior charity that no one has. The idea that degrees can be inferred from visible achievement is contradicted by the mechanism itself. And the confident modern reflex in the other direction—that heaven must be equal because inequality would be unfair—is not a correction of a medieval excess but a rejection of a conciliar definition, usually made by people who do not know they are making it.

The honest position is narrow and can be stated in three sentences. The blessed see God unequally, in proportion to charity, and this is defined. The inequality is a difference of capacity for an object wholly given to each, and this is the common and convincing explanation, not a definition. What any particular degree consists in, how it is experienced, whether it is fixed or grows, and where anyone stands on it, is unknown, and the greatest Western authority on the subject said so in the sentence in which he affirmed the doctrine.

7 No One Is Blessed Alone

Scripture never once shows a solitary blessed soul. Whatever the eschatological imagery is doing, it is unanimous on this: the unit of glory is plural. A multitude that no man could number, out of every nation and tribe and people and tongue, standing before the throne in white robes with palms.⁹⁴ A city, and a bride, and a wife of the Lamb—three corporate images for the same thing, given in a single chapter.⁹⁵ A feast, with named guests: “many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”⁹⁶ And, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, an address to the living that lists what they have already arrived at: “you are come to mount Sion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the company of many thousands of angels, and to the church of the firstborn who are written in the heavens, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the just made perfect.”⁹⁷

The question this section takes up is whether that plurality is part of what heaven is, or a very good thing that happens to be true of it. The question is not idle. If the company is incidental, then the whole apparatus of the communion of saints—intercession, veneration, the confidence that the dead are not lost to us—is a feature of the interim rather than of the end, and the corporate imagery is decoration. If the company is constitutive, then something has to be said about how it relates to a vision whose object is God alone.

7.1 What the Church teaches

The Catechism’s answer is unambiguous and worth reading for its grammar. Paragraph 1024 does not say heaven includes communion; it says heaven *is* communion: “This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity—this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed—is called ‘heaven.’”⁹⁸ Paragraph 1026 repeats the identification: “Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ.”⁹⁹ And 1045, describing the consummation, makes the relation between vision and company explicit in the order of causality: “The beatific vision, in which God opens himself in an inexhaustible way to the elect, will be the ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace, and mutual communion.”¹⁰⁰

The Second Vatican Council's treatment is fuller and adds the crucial claim that the communion is not interrupted by death. The pilgrims, the souls being purified, and the blessed "in various ways and degrees are in communion in the same charity of God and neighbor"; "the union of the wayfarers with the brethren who have gone to sleep in the peace of Christ is not in the least weakened or interrupted, but on the contrary... is strengthened by communication of spiritual goods"; and because those in heaven "are more closely united with Christ, they establish the whole Church more firmly in holiness."¹⁰¹

And the Catechism adds the point that makes all of this a doctrine about persons rather than about a crowd: in heaven the elect "retain, or rather find, their true identity, their own name."¹⁰² Whatever union means, it does not mean dissolution into a collective. The saints are more themselves, not less.

7.2 The counterargument, at full strength

Against all of which stands the most awkward article in the Latin tradition on this subject, and no honest treatment can pass it by.

Aquinas asks whether the fellowship of friends is necessary for happiness. For the imperfect happiness of this life, he says, yes: a man needs friends for the sake of good action, to do them good, to delight in seeing them do good, and to be helped by them. Then:

"But if we speak of perfect Happiness which will be in our heavenly Fatherland, the fellowship of friends is not essential to Happiness; since man has the entire fulness of his perfection in God. But the fellowship of friends conduces to the well-being of Happiness."¹⁰³

And the reply to the third objection puts it as sharply as it can be put:

"Perfection of charity is essential to Happiness, as to the love of God, but not as to the love of our neighbor. Wherefore *if there were but one soul enjoying God, it would be happy, though having no neighbor to love*. But supposing one neighbor to be there, love of him results from perfect love of God. Consequently, friendship is, as it were, concomitant with perfect Happiness."¹⁰⁴

One soul, alone, seeing God, would be perfectly happy. That is not a hesitation or an aside; it is the considered position of the mature *Summa*, argued from the sufficiency of God, and it is exactly what a reader who thinks the communion of saints is constitutive of beatitude has to answer.

It is worth adding, in fairness to the position, that the same author does not leave the blessed indifferent to one another. In the treatise on charity he holds that the order of charity endures in heaven: "each one will love more and reckon to be nearer to himself those who are nearer to God"—and, immediately after, that the natural bonds are not erased: "It will however be possible in heaven for a man to love in several ways one who is connected with him, since the causes of virtuous love will not be banished from the mind of the blessed."¹⁰⁵

7.3 A judgment

Project synthesis: whether the communion of saints is constitutive of beatitude

Claim. The company is constitutive of the state and not of the act, and the two claims are compatible because they answer different questions. What formally beatifies is the vision of God, and Aquinas is right that nothing else is required for the act; a single soul admitted to that vision would be blessed. But heaven, as the Church actually teaches it, is not an act in isolation—it is a state, named by the Catechism as a communion and by revelation as a city, a bride, a feast, and a numberless multitude, into which no one is admitted privately. Three considerations move this article to say that the plurality is more than an accompaniment. First, the object seen is triune: the beatitude a creature is admitted to is not the solitary self-sufficiency of a monad but the life of Father, Son, and Spirit, and it would be strange for admission to that life to be indifferent to communion. Second, the Church's own catechesis defines heaven by communion rather than describing communion as one of heaven's contents, and does so in the paragraph that follows immediately on the definition of the vision. Third, the imagery is unanimous, and unanimity in imagery is evidence about the thing imaged even when the images

are not descriptions. On this reading Aquinas’s “concomitant” is exactly right as an analysis of the beatifying act and is not a statement about how much of heaven a lone soul would have.

Strongest counterargument, at full strength. This is a distinction manufactured to save an appearance. If the fellowship of the blessed is not part of what makes them blessed, then it is an ornament, however magnificent—and Aquinas says so in terms, with an argument, from the sufficiency of God, which is the one premise a Christian cannot deny. Everything offered above is soft: the corporate imagery of the Apocalypse is ecclesial symbolism whose referent is the Church, not a report on the furniture of glory; the Catechism’s “communion of life and love” is catechetical language, not the technical vocabulary in which “constitutive” has a meaning; and the appeal to the Trinity proves too much, since the same argument would make every relation in heaven constitutive of beatitude. Worse, the claim is pastorally dangerous in a specific way that the magisterium itself has flagged: *Lumen gentium* 51 has to warn that communion with the saints must not weaken the worship due to God alone, and the modern sentimental version of heaven—in which the point of dying is reunion, and God is the host of the party rather than its substance—is precisely what the scholastic “not essential” was designed to prevent. A doctrine that makes the company constitutive has no principled defence against that drift.

What would change the judgment. An identified magisterial text asserting, in technical language, that the communion of the blessed with one another belongs to essential rather than accidental beatitude would settle it in this article’s favour; nothing of the kind has been found, and CCC 1024–1026 and 1045, though strong, are catechetical rather than definitional. In the other direction, the judgment would be substantially weakened by a demonstration that the Latin tradition’s “concomitant” has been received as a doctrinal minimum rather than as an analytic distinction—for instance by later magisterial use of ST I-II, q. 4, a. 8 in that sense. The largest gap in the evidence is that this article did not read the *Summa*’s own treatment of charity in the fatherland beyond a single article, nor the Eastern tradition’s ecclesiology of glory at all; either could change the balance. The judgment is held at moderate confidence.

7.4 What follows, and what does not

Two practical consequences follow from the teaching as it stands, and one popular consequence does not.

It follows that the dead in Christ are not out of reach. *Lumen gentium* teaches the union of the living with the blessed as strengthened rather than interrupted, and the intercession of the saints as continuing; this is why a Catholic asks a saint to pray rather than merely admiring one.¹⁰⁶ It also follows that the veneration of the saints is not a rival to the worship of God, and the Council says so in the same breath in which it commends the practice—a boundary that belongs beside the doctrine and not in a footnote to it.

What does not follow is the reunion scene. That the blessed know and love one another is taught; that the natural bonds are not abolished is the common teaching of the schools; that any particular person will meet any particular person, in any particular manner, at any particular age, is not taught anywhere this article has looked. The hope of seeing again those we have loved is a legitimate hope grounded in a real doctrine. The scene at the gate, with the recognitions and the explanations, is a scene, and it belongs to the register the last section of this article takes up.

8 The Postcard, Audited

This section does something the rest of the article has not done: it checks the popular picture against the text, item by item, and reports the results of bounded searches. The method is crude and its limits are stated. What comes out of it is not a debunking. It is a redistribution—several of the postcard’s furnishings turn out to be in Scripture after all, in odder places than expected, and the one thing the postcard never shows turns out to be the only thing the text puts at the centre.

8.1 Method and its limits

Every search reported here was run over the source library’s tracked per-verse text of the Douay–Rheims in the Challoner electronic edition, on 2026-07-26. The searches are literal English string matches within single verses of that edition. They cannot exclude synonyms, paraphrase, a different translation’s vocabulary, an inflection not searched,

or a sense expressed without the word. Where a search returns nothing, the honest form of the result is “this word does not occur in this edition in this range,” and nothing stronger.¹⁰⁷

8.2 What is in the text

Taking the Apocalypse’s final vision first, since it is the fullest description Scripture gives: a new heaven and a new earth, with the sea gone; a holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; the tabernacle of God with men; every tear wiped away, and death, mourning, crying and sorrow ended, “for the former things are passed away.”¹⁰⁸ Then the measurements: a wall great and high with twelve gates and twelve angels in them, the names of the twelve tribes on the gates and the twelve apostles on the foundations; the city four-square, twelve thousand furlongs, length and height and breadth equal; the wall of jasper, the city of pure gold like clear glass, the foundations adorned with twelve named gems, the twelve gates twelve pearls, the street pure gold “as it were, transparent glass.”¹⁰⁹

Then the four negations that carry the theology: “And I saw no temple therein. For the Lord God Almighty is the temple thereof, and the Lamb.” “And the city hath no need of the sun, nor of the moon, to shine in it.” “And the gates thereof shall not be shut by day: for there shall be no night there.” And in the next chapter, “And there shall be no curse any more.”¹¹⁰ Then the river of the water of life clear as crystal, the tree of life bearing twelve fruits and yielding every month, its leaves “for the healing of the nations.”¹¹¹ And then the sentence everything has been building to: “And they shall see his face: and his name shall be on their foreheads.”¹¹²

Elsewhere: white robes and palms in the hands of a multitude no man could number, from every nation and tribe and people and tongue.¹¹³ Crowns, repeatedly—a crown of justice, a crown of life, a never-fading crown of glory.¹¹⁴ Brightness: “Then shall the just shine as the sun, in the kingdom of their Father”; “they that are learned, shall shine as the brightness of the firmament: and they that instruct many to justice, as stars for all eternity.”¹¹⁵ A new heavens and a new earth “in which justice dwelleth,” promised in both Testaments.¹¹⁶

And harps, which the postcard did not invent. In the Apocalypse harps appear three times: the four living creatures and the twenty-four ancients hold them before the Lamb; a voice from heaven sounds “as the voice of harpers, harping on their harps”; and those who have overcome the beast stand on a sea of glass mingled with fire, “having the harps of God.”¹¹⁷ The redeemed do get harps. What they do not get is one apiece on a cloud.

8.3 What is not in the text

Four items in the standard picture were tested and are not there in the form the picture gives them.

Wings. A literal search for “wings” across the twenty-seven New Testament books of this edition returns five verses. Two are the Lord’s lament over Jerusalem, where the wings are a hen’s or a bird’s. One gives six wings to the four living creatures around the throne. One gives wings to the locusts of the fifth trumpet. One gives “two wings of a great eagle” to the woman of chapter twelve, so that she may fly into the desert. In this edition’s New Testament, no human being, living or risen or blessed, is given wings.¹¹⁸

Clouds as a dwelling. Clouds are everywhere in the New Testament, but almost always as the vehicle or veil of a divine coming: the cloud at the Transfiguration, the cloud that received Christ at the Ascension, the Son of man coming in the clouds. Twice human beings are associated with a cloud in the way the picture suggests, and both are movements rather than residences: the two witnesses of chapter eleven go up to heaven in a cloud, and at the parousia “we who are alive, who are left, shall be taken up together with them in the clouds to meet Christ, into the air: and so shall we be always with the Lord.”¹¹⁹ The cloud is transport. Nobody lives on it.

A gate-keeper. The gates of the city have twelve angels stationed in them and the names of the twelve tribes written on them; the foundations carry the names of the apostles. But the gates are never shut, and nothing in the vision puts anyone at them with a register. The keys of the kingdom are given to Peter on earth, in a text about binding and loosing.¹²⁰ The comic scene of the interview at the gate is a joke about the last judgment relocated to the door of heaven, and the last judgment, in the texts, happens somewhere else and to everyone at once.

Becoming angels. Both Synoptic forms of the Sadducees’ question say something precise and less than the picture claims. Matthew: “in the resurrection they shall neither marry nor be married, but shall be *as* the angels of God in heaven.” Luke: “Neither can they die any more for they are *equal to* the angels and are the children of God, being the

children of the resurrection.”¹²¹ Both are comparisons, and both name their term: not marrying, not dying. Neither says the risen become angels, and the whole doctrine of the resurrection of the body says they do not.

One further item, of a different kind: the string “halo” does not occur in this edition of Scripture at all except inside proper names.¹²²

8.4 What kind of language this is

It would be a poor conclusion to say that Scripture’s heaven is imagery and therefore tells us nothing. The Catechism draws the opposite conclusion from the same fact: “This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise.”¹²³ The images are revealed. They are not a concession to weak minds that a stronger mind could dispense with; they are the form in which the content is given, and the content is genuinely in them.

The tradition has always known this and said it when pressed. Augustine, in the middle of his most speculative chapter, has to stop and explain that “by ‘the face’ of God we are to understand His manifestation, and not a part of the body similar to that which in our bodies we call by that name.”¹²⁴ Aquinas, denying that God can be seen in an imaginative vision, notes that “in the divine Scripture divine things are metaphorically described by means of sensible things.”¹²⁵ And Paul, who says he was caught up to the third heaven and into paradise, reports that he “heard secret words which it is not granted to man to utter”—the one first-hand account in the canon, and it declines to give an account.¹²⁶

Read as symbols, the images give more than the postcard, not less. No temple: the distinction between sacred and secular time, sacred and secular space, is abolished—not because worship stops but because nothing is outside it. No sun and no night: the city’s light is not something it receives from a body it orbits. Gates never shut: a walled city with permanently open gates is a city with nothing left to fear, which is what a fortified gate is for. Every tear wiped away, by a hand, personally. A tree whose leaves are for healing, in a place where nothing is sick. And names—on the gates, on the foundations, on the foreheads of the blessed. Identity, twelve times over, written into the architecture.

8.5 The one thing the postcard leaves out

Line up the images and a structure appears. Almost all of them are negations of the conditions of this life: no sea, no death, no mourning, no crying, no sorrow, no temple, no sun, no night, no curse, no shut gate. The Apocalypse describes heaven mainly by subtraction, which is exactly what one would expect of a text describing something for which its readers have no positive concept.

Against that there stands one positive clause, and it is the last thing said before the city’s lamps are described: *and they shall see his face*.

That is the sentence the definitions of 1336 and 1439 were written to protect, and it is the sentence the postcard has no way to draw. A picture can show clouds, harps, gates, and reunions; it cannot show the vision of the divine essence, because there is nothing to show—the seeing is an act of a mind and its object has no shape. So the picture fills the space with the furniture, and the furniture, being visible, becomes what heaven is about.

That is the whole mechanism of the drift, and it explains why the drift runs the way it does. It is not that Christians became more worldly or less devout. It is that the central content of the doctrine is the one item that cannot be illustrated, and illustration is how a picture works. The corrective is not to burn the postcards. It is to know what the postcards are for, and to know that the small clause they omit is the only part the Church has ever bound anyone to believe.

9 The Last of the Last Things

The four last things have been preached as a series since long before anyone counted them, and the counting has always been a little misleading. Death, judgment, hell, heaven: the list has the shape of an itinerary, and an itinerary invites the assumption that the fourth item is the last stage of a journey—the terminus after the customs post. It is

not. The first three are things that happen to a creature. The fourth is what a creature is for. A series about the last things does not end at heaven the way a road ends at a town; it arrives at the thing the road was built to reach, and the arrival changes the description of everything behind it.

That is why this volume could not be written as a description, and why the reader who came for one has been given something else.

9.1 What has been withheld, and what has not

Take the honest inventory. On the state that Christian hope is entirely about, the Catholic Church has defined this and, so far as this article has found, essentially nothing more: that the fully purified souls, since the Passion, and before the resurrection of their bodies, see the divine essence immediately, intuitively, face to face, with no creature standing in as the object seen; that they see God as he is, and unequally, according to charity; that they will rise in the very bodies they now bear; and that this state is their true blessedness and their rest.

Everything else that a Christian believes about heaven falls into two classes. There is a great body of theological reasoning—some of it magnificent, some of it near-unanimous, all of it revisable—about how a finite mind performs an infinite act, what the risen body is like, how degrees and equality are held together, what the company contributes. And there is a body of imagery, most of it revealed and therefore not disposable, which has been read for centuries as though it were topography.

Sorting those has been the labour of this article, and the result is uncomfortable in a specific way. Almost every question a person actually has—what will it feel like, what will I look like, who will be there, what will I do, will I know them, will they know me—is answered either not at all, or by a theologian saying carefully that he does not know. Augustine, who supplied more of the received picture than any other writer, twice stopped in the middle of supplying it to say that we have no experience of the matter and that Scripture does not definitely pronounce. That sentence has been quoted three times in this study, which is not too often for a sentence that half the tradition's confident detail is standing on.

And yet nothing central has been withheld. What has been withheld is description. What has been given is an object and a direction.

9.2 The one sentence that does the work

“Dearly beloved, we are now the sons of God: and it hath not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that when he shall appear we shall be like to him: because we shall see him as he is.”¹²⁷

Notice how the sentence is built, because the structure is the answer to the whole problem. It begins by conceding the ignorance—*it hath not yet appeared what we shall be*—and it does not treat that ignorance as a defect to be apologised for. It then explains it. What we shall be depends on seeing what has not yet been seen; the reason no one can describe the end is that the end is a likeness produced by a sight nobody has had. The ignorance is not a gap in the revelation. It is a consequence of the content of the revelation.

That is a very different thing from a doctrine with holes in it. A doctrine with holes invites filling. This one explains why it cannot be filled, and the explanation is the promise.

9.3 What to do with a smaller picture

A reader who has followed the argument this far has been relieved of a good deal of furniture and may reasonably ask what is left to hope for.

Something more definite than what was taken away, is the answer, and considerably harder. The devotional picture offers a very good version of here: the people, the rest, the beauty, the reunion, at their best and without the losses. Every element of it is drawn from something we have already wanted. The defined doctrine offers something no one has wanted, because no one has seen it—an act for which our nature is not equipped, requiring an elevation of the mind that no creature could possess by nature and that God has to give, terminating in himself, and never exhausted, so that the infinite stays infinite for ever to the ones who have it.

The two hopes are not rivals, but they are not the same size, and the second cannot be assembled out of the first. This is why the tradition’s imagery works by subtraction. No death, no mourning, no crying, no sorrow, no night, no temple, no shut gate: each of those clears something away, and what is left standing in the cleared space is a face.

9.4 Where the series ends

Augustine, having spent a chapter on the question of whether the risen will see God with their eyes, and having declined to settle it, wrote a sentence that is the right register for the end of a study like this one: “I do not say what I see, but I say what I believe.”¹²⁸ It is not a retreat. He goes on to say a great deal, and to argue for it. But he has marked the register, and once the register is marked the reader knows how to hold what follows.

This article has tried to mark the register at every claim, which is a less exhilarating way to write about heaven than the alternative and, on the evidence assembled here, the only responsible one. What survives the marking is small, and it is not fragile. Four councils and a constitution, one verse of an epistle, one clause at the end of the Apocalypse: *and they shall see his face*.

The last of the last things, it turns out, is not a thing. Death is an event, judgment is an event, and the refusal that can become final is a state of a will. Heaven is a Person, seen. A series that began with what happens to a creature ends by saying that the creature was made for someone—and that the reason nobody can tell you what it will be like is that nobody has yet seen the one it will be like.

10 The Claims and Their Weights: A Synopsis

This table is a navigational summary of the claims engaged in the article, grouped by the weight each carries, with the locus and the place of treatment. It is editorial synthesis and a compression: every entry stands for a treatment given, with citations, verification dates, and qualifications, in the body, the Notes, and the References, which govern over this table wherever they differ. “Reported” marks a position engaged at a stated secondary-witness ceiling rather than from a primary text read at its own locus. Nothing in the “not found” band is a claim that a proposition is false; each is the bounded result of a stated search or a statement that the article located no teaching.

Weight	Claim	Locus	Treated
Defined	The souls of the fully purified, since the Passion and before the resumption of their bodies and the general judgment, have seen and see the divine essence by an intuitive and facial vision, no creature intervening in the role of an object seen.	<i>Benedictus Deus</i> (1336), DS 1000.	Definitions.
Defined	That vision and enjoyment void the acts of faith and hope, and continue without interruption to the last judgment and thereafter for ever.	<i>Benedictus Deus</i> , DS 1001.	Definitions.
Defined	The purified are received at once into heaven and see clearly God himself, three and one, as he is—yet according to the diversity of merits, one more perfectly than another.	Florence, <i>Laetentur caeli</i> (1439), DS 1305.	Definitions; degrees.
Defined	The justified truly merit, by works done through grace, an increase of grace, eternal life, and an increase of glory.	Trent, session VI (1547), canon 32, DS 1582.	Degrees.
Defined	All will rise with their own bodies, the ones they now bear, to receive according to their works.	Lateran IV (1215), <i>Firmiter</i> , DS 801.	Definitions; the risen body.
Condemned error	That every intellectual nature is naturally blessed in itself and that the soul does not need the light of glory elevating it to see God.	Vienne (1312), <i>Ad nostrum qui</i> , DS 895, with the censure at DS 899.	The light of glory.
Papal act, not a definition	A reigning pope may hold, preach, and publish an opinion on an undefined question, and be resisted; John XXII conceded the freedom of theologians while the See had not decided.	<i>Ne super his</i> (1334), DS 990–991; reported sequence from a public-domain 1910 reference work.	Definitions.

Weight	Claim	Locus	Treated
Catechetical teaching	Heaven is the communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels, and all the blessed; it is the blessed community of all perfectly incorporated into Christ.	CCC 1024, 1026.	The company.
Catechetical teaching	The elect retain, or rather find, their true identity, their own name; in glory they continue joyfully to fulfil God's will toward others and toward all creation.	CCC 1025, 1029.	The company; the risen body.
Catechetical teaching	The "how" of the resurrection exceeds imagination and understanding and is accessible only to faith; we know neither the moment nor the manner of the transformation of the universe.	CCC 1000; CCC 1048 quoting <i>Gaudium et spes</i> 39.	The risen body.
Conciliar teaching	The union of the wayfarers with the blessed is not weakened or interrupted but strengthened; the blessed intercede; their cult must not weaken the worship due to God.	<i>Lumen gentium</i> 49–51.	The company.
Conciliar teaching	Eastern and Western theological expressions of a mystery are often to be considered mutually complementary rather than conflicting.	<i>Unitatis redintegratio</i> 17.	The Eastern answer.
Scripture	"And they shall see his face: and his name shall be on their foreheads."	Apoc 22:4.	Throughout; the audit.
Scripture	"It hath not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that when he shall appear we shall be like to him: because we shall see him as he is."	1 Jn 3:2.	The close.
Scripture	"Whom no man hath seen, nor can see"; "No man hath seen God at any time"; "man shall not see me, and live."	1 Tim 6:16; Jn 1:18; Ex 33:20.	Whether a creature can see God.
Scripture	The risen body: sown in corruption, dishonour, weakness, a natural body; raised in incorruption, glory, power, a spiritual body. Flesh and blood cannot possess the kingdom.	1 Cor 15:42–44, 50.	The risen body.
Scripture	"Star differeth from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead."	1 Cor 15:41–42.	Degrees.
Patristic witness	The operations of God come down to us; his essence remains beyond our reach.	Basil, Letter 234.1.	The Eastern answer.
Patristic witness	Not the prophets, nor angels, nor archangels have seen what God is, for a created nature cannot see the Uncreated; all that is comprehensible about him is his infinity and incomprehensibility.	Chrysostom, <i>Hom. on John</i> 15; John of Damascus, <i>De fide orth.</i> I.4.	Whether a creature can see God; the Eastern answer.
Patristic witness	The soul is a vessel enlarged by what fills it, and never stops enlarging.	Gregory of Nyssa, <i>On the Soul and the Resurrection</i> .	The Eastern answer; degrees.
Eastern school theology	God is not seen in his superessential essence but according to his deifying energy; essence and energy are not totally identical in God, though he is entirely manifest in every energy, and the essence transcends the energies infinitely.	Palamas, <i>Triads</i> III.i.29, 33–34; III.ii.5, 8–10.	The Eastern answer.
Reported reception	The Palamite doctrine was endorsed by Athos and by councils at Constantinople in 1341, 1347, and 1351.	Named modern scholarly introduction; the conciliar acts were not read for this article.	The Eastern answer.
Latin school theology	No created likeness can represent the divine essence, and to say God is seen by a likeness is to say the essence is not seen; nor can it be seen by any sense or by the bodily eye.	ST I, q. 12, aa. 2–3.	Whether a creature can see God.
Latin school theology	The light of glory is a created disposition strengthening the intellect—a medium <i>by</i> which, not a medium <i>in</i> which—and does not take away the immediacy of the vision.	ST I, q. 12, a. 5 with ad 1–3.	The light of glory.

Weight	Claim	Locus	Treated
Latin school theology	The blessed see God but never comprehend him, and do not see in him all that he does or can do.	ST I, q. 12, aa. 7–8.	Seeing without comprehending.
Latin school theology	One sees more perfectly than another by a greater light of glory, and the greater light follows the greater charity, not the greater natural intellect.	ST I, q. 12, a. 6.	Degrees.
Latin school theology	Perfect happiness does not depend on the body; when the body is resumed, happiness increases in extent, not in intensity.	ST I-II, q. 4, a. 5 with ad 4–5.	The risen body.
Latin school theology	The fellowship of friends is not essential to perfect happiness but conduces to its well-being; one soul alone enjoying God would be happy.	ST I-II, q. 4, a. 8 with ad 3.	The company (counterargument).
Latin school theology	The order of charity endures in heaven; the blessed love more those nearer to God, and the causes of natural love are not banished from their minds.	ST II-II, q. 26, a. 13.	The company.
Latin school theology, compiled posthumously	Impassibility, subtlety, agility, and clarity as properties of the glorified body; clarity as the overflow of the soul’s glory; local motion still traverses the interval.	ST Supplement, qq. 82–85, assembled after Aquinas’s death from his commentary on the <i>Sentences</i> .	The risen body.
Speculation, marked by its author	The risen rise at the vigour of about thirty; both sexes rise; blemishes are removed; nothing of the body is lost.	Augustine, <i>De civ. Dei</i> XXII.15–21, with his own disclaimer at XXII.21.	The risen body.
Speculation, marked by its author	Whether the glorified eye sees God—left expressly unresolved, “a matter of which we have no experience, and upon which the authority of Scripture does not definitely pronounce.”	<i>De civ. Dei</i> XXII.29; Aquinas: “Augustine speaks as one inquiring, and conditionally.”	The risen body; the audit.
Speculation, unmarked	The aureoles of virgins, martyrs, and doctors, their assignment and their ranking.	ST Supplement, q. 96.	The risen body; degrees.
Project synthesis	<i>Benedictus Deus</i> and the Palamite doctrine probably do not formally contradict, because <i>essentia</i> and <i>ousia</i> are probably not the same concept; held at low confidence, with the counterargument and falsifier stated.	Original synthesis, attributed to no source.	The Eastern answer.
Project synthesis	The communion of the blessed is constitutive of the state of heaven though not of the beatifying act; held at moderate confidence, with the counterargument and falsifier stated.	Original synthesis, attributed to no source.	The company.
Project synthesis	The great majority of the received popular picture of heaven is theological speculation or unwarranted imagery, and a substantial part of it was marked as conjecture by the authors who produced it.	Original synthesis, argued from the whole of the evidence above.	Opening; the audit.
Not found	Wings on any human being, living or risen, anywhere in the New Testament of the searched edition; clouds as a dwelling, the two human cloud texts being ascents; a gate-keeper with a register, the gates carrying twelve angels and never shut; that the risen become angels, both Synoptic forms giving a bounded comparison—not marrying, not dying.	Bounded literal search, 2026-07-26 (an absent English word in one edition); Apoc 11:12; 1 Thess 4:16 (Vulgate numbering); Apoc 21:12, 25; Matt 22:30; Luke 20:36.	The audit.
Not taught	Any particular reunion scene; the age, appearance, or activity of a particular risen person; where any person stands among the degrees.	No locus located in the material read.	The risen body; degrees; the company.

Notes

¹Apocalypse 21:15–16, Douay–Rheims (Challoner revision), read 2026-07-26 in the source library’s tracked verse text of this edition at the registered artifact for the Apocalypse (lines 373–374 of the per-verse file). Scripture throughout this article is quoted from that tracked witness and cited in the Vulgate chapter-and-verse numbering the edition preserves; where that numbering differs from a modern Bible’s, the note says so. The conversion of twelve thousand *stadia* to a modern distance is the article’s own arithmetic at the conventional 185-metre *stadion*, and is offered only to make the figure imaginable; the text gives no metric equivalent and the number is plainly symbolic (twelve, the tribes and the apostles, multiplied by a thousand).

²Apoc 21:21 (“the twelve gates are twelve pearls, one to each: and every several gate was of one several pearl”) and 21:25 (“And the gates thereof shall not be shut by day: for there shall be no night there”); 21:12 places twelve angels in the gates, with the names of the twelve tribes written on them. The figure of a single apostle admitting or refusing entrants at a gate is not in the text; the keys given to Peter in Matt 16:19 are keys of the kingdom given on earth, and the Apocalypse does not station him at the gates. All read 2026-07-26 in the tracked verse text.

³Apoc 5:8; 14:2; 15:2, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. On the wings, see the bounded search reported in the section on Scripture and the postcard below.

⁴The other three volumes of this series are independent works and are not summarised or relied on here; where their subjects touch this one—the particular judgment that precedes the state described in *Benedictus Deus*, the purification that the same constitution presupposes, the possibility of definitive refusal—this article states only what its own sources establish and leaves those subjects to the volumes that own them. *Beatitudo* is rendered “beatitudo” or “happiness” throughout; it translates the complete and final good of a rational creature, not a mood or a pleasant feeling, and the English word “happiness” in quotations from the English Dominican *Summa* carries that heavier sense.

⁵*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1027: “This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father’s house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise. . .” Official Vatican English web text, read 2026-07-26; the Catechism’s own delivery of the passage is quoted, and its typography (a spaced hyphen for the dash) is not reproduced. Quotations from the Catechism throughout are brief excerpts of a copyrighted official text, used with attribution.

⁶This is the article’s own summary judgment, a project synthesis rather than a received teaching; the evidence for it is the whole of the sections that follow, and it is stated again in bounded form, with its counterargument, in the synopsis at the end. The most striking single piece of evidence is Augustine’s own warning in the two chapters of *De civitate Dei* on which most of the Western picture of the risen body ultimately rests: “here we speak of a matter of which we have no experience, and upon which the authority of Scripture does not definitely pronounce” (XXII.29) and “what this spiritual body shall be, and how great its grace, I fear it were but rash to pronounce, seeing that we have as yet no experience of it” (XXII.21). Both quoted in full below from the tracked 1871 Dods translation.

⁷Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 12, a. 3, reply to objection 2, English Dominican translation, read 2026-07-26 at New Advent. The New Advent presentation inserts spaces before punctuation where a word is hyperlinked; quotations here close those spaces and change nothing else. Latin checked at Corpus Thomisticum for the loci identified in the References.

⁸*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, art. “Pope John XXII” (vol. 8, New York 1910), read 2026-07-26 at New Advent: “Before his elevation to the Holy See, he had written a work on this question, in which he stated that the souls of the blessed departed do not see God until after the Last Judgment. After becoming pope, he advanced the same teaching in his sermons.” The article is a public-domain 1910 reference work used here as a historical witness for the sequence of events, not as a doctrinal authority; the acts themselves (John’s *Ne super his* and Benedict XII’s *Benedictus Deus*) are quoted below from the received Latin.

⁹*Catholic Encyclopedia*, art. “Pope John XXII,” read 2026-07-26: John “wrote to King Philip IV on the matter (November, 1333), and emphasized the fact that, as long as the Holy See had not given a decision, the theologians enjoyed perfect freedom in this matter”; the Paris theologians “pointed out that the pope had given no decision on this question but only advanced his personal opinion.” In a consistory of 3 January 1334 John “explicitly declared that he had never meant to teach aught contrary to Holy Scripture or the rule of faith and in fact had not intended to give any decision whatever.” The distinction being drawn—between what a pope says and what a pope defines—is the ordinary Catholic one and is not this article’s invention; nothing here is a judgment about the man.

¹⁰John XXII, bull *Ne super his*, 3 December 1334, as received at Denzinger nn. 990–991 (older numbering 457a–457b); Latin read 2026-07-26 at the patristica.net web presentation of the Latin *Enchiridion symbolorum*, the edition registered in the source library for this witness. Working rendering (this article’s, governed by the Latin, and labelled as a gloss, not as an approved translation): “We confess and believe that souls, purified and separated from their bodies, are gathered in heaven, in the kingdom of heaven and paradise, and with Christ in the company of the angels, and see God and the divine essence face to face clearly, according to the common law, *so far as the state and condition of a separated soul allows*.” The whole document then subjects everything he has said or written to the determination of the Church and of his successors.

¹¹*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, art. “Benedict XII” (vol. 2, New York 1907), read 2026-07-26 at New Advent: “Eager to solve the question, Benedict heard the opinions of those maintaining the theory of deferred vision, and, with a commission of theologians, gave four months to patristic research. Their labours terminated in the proclamation (29 January, 1336) of the

Bull ‘Benedictus Deus’ defining the immediate intuitive vision of God by the souls of the just having no faults to expiate.” The dates of election and enthronement are from the same article.

¹²Benedict XII, apostolic constitution *Benedictus Deus*, 29 January 1336, as received at Denzinger nn. 1000–1001 (older numbering 530); Latin read 2026-07-26 at the registered patristica.net presentation of the Latin *Enchiridion*. The ellipses omit the constitution’s long enumeration of the classes of soul covered (the saints of before the Passion, apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins, the baptised faithful in whom nothing was to be purged, those purged after death, and baptised children dying before the use of free will) and its clause about the Ascension. The full enumeration is summarised in the prose above; nothing doctrinally material is omitted. The 1336 Latin act is public domain; printed editions of Denzinger retain their own editorial rights, and the web presentation used here does not identify the exact printing it transcribes, which is recorded as this article’s verification ceiling for the wording.

¹³*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1023, quoting *Benedictus Deus* (DS 1000), official Vatican English web text, read 2026-07-26. The Catechism’s excerpt begins “By virtue of our apostolic authority, we define the following” and preserves the constitution’s enumeration in abbreviated form with ellipses; the wording quoted here is the Catechism’s own rendering and is not altered.

¹⁴1 Cor 13:12, tracked verse text of the Douay–Rheims, read 2026-07-26. The Latin *facialis* in the constitution is the scholastic adjective formed from the Vulgate’s *facie ad faciem*; it is a technical term of art, not an assertion that God has a face, a point Augustine had already had to make explicitly (*De civitate Dei* XXII.29: “By ‘the face’ of God we are to understand His manifestation, and not a part of the body similar to that which in our bodies we call by that name”).

¹⁵*Benedictus Deus*, DS 1001: *ac quod visio huiusmodi divinae essentiae eiusque fruitio actus fidei et spei in eis evacuant, prout fides et spes propri(a)e theologicae sunt virtutes; quodque, postquam inchoata fuerit vel erit talis intuitiva ac facialis visio et fruitio in eisdem, eadem visio et fruitio sine aliqua intermissione (intermissione) seu evacuatione praedictae visionis et fruitionis continuata existit et continuabitur usque ad finale iudicium et ex tunc usque in sempiternum*. The parenthesised variants are the transcription’s own and are reproduced rather than silently resolved. The final paragraph of the constitution (DS 1002) defines the immediate descent to hell of those who die in actual mortal sin and the general judgment in which all will appear with their bodies; that subject belongs to the other volumes of this series and is not developed here.

¹⁶Council of Florence, bull *Laetentur caeli*, 6 July 1439, DS 1305 (older numbering 693): *in caelum mox recipi et intueri clare ipsum Deum trinum et unum, sicuti est, pro meritum tamen diversitate alium alio perfectius*. Latin read 2026-07-26 at the registered patristica.net presentation; the English is this article’s labelled working gloss governed by the Latin. Note that *Laetentur caeli* is a decree of union with the Greek Church, subscribed at Florence and afterwards repudiated at Constantinople; its doctrinal force in the Catholic Church does not depend on its reception in the East, and this article does not treat the repudiation, which lies outside its scope.

¹⁷1 Jn 3:2: “We know that when he shall appear we shall be like to him: because we shall see him as he is.” Tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

¹⁸Fourth Lateran Council (1215), constitution 1, *Firmiter credimus*, DS 801 (older numbering 429): *qui omnes cum suis propriis resurgent corporibus, quae nunc gestant, ut recipiant secundum opera sua, sive bona fuerint sive mala, illi cum diabolo poenam perpetuam, et isti cum Christo gloriam sempiternam*. Latin read 2026-07-26 at the registered patristica.net presentation; English gloss labelled. The Catechism quotes the same clause at CCC 999, in the form “all of them will rise again with their own bodies which they now bear.”

¹⁹Ex 33:20, 23, tracked verse text of the Douay–Rheims (Challoner), read 2026-07-26. The preceding petition is at 33:18, “Shew me thy glory.”

²⁰Jn 1:18, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

²¹1 Tim 6:16, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. *Nec videre potest*: the negative is modal, not merely factual, which is why the verse does most of the work in the objections of both traditions.

²²John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homily 15 (on Jn 1:18), trans. Charles Marriott, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 14 (1889), public domain; read 2026-07-26 at New Advent. The New Advent presentation runs scriptural references into the text as inline citations; those are omitted from the quotations here and nothing else is altered. Chrysostom adds that God’s essence was invisible even to the angels until the Incarnation: “even to angels He then became visible, when He put on the Flesh; but before that time they did not so behold Him, because even to them His Essence was invisible.”

²³John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* I.4, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 9 (1899), public domain; read 2026-07-26 at New Advent. The chapter heading is “Concerning the nature of Deity: that it is incomprehensible.”

²⁴*Summa theologiae* I, q. 12, a. 1, objections 1 and 3; Latin read 2026-07-26 at Corpus Thomisticum (*Chrysostomus enim, super Ioannem, exponens illud quod dicitur Ioan. I, Deum nemo vidit unquam, sic dicit, ipsum quod est Deus, non solum prophetae, sed nec Angeli viderunt nec Archangeli, quod enim creabilis est naturae, qualiter videre poterit quod increabile est?*); English at New Advent.

²⁵Matt 5:8, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

²⁶1 Cor 13:12, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

²⁷1 Jn 3:2, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. The Douay–Rheims renders the Vulgate’s *quoniam* as “because” where most modern versions read “for”; the causal force—likeness because of sight—is what the tradition builds on, and the English Dominican *Summa* translation notes the variant in the text quoted at I, q. 12, a. 5.

²⁸Apoc 22:4, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

²⁹ST I, q. 12, a. 1, corpus; English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum (*sicut sol, qui est maxime visibilis, videri non potest a vespertilione, propter excessum luminis*), both read 2026-07-26.

³⁰ST I, q. 12, a. 1, corpus; emphasis added here to mark the appeal. Latin: *Quod est alienum a fide*. Read 2026-07-26 as above.

³¹ST I, q. 12, a. 1, corpus; Latin *Inest enim homini naturale desiderium cognoscendi causam, cum intuetur effectum; et ex hoc admiratio in hominibus consurgit... remanebit inane desiderium naturae. Unde simpliciter concedendum est quod beati Dei essentiam videant*. Read 2026-07-26.

³²The intra-Thomist controversy over the natural desire for the supernatural is beyond this article’s scope and is named, not resolved; see the appendix. What must be preserved either way is the gratuity of the supernatural end, which the First Vatican Council’s *Dei Filius* ch. 2 protects by grounding it in God’s *infinita bonitas* rather than in any exigency of the creature. That locus is not independently verified for this article and is cited only as a boundary marker.

³³ST I, q. 12, a. 1, reply to objection 1, read 2026-07-26; he adds that Chrysostom himself, immediately after the sentence quoted, says he is speaking “of the most certain vision of the Father, which is such a perfect consideration and comprehension as the Father has of the Son.” Whether that reading does justice to Chrysostom’s intention is a real question and is taken up in the section on the Eastern answer.

³⁴ST I, q. 12, a. 2, corpus, read 2026-07-26 in English at New Advent and in Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The scholastic term is *species*, a likeness by which a thing is known; the article’s phrase “created likeness” renders it.

³⁵ST I, q. 12, a. 2, corpus; Latin *Unde dicere Deum per similitudinem videri, est dicere divinam essentiam non videri, quod est erroneum*. Read 2026-07-26.

³⁶ST I, q. 12, a. 3, corpus, read 2026-07-26.

³⁷ST I, q. 12, a. 3, reply to objection 1, read 2026-07-26. The Douay–Rheims text of Job 19:26 in the tracked Challoner electronic edition reads “And I shall be clothed again with my skin, and in my flesh I shall see my God”; the 1899 American edition reads “I will see my God,” one of the 1859 verses where the two Douay–Rheims states differ, and the divergence is recorded in the tracked collation table registered with the edition. Neither reading affects the point.

³⁸ST I, q. 12, a. 4, corpus, read 2026-07-26. Latin: *Non igitur potest intellectus creatus Deum per essentiam videre, nisi inquantum Deus per suam gratiam se intellectui creato coniungit, ut intelligibile ab ipso*.

³⁹ST I, q. 12, a. 5, corpus, read 2026-07-26 in English at New Advent; the ellipsis before “we shall see Him” stands where the translators insert the bracketed note that the Vulgate reads “because” rather than “and.” Latin at Corpus Thomisticum: *oportet quod aliqua dispositio supernaturalis ei superaddatur, ad hoc quod elevetur in tantam sublimitatem... Et secundum hoc lumen efficiuntur deiformes, idest Deo similes*. The Scripture cited in the article for the light itself is Apoc 21:23, “The glory of God hath enlightened it”—glossed by Aquinas as the society of the blessed who see God.

⁴⁰ST I, q. 12, a. 5, reply to objection 1, read 2026-07-26.

⁴¹ST I, q. 12, a. 5, reply to objection 2, read 2026-07-26; emphasis added. The scholastic terminology is *medium in quo* (a medium in which, an object seen instead of or alongside) versus *medium quo* (a medium by which, a disposition of the seer). The distinction is the hinge on which the compatibility of the Thomistic account with the 1336 definition turns, and it is also the precise point at which the Eastern tradition declines to follow—for reasons that are not a failure to understand the distinction, as the next section shows.

⁴²ST I, q. 12, a. 5, reply to objection 3, read 2026-07-26.

⁴³Council of Vienne, session III, 6 May 1312, constitution *Ad nostrum qui*, fifth listed error, DS 895 (older numbering 475): *Quod quaelibet intellectualis natura in se ipsa naturaliter est beata, quodque anima non indiget lumine gloriae, ipsam elevante ad Deum videndum et eo beate fruendum*. The censure attached to the list (DS 899) is: *Nos sacro approbante Concilio sectam ipsam cum praemissis erroribus damnamus et reprobamus omnino*. Latin read 2026-07-26 at the registered patristica.net presentation; English gloss labelled. The error condemned is a compound proposition, and the condemnation of a listed error of a named sect is not equivalent to a positive definition of the Thomistic account of the *lumen gloriae*; what it does establish is that the denial of any need for an elevating light, coupled with the claim of natural beatitude, is not an open option.

⁴⁴ST I, q. 12, a. 7, corpus, read 2026-07-26. Latin: *comprehendere Deum impossibile est cuicumque intellectui creato, attingere vero mente Deum qualitercumque, magna est beatitudo, ut dicit Augustinus*. The Augustinian source is the sermon literature; Aquinas cites him without a locus at this point and the article has not independently checked the Augustinian text, which is recorded as a limit.

⁴⁵ST I, q. 12, a. 7, corpus, read 2026-07-26; Latin *Cum igitur lumen gloriae creatum, in quocumque intellectu creato receptum, non possit esse infinitum, impossibile est quod aliquis intellectus creatus Deum infinite cognoscat. Unde impossibile est quod Deum comprehendat*.

⁴⁶ST I, q. 12, a. 8, corpus, read 2026-07-26.

⁴⁷The dating of the *Triads* to 1338–1341 is from John Meyendorff’s introduction to the edition used here (*Gregory Palamas: The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff, trans. Nicholas Gendle, Classics of Western Spirituality, New York: Paulist Press, 1983), read 2026-07-26. That edition is a copyrighted selection and translation; it was read in an optical-character transcription of a scanned copy hosted at the Internet Archive, and short clauses are quoted here with full attribution. The Greek was not consulted, no printed copy was collated, and the transcription’s uncorrected scanning errors are visible elsewhere in the file; this is the article’s stated verification ceiling for every Palamas quotation below, and it is a real limitation, not a formality.

⁴⁸Basil of Caesarea, Letter 234.1, trans. Blomfield Jackson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 8 (1895), public domain; read 2026-07-26 at New Advent. Jackson renders *energeiai* as “operations”; the same Greek word is what later translations of Palamas render “energies,” and the difference in English is a translator’s choice, not a difference in the term. Basil adds at 234.2: “knowledge of the divine essence involves perception of His incomprehensibility, and the object of our worship is not that of which we comprehend the essence, but of which we comprehend that the essence exists.”

⁴⁹Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. William Moore, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 5 (1893), public domain; read 2026-07-26 at New Advent. The passage continues: “The fountain of blessings wells up unceasingly, and the partaker’s nature, finding nothing superfluous and without a use in that which it receives, makes the whole influx an enlargement of its own proportions.” The doctrine of endless progress in the good is conventionally called *epektasis* after Phil 3:13; the term is not Gregory’s own in this text and is used here as a label.

⁵⁰Gregory Palamas, *Triads* III.i.29, Gendle translation, read 2026-07-26 in the transcription described above. “Enhypostatic” renders a technical term meaning subsisting in a hypostasis rather than as a self-standing thing; Palamas uses it to insist that the deifying light is not an independent divinity nor a mere accident.

⁵¹*Triads* III.i.33, Gendle translation, read 2026-07-26.

⁵²*Triads* III.i.34, Gendle translation, read 2026-07-26.

⁵³*Triads* III.ii.5, Gendle translation, read 2026-07-26.

⁵⁴*Triads* III.ii.9, Gendle translation, read 2026-07-26. The clause “He is entirely manifest in every energy” is doing heavy work: the energies are not portions of God, and a creature that receives one receives God entire under that aspect.

⁵⁵*Triads* III.ii.8, Gendle translation, read 2026-07-26; the inner quotation is Palamas’s citation of Maximus the Confessor, not independently checked here. Compare III.ii.10: “the divine essence that transcends all names, also surpasses energy, to the extent that the subject of an action surpasses its object.”

⁵⁶*Triads* III.iii.9, Gendle translation, read 2026-07-26; Palamas attributes the last claim to John of Damascus and to Dionysius and Maximus. The passage is the clearest statement in the material read for this article that the Palamite account is eschatological and not merely mystical: the object of the vision in glory is the uncreated light, that is, the energy—not the *ousia*.

⁵⁷This paragraph reports the reception history from Meyendorff’s introduction to the edition cited above, read 2026-07-26. The acts of the councils of 1341, 1347, and 1351, the Hagioritic Tome, and the Synodal Tome of 1351 were *not* reached in any edition for this article; the article therefore reports their existence and their outcome on the authority of a named twentieth-century scholarly introduction and makes no claim about their wording, their canons, or their anathemas. That is a substantial gap and is recorded as such in the appendix and in the source audit.

⁵⁸Meyendorff, introduction to *The Triads*, read 2026-07-26 in the transcription described above. The observation that the loser of the Byzantine controversy held something structurally similar to the winner of the Latin one is the article’s own, and is offered as an observation, not as an identification of the two positions.

⁵⁹Second Vatican Council, decree *Unitatis redintegratio* (21 November 1964), n. 17, official English text at vatican.va, read 2026-07-26: “In such cases, these various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting.” The qualification “often” is in the text and is not this article’s insertion. The paragraph concerns the lawful variety of theological expression in the Church, not the suspension of defined doctrine, and the counterargument’s use of it here is deliberately the reading least favourable to this article’s claim.

⁶⁰Fourth Lateran Council, *Firmiter credimus*, DS 801: *qui omnes cum suis propriis resurgent corporibus, quae nunc gestant*. Latin read 2026-07-26 at the registered patristica.net presentation of the Latin *Enchiridion symbolorum*. The Catechism quotes the same clause at CCC 999.

⁶¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1000, official Vatican English web text, read 2026-07-26. CCC 999 quotes Lateran IV and 1 Cor 15; CCC 1001 places the resurrection “at the last day,” “at the end of the world.”

⁶²1 Cor 15:35, tracked verse text of the Douay–Rheims, read 2026-07-26; the whole passage 15:35–44 was read in the tracked artifact.

⁶³1 Cor 15:36–38, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

⁶⁴1 Cor 15:42–44, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. The Douay’s “natural body” renders *corpus animale*, the body of the living soul (*anima*); “spiritual body” renders *corpus spiritale*. The contrast is not between matter and spirit—a body wholly de-materialised would not be a body—but between two principles animating the same flesh.

⁶⁵1 Cor 15:50, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

⁶⁶Phil 3:21, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. The Douay’s “reform” renders *reformabit*.

⁶⁷1 Jn 3:2, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. The verse continues: “We know that when he shall appear we shall be like to him: because we shall see him as he is”—likeness is asserted, content is not.

⁶⁸ST I-II, q. 4, a. 5, corpus, English Dominican translation, read 2026-07-26 at New Advent. The authority he cites is 2 Cor 5:6–8.

⁶⁹ST I-II, q. 4, a. 5, reply to objection 5, read 2026-07-26. The Latin technical contrast is *non intensive sed extensive*. The preceding reply (ad 4) puts it in the first person of the soul: “the soul desires to enjoy God in such a way that the enjoyment also may overflow into the body, as far as possible. . . it would still wish the body to attain to its share.”

⁷⁰Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XXII.15–16, trans. Marcus Dods, *The City of God*, vol. II (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), public domain; read 2026-07-26 in the source library’s tracked transcription of the 1871 printing at lines 20263–20313 of the artifact. Augustine’s argument in XXII.15 turns on Eph 4:13, “the measure of the age of the fulness of Christ,” which he takes to speak of age rather than stature; XXII.18 offers the alternative reading, that the “perfect man” is Christ with his whole body the Church.

⁷¹*De civitate Dei* XXII.17, Dods translation, read 2026-07-26 in the tracked transcription (lines 20314–20366). His exegetical argument is that when the Lord answered the Sadducees he denied marriages and not women, and that “They shall not be given in marriage” applies to females and “Neither shall they marry” to males—which he takes as an affirmation that the sexes remain (Matt 22:30; the Douay reads “For in the resurrection they shall neither marry nor be married, but shall be as the angels of God in heaven”).

⁷²*De civitate Dei* XXII.19–21, Dods translation, read 2026-07-26 in the tracked transcription (lines 20418–20617).

⁷³*De civitate Dei* XXII.21, Dods translation, read 2026-07-26 in the tracked transcription (line 20599 region).

⁷⁴*De civitate Dei* XXII.29, Dods translation, read 2026-07-26 in the tracked transcription (lines 21214–21426, the complete chapter). The internal quotation is Wisdom 9:14. The chapter’s own heading in the Dods edition is “Of the beatific vision.” Augustine’s tentative conclusion is that “it may very well be, and it is thoroughly credible, that we shall in the future world see the material forms of the new heavens and the new earth in such a way that we shall most distinctly recognise God everywhere present.”

⁷⁵ST I, q. 12, a. 3, reply to objection 2, read 2026-07-26. Aquinas goes on to quote Augustine’s own conditional phrasing back at the objector and to conclude that the glorified eyes will see God as our eyes now see the life of another—that is, indirectly, the divine presence being known by the intellect immediately upon the sight of bodily things.

⁷⁶*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, art. “Summa Theologiae” (vol. 14, New York 1912), read 2026-07-26 at New Advent: “The work has been completed by the addition of a supplement, drawn from other writings of St. Thomas, attributed by some to Peter of Auvergne, by others to Henry of Gorkum. These attributions are rejected by the editors of the Leonine edition. . . Mandonnet. . . inclines to the very probable opinion that it was compiled by Father Reginald de Piperno.” The composition dates for the parts Thomas did write are given in the same article. This matters for weighing the material: the Supplement is authentic Thomas in substance but early Thomas, transposed by another hand, and it is not the mature judgment of the *Summa* proper.

⁷⁷ST Supplement, q. 85, a. 1, corpus, English Dominican translation, read 2026-07-26 at New Advent, citing 1 Cor 15:41. The article explicitly rejects the alternative explanation, then current, that the brightness comes from a heavenly fifth essence predominating in the body.

⁷⁸ST Supplement, qq. 83–84, article headings read 2026-07-26 at New Advent.

⁷⁹ST Supplement, q. 84, a. 3, corpus, read 2026-07-26 at New Advent. The article rejects two named positions before giving its own, and the argument is a *reductio* on the continuity of local motion.

⁸⁰ST Supplement, q. 96, article headings read 2026-07-26 at New Advent; a. 1 distinguishes the *aurea*, the essential reward that “consists in the perfect union of the soul with God,” from the *aureola*, an accidental reward. The distinction between essential and accidental reward is standard and is not itself in question here; the enumeration and ranking of aureoles is a school elaboration with no definitional standing.

⁸¹CCC 1025, official Vatican English web text, read 2026-07-26, citing Phil 1:23 and Apoc 2:17. The promise of the new name given to the conqueror, “which no man knoweth, but he that receiveth it,” is the Apocalypse’s own way of saying that identity in glory is more particular, not less.

⁸²Matt 8:11, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26: “many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” The parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) shows the dead recognising and addressing one another, but it is a parable and its topography is the parable’s; nothing in the passage is offered by the Church as a description of the state of the blessed.

⁸³Council of Florence, *Laetentur caeli*, 6 July 1439, DS 1305; Latin read 2026-07-26 at the registered patristica.net presentation of the Latin *Enchiridion symbolorum*. The English is this article’s labelled working gloss.

⁸⁴Council of Trent, session VI (13 January 1547), canon 32, DS 1582 (older numbering 842): . . . *non vere mereri augmentum gratiae, vitam aeternam et ipsius vitae aeternae (si tamen in gratia decesserit) consecutionem, atque etiam gloriae augmentum: an. s.* Latin read 2026-07-26 at the registered presentation; English gloss labelled. The canon’s structure should be noticed: it

condemns the denial that the works are *both* God's gifts *and* the justified person's merits. The doctrine is not that some earn what others are given.

⁸⁵Second Vatican Council, dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* (21 November 1964), n. 49, official English text at vatican.va, read 2026-07-26. The same paragraph quotes the Florence definition—the blessed are “in glory beholding ‘clearly God Himself triune and one, as He is’”—and cites *Benedictus Deus* at n. 49 as well.

⁸⁶1 Cor 15:41–42, tracked verse text of the Douay–Rheims, read 2026-07-26.

⁸⁷ST I, q. 12, a. 6, *sed contra*, read 2026-07-26 at New Advent: “Eternal life consists in the vision of God, according to John 17:3. . . . Therefore if all saw the essence of God equally in eternal life, all would be equal; the contrary to which is declared by the Apostle: ‘Star differs from star in glory’ (1 Corinthians 15:41).” The many-mansions verse (Jn 14:2) has been read as teaching diverse degrees since antiquity, but the sense of *mansiones* there is genuinely disputed—dwelling-places, or stages, or simply room enough—and this article does not rest the claim on it.

⁸⁸ST I, q. 12, a. 6, reply to objection 3, read 2026-07-26.

⁸⁹ST I, q. 12, a. 6, objection 3, read 2026-07-26. The reply concedes the principle and locates the difference in “the glorified faculty” rather than the natural one.

⁹⁰ST I, q. 12, a. 6, corpus, read 2026-07-26 at New Advent; Latin at Corpus Thomisticum: *Unde intellectus plus participans de lumine gloriae, perfectius Deum videbit. Plus autem participabit de lumine gloriae, qui plus habet de caritate, quia ubi est maior caritas, ibi est maius desiderium; et desiderium quodammodo facit desiderantem aptum et paratum ad susceptionem desiderati.*

⁹¹Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XXII.30, trans. Marcus Dods (1871), public domain; read 2026-07-26 in the source library's tracked transcription of the 1871 printing at the registered passage for XXII.30. Note that Augustine begins with “who can conceive, not to say describe” and only then says the degrees cannot be doubted: the fact is asserted, the content disclaimed, in a single breath.

⁹²Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, NPNF 2nd series, vol. 5 (Moore), public domain, read 2026-07-26 at New Advent; quoted more fully in the section on the Eastern answer above.

⁹³ST Supplement, q. 96, aa. 1, 5–7, 12, headings and a. 1 corpus read 2026-07-26 at New Advent; see the section on the risen body above for the provenance of the Supplement.

⁹⁴Apoc 7:9, tracked verse text of the Douay–Rheims, read 2026-07-26; the vision continues to 7:17, where the Lamb leads them to the fountains of the waters of life.

⁹⁵Apoc 21:2, 9–10, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. The angel says “Come and I will shew thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb,” and then shews him a city.

⁹⁶Matt 8:11, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

⁹⁷Heb 12:22–23, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. The rhetorical force is that the addressees have *already* come to this assembly; the communion is not postponed.

⁹⁸*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1024, official Vatican English web text, read 2026-07-26. The Catechism's delivery renders the em-dashes as spaced hyphens; the dashes are restored here and nothing else is changed.

⁹⁹CCC 1026, official Vatican English web text, read 2026-07-26.

¹⁰⁰CCC 1045, official Vatican English web text, read 2026-07-26. The paragraph also describes the consummation as “the final realization of the unity of the human race, which God willed from creation.”

¹⁰¹Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* n. 49, official English text at vatican.va, read 2026-07-26. The same paragraph teaches that the blessed “do not cease to intercede with the Father for us,” and n. 51 immediately adds the boundary: communion with those in heaven, rightly understood, “in no way weakens, but conversely, more thoroughly enriches the laetific worship we give to God the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit.”

¹⁰²CCC 1025, official Vatican English web text, read 2026-07-26.

¹⁰³ST I-II, q. 4, a. 8, corpus, English Dominican translation, read 2026-07-26 at New Advent. He supports it from Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* viii.25: “the spiritual creatures receive no other interior aid to happiness than the eternity, truth, and charity of the Creator. But if they can be said to be helped from without, perhaps it is only by this that they see one another and rejoice in God, at their fellowship.” The Augustinian locus was not independently checked for this article and is reported as Aquinas gives it.

¹⁰⁴ST I-II, q. 4, a. 8, reply to objection 3, read 2026-07-26; emphasis added. The Latin technical term rendered “concomitant” is *concomitans*: accompanying necessarily but not constituting.

¹⁰⁵ST II-II, q. 26, a. 13, corpus, read 2026-07-26 at New Advent. The article distinguishes the order of love by the good willed to another from the order by intensity of the act, and concludes that all other reasons of love are “incomparably surpassed by that which is taken from nighness to God.” This is, so far as the material read for this article goes, the tradition's most exact answer to the question people actually ask about seeing their families again: the bonds are not abolished, and they are re-ordered.

¹⁰⁶*Lumen gentium* nn. 49–50, read 2026-07-26; n. 50 traces the practice from “the very first ages of the Christian religion” and n. 51 reaffirms the decrees of Nicaea II, Florence, and Trent on the cult of the saints while urging the correction of abuses.

¹⁰⁷The tracked artifacts are the per-book, one-verse-per-line normalised text files registered under the Challoner Project Gutenberg edition of the Douay–Rheims; the New Testament range is the twenty-seven files numbered 47 through 73. This edition preserves the Vulgate chapter-and-verse numbering, which differs from a modern Bible’s at several places relevant here—most importantly 1 Thess 4, where the “caught up in the clouds” verse is numbered 16 rather than 17. The edition also differs from the 1899 American edition in 1859 verses, collated in a table registered with it; none of the divergences affects any claim in this section.

¹⁰⁸Apoc 21:1–4, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

¹⁰⁹Apoc 21:12–21, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

¹¹⁰Apoc 21:22, 23, 25; 22:3, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. The Douay of 21:23 continues: “For the glory of God hath enlightened it: and the Lamb is the lamp thereof”—the verse Aquinas cites for the light of glory at ST I, q. 12, a. 5.

¹¹¹Apoc 22:1–2, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. The 1899 American edition reads the last clause slightly differently (“and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations”), one of the collated divergences.

¹¹²Apoc 22:4, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

¹¹³Apoc 7:9, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

¹¹⁴2 Tim 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4; Apoc 2:10; tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

¹¹⁵Matt 13:43; Dan 12:3; tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

¹¹⁶2 Pet 3:13; Is 65:17; tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

¹¹⁷Apoc 5:8; 14:2; 15:2; tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. The literal search for the string “harp” over the tracked Apocalypse artifact was run with the source library’s search tool on 2026-07-26; it returns these three plus a set of false positives from the substring in “sharp,” which is a fair illustration of what a literal line search can and cannot do.

¹¹⁸Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34; Apoc 4:8; 9:9; 12:14; searched and read 2026-07-26 over the tracked per-verse artifacts for the twenty-seven New Testament books. The result is bounded as stated in the method note above: it is the absence of an English word in one edition’s New Testament, not a demonstration that no scriptural text anywhere assigns wings to the blessed. The winged human figure is an artistic convention of considerable antiquity and no scriptural warrant that this search located; its history is outside this article’s scope.

¹¹⁹Apoc 11:12; 1 Thess 4:16 in the Vulgate numbering of this edition (4:17 in most modern Bibles); tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. Acts 1:9, Matt 17:5, and Matt 24:30 are the theophanic uses referred to. The clause that matters in the Thessalonians text is the last one: the destination is not the cloud but “always with the Lord.”

¹²⁰Apoc 21:12, 14, 25; Matt 16:19; tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26.

¹²¹Matt 22:30; Luke 20:36; tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26; emphasis added. Augustine makes the point that the comparison is limited: “They shall be equal to the angels in immortality and happiness, not in flesh, nor in resurrection, which the angels did not need, because they could not die” (*De civitate Dei* XXII.17, Dods translation, read in the tracked transcription 2026-07-26).

¹²²Searched 2026-07-26 over the tracked per-verse artifacts; the seven matches are all substrings of proper nouns (Mahalon, Chelion’s neighbours in Ruth, Hethalon in Ezechiel, and the like). The nimbus is an iconographic convention, and a good one; it is not a report.

¹²³CCC 1027, official Vatican English web text, read 2026-07-26. The paragraph closes by quoting 1 Cor 2:9.

¹²⁴*De civitate Dei* XXII.29, Dods translation, read 2026-07-26 in the tracked transcription.

¹²⁵ST I, q. 12, a. 3, reply to objection 3, read 2026-07-26.

¹²⁶2 Cor 12:2–4, tracked verse text, read 2026-07-26. Compare 1 Cor 2:9: “That eye hath not seen, nor ear heard: neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him,” itself a citation of Is 64:4.

¹²⁷1 Jn 3:2, tracked verse text of the Douay–Rheims, read 2026-07-26. The Douay renders the Vulgate’s *quoniam* as “because,” making the causal order explicit: likeness follows from vision, not the reverse. The verse is quoted in the definition of Florence (*sicuti est*), in ST I, q. 12, a. 5 for the “deiform” blessed, and in CCC 1023 for the state of the saints; it is the single verse on which most of the doctrinal apparatus of this article converges.

¹²⁸Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XXII.29, Dods translation (1871), public domain; read 2026-07-26 in the source library’s tracked transcription of the 1871 printing. The sentence is his gloss on Ps 115:10 (Vulgate numbering), “I have believed, therefore have I spoken,” which he quotes immediately before it.

A Scope, Method, and Qualifications

A.1 Reader, question, and method

This is a discursive theological article for a serious general reader, able to follow careful distinctions but not presumed to know scholastic terminology. It is the fourth and closing volume of a four-part series on the last things; each volume is a complete study of its own subject, and this one neither summarises nor depends on the other three. Where its subject touches theirs—the particular judgment presupposed by *Benedictus Deus*, the purification the same constitution presupposes, the possibility of definitive refusal—it states only what its own sources establish and refers to the companion volumes by their subjects.

The governing question is what may be said about heaven on evidence that can be produced, and its claim is twofold. First: what the Catholic Church has defined is a promise of an immediate, unmediated, personal seeing of God himself, given to creatures who cannot achieve it, differing in degree with charity, entailing the resurrection of the very bodies we now bear, and enjoyed in company—and this defined core is both smaller and more extreme than the picture that has grown over it. Second: the great majority of what an ordinary Catholic believes about heaven is theological speculation, and a substantial part of that was flagged as conjecture by the authors who produced it and un-flagged by their readers. The second claim is project synthesis and is stated with its counterargument in the synopsis; the first is a report of the definitions and their limits.

The method is one discipline applied at every consequential claim: name the register. Defined doctrine, condemned error, catechetical or conciliar teaching, Scripture, patristic witness, school theology of either tradition, reported reception, and original synthesis are labelled where they occur and again in the synopsis. Weight is not inferred from eloquence, antiquity, or frequency of repetition. Where a claim rests on a witness the article could not reach at its own locus, the ceiling is stated in the note and in the source audit rather than smoothed over.

The body proceeds in the order the evidence has rather than in a topical inventory: the definitions first, because they are the fixed points; then the question the definitions raise and do not answer, worked in the *Summa* at the text; then the Eastern alternative in its own authors, placed before the remaining topics because it is a rival account of the same central act and not an appendix to it; then the body, the degrees, and the company, which are the three places where confident detail and actual warrant diverge most sharply; then an audit of the popular picture against bounded searches of the tracked Scripture text; then the close.

Source class	Function in the article	Governing boundary
Defining acts	<i>Benedictus Deus</i> (1336) supplies the central definition, read at its Latin phrase by phrase; Florence’s <i>Laetentur caeli</i> (1439) adds <i>sicuti est</i> and the degrees; Lateran IV’s <i>Firmiter</i> (1215) the resurrection clause; Trent session VI canon 32 the increase of glory; Vienne’s <i>Ad nostrum qui</i> (1312) the condemned denial of the light of glory.	Quoted in Latin from the received text of a standard collection in a dated web presentation that does not identify the printing it transcribes; that is the stated verification ceiling. English renderings are labelled working glosses except where the Catechism’s official English is quoted. Dogmatic force is confined to what the texts state.
Catechetical and conciliar teaching	CCC 1000, 1023–1029, 1045, 1048 on heaven, the vision, communion, and the limits of knowledge; <i>Lumen gentium</i> 49–51 on the communion of saints; <i>Unitatis redintegratio</i> 17 on Eastern and Western theological expression.	Cited at its own authority, which is authoritative and not definitive; brief excerpts of copyrighted official texts, quoted with attribution. Catechetical language is not treated as technical definition.

Source class	Function in the article	Governing boundary
Scripture	The texts denying vision (Ex 33:20; Jn 1:18; 1 Tim 6:16) and promising it (Matt 5:8; 1 Cor 13:12; 1 Jn 3:2; Apoc 22:4); the resurrection chapter (1 Cor 15); the Apocalypse’s final vision; and the bounded searches behind the audit of the popular picture.	Quoted from the public-domain Douay–Rheims (Challoner) in the source library’s tracked per-verse text of the Project Gutenberg electronic edition, at Vulgate numbering, on 2026-07-26. Readings are textual and modest; no independent exegetical apparatus is claimed; negative results are bounded to a literal English search in one edition.
Latin school theology	ST I, q. 12 governs the analysis of the vision, the light of glory, comprehension, and degrees; I-II, q. 4 the body and the fellowship of friends; II-II, q. 26, a. 13 the order of charity in heaven; the Supplement qq. 82–85 and 96 the properties of the glorified body and the aureoles.	Adopted as the article’s principal Western framework where Catholic theology permits schools; not asserted as dogma; each locus used at its exact argumentative level. The Supplement is identified at every use as compiled after Aquinas’s death from his earlier commentary.
Eastern tradition	Basil (Letter 234), Chrysostom (<i>Hom. on John</i> 15), Gregory of Nyssa (<i>On the Soul and the Resurrection</i>), John of Damascus (<i>De fide orth.</i> I.4) in public-domain translations; Gregory Palamas’s <i>Triads</i> in an identified modern translation.	Stated at full strength in its own authors, not as a foil. The Palamas quotations were read in an optical-character transcription of a scanned copy of a copyrighted 1983 translation, without the Greek and without collation; the conciliar acts of 1341, 1347, and 1351 were not reached at all, and their outcome is reported from a named modern introduction.
Reference works	The 1907–1912 <i>Catholic Encyclopedia</i> for the sequence of the 1330s controversy, for Benedict XII’s preparation of the constitution, and for the compilation of the <i>Summa</i> ’s Supplement.	Public-domain historical witnesses of their date, used for chronology and bibliography, never for doctrinal authority. Their judgments of probability (for example on the Supplement’s compiler) are reproduced as probabilities.
Project synthesis	The three-register discipline; the judgment on whether the Latin and Palamite doctrines formally contradict; the judgment on whether the communion of saints is constitutive; the reading of the Apocalypse’s imagery as systematically privative around one positive clause; the estimate of how much of the received picture is speculation; the synopsis table and all final formulations.	Original editorial synthesis argued from the checked sources, attributed to no source, creating no doctrine, and resolving nothing the Church has left open. The two labelled synthesis blocks state their counterargument at full strength and name what finding would change them.

A.2 Included and excluded scope

Included are: the text and construction of *Benedictus Deus* and the controversy that produced it; the additions made at Florence and Lateran IV, with Trent’s canon on the increase of glory and Vienne’s condemned proposition; the scriptural texts that deny and that promise the vision of God; the Thomistic account of the vision, the light of glory, and non-comprehension, read in ST I, q. 12; the Eastern essence-and-energies doctrine in Basil, Nyssa, Chrysostom, the Damascene, and Palamas, with its fourteenth-century reception reported at a stated ceiling; the defined and undefined content of the resurrection of the body, with Augustine’s speculations and disclaimers and the schools’ four gifts; the degrees of beatitude, their measure in charity, and the ways equality and difference are held together; the

communion of saints as related to the beatifying act; and a bounded audit of the popular imagery against the tracked Scripture text.

Excluded are: death, particular judgment, purgatory, the general judgment, and hell, which belong to the companion volumes and are touched here only where a source under examination mentions them; the theology of grace, merit, justification, predestination, and assurance beyond the single canon of Trent cited for the increase of glory; Christology and soteriology, presupposed throughout and nowhere developed; the sacramental economy and the Eucharist as pledge of glory; the intra-Thomist controversy over the natural desire for the supernatural, which is named and not adjudicated; the theology of the angels beyond what the sources quoted say; private revelation, mystical or near-death testimony, and any phenomenology of religious experience; the history and iconography of Christian art, which the audit of the popular picture touches only to say that a convention is a convention; the reception history of *Laetentur caeli* in the East; and any judgment about the state, culpability, degree of glory, or destiny of any person.

A.3 Material qualifications

1. *Beatitudo*, rendered “beatitude” or “happiness,” names the complete and final good of a rational creature, not a mood; the English Dominican *Summa* translation’s “Happiness” carries that sense wherever it is quoted.
2. Every Latin text of a magisterial act quoted here was read in a dated web presentation of a standard collection that does not identify the printed edition it transcribes. No printed edition was collated. This is the article’s verification ceiling for all conciliar and papal wording, and it is a real one: a collation could in principle change a word.
3. The English renderings of Latin acts are the article’s own labelled working glosses, governed by the Latin, except where the Catechism’s official English is quoted as such. They are not approved translations and must not be used as if they were.
4. *Benedictus Deus* defines the state of purified souls before the resurrection. Its use here is confined to what it states; no position is taken on eschatological questions outside it, and the constitution’s final paragraph on those who die in mortal sin is noted and left to the volume that owns it.
5. The exclusion in the definition is of a created *object* of vision. The compatibility of the Thomistic light of glory with that exclusion depends on the scholastic distinction between a medium *in quo* and a medium *quo*; the article states the distinction, shows that Aquinas draws it explicitly, and does not claim that the definition canonises his account.
6. The Council of Vienne’s condemned proposition is a compound. Its condemnation establishes that natural beatitude coupled with the denial of any elevating light is not an open option; it does not define the Thomistic explanation of the light of glory.
7. How much the argument from natural desire (ST I, q. 12, a. 1) proves has been disputed among Thomists for centuries. The article names the dispute, does not adjudicate it, uses the argument only as an explanation of a datum already held on other grounds, and nowhere treats the desire as an exigency binding God.
8. The Palamas material is quoted from Nicholas Gendle’s English translation in the 1983 Paulist Press edition, read in an optical-character transcription of a scanned copy hosted at the Internet Archive. The Greek was not consulted; no printed copy was collated; the transcription contains visible uncorrected scanning errors elsewhere in the file. Quotations are short and attributed. This is the article’s stated ceiling for every Palamas sentence.
9. The acts of the Byzantine councils of 1341, 1347, and 1351, the Hagioritic Tome, and the Synodal Tome were not reached in any edition. Their existence and outcome are reported from a named twentieth-century scholarly introduction, and no claim whatever is made about their wording, canons, or anathemas. This is the largest single gap in the article’s evidence and it bears directly on the synthesis about contradiction, which is accordingly held at low confidence.
10. The judgment that *essentia* and *ousia* are probably not the same concept is a proposal about where to look, not a finding, and is stated with the counterargument at full strength and with the specific finding that would overturn it. It resolves nothing between the Churches and has no ecumenical standing.
11. The judgment that the communion of saints is constitutive of the state but not of the beatifying act is likewise labelled synthesis and is held at moderate confidence. *Lumen gentium* 51’s boundary—that communion with the

saints must not weaken the worship due to God—is stated beside it and is not this article’s qualification but the Council’s.

12. The Supplement to the *Summa theologiae* was assembled after Aquinas’s death from his commentary on the *Sentences*; the compiler’s identity is not settled, and the older reference work cited gives the attribution to Reginald of Piperno as probable, not certain. The material is authentic Thomas in substance and early Thomas in date, transposed by another hand.
13. Augustine’s speculations on the risen body are quoted from the public-domain Dods translation of 1871 in the source library’s tracked transcription of that printing. His two disclaimers are quoted in full because the article’s use of the material depends on them; nothing is attributed to him that he did not say, and the tentativeness of his register is reported as he marked it.
14. The negative results reported in the audit are bounded literal searches for English strings within single verses of one electronic edition of one translation, run on 2026-07-26. They cannot exclude synonyms, paraphrase, inflection, a different translation’s vocabulary, or a sense expressed without the word. “Not found” means exactly that and never “false.”
15. The tracked Douay–Rheims text used here preserves Vulgate chapter-and-verse numbering, which differs from a modern Bible’s at several loci cited, most consequentially at 1 Thess 4:16. It also differs from the 1899 American edition in 1859 verses, collated in a table registered with the edition; where a divergence touches a verse quoted here (Job 19:26, Apoc 22:2) the note says so, and no claim depends on the difference.
16. The estimate that “the great majority” of the received popular picture is speculation is a qualitative judgment, not a measurement. No corpus of devotional literature was sampled and no count was made; the judgment rests on the sorting performed in the body, and a reader who thinks the proportion smaller is entitled to the same evidence.
17. No pastoral, canonical, or liturgical advice is given. Nothing here diagnoses any person’s state or destiny, and nothing here is offered as consolation in the place of a competent pastor.

A.4 Notes, translations, rights, currentness, and review

The numbered Notes carry exact citations, edition and translation identifications, verification dates, search bounds, and the qualifications that would interrupt the argument; no indispensable premise lives only in a note. Scripture is quoted from the public-domain Douay–Rheims (Challoner revision) in the source library’s tracked per-verse text of the Project Gutenberg electronic edition. Aquinas is quoted from the public-domain English Dominican translation, with the Latin of I, q. 12 checked at Corpus Thomisticum; the New Advent presentation inserts spaces before punctuation at hyperlinked words, and quotations here close those spaces and change nothing else. Basil, Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, and John of Damascus are quoted from the public-domain Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers translations; Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* from the public-domain Dods translation of 1871, checked in the source library’s tracked transcription of that printing. Latin conciliar and papal texts are quoted from the received text of the *Enchiridion symbolorum* in a dated public web presentation, with English renderings labelled as working glosses. The Catechism, *Lumen gentium*, and *Unitatis redintegratio* are quoted briefly from the official Vatican web texts with attribution. Gregory Palamas is quoted in short clauses from an identified copyrighted modern translation, with attribution and with the transcription ceiling stated. Official texts and third-party translations remain outside the project’s CC BY 4.0 grant; project-created prose, organisation, and synthesis are project content.

All online witnesses were checked on 2026-07-26; no mutable law or discipline is relied on, and no as-of date governs any conclusion. This revision received internal argumentative, source-consistency, quotation, rights, and production review by the authoring agent. Independent scriptural, patristic, Thomistic, Byzantine, dogmatic, theological, and ecclesiastical review is outstanding; no imprimatur, nihil obstat, or ecclesiastical approval is claimed, and internal checking is not independent review.

B References

Scripture

- Exodus 33:18–23; Job 19:25–27; Psalm 115:10 (Vulgate numbering); Wisdom 9:14 (as quoted by Augustine); Daniel 12:2–3; Matthew 5:8; 8:11; 13:43; 16:19; 22:29–32; 23:37; Luke 13:34; 16:19–31; 20:34–38; John 1:18; 14:2–3; 17:24; Romans 8:18–23; 1 Corinthians 2:9; 13:9–12; 15:35–58; 2 Corinthians 12:2–4; Philippians 3:20–21; Colossians 3:3–4; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17 (Vulgate numbering); 1 Timothy 6:15–16; 2 Timothy 4:8; Hebrews 12:22–24; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; 2 Peter 1:4; 3:13; 1 John 3:1–2; Apocalypse 2:10; 4:8; 5:8; 7:9–17; 9:9; 11:12; 12:14; 14:2–3; 15:2; 21:1–27; 22:1–5. Quoted from the public-domain Douay–Rheims translation (Challoner revision) in the source library’s tracked per-verse text of the Project Gutenberg electronic edition (eBook 1581), read 2026-07-26. Chapter and verse are the edition’s own, which follow the Clementine Vulgate; the edition’s registered divergence table against the 1899 American edition was consulted for every verse quoted.

Defining and magisterial acts

- Fourth Lateran Council (1215), constitution 1, *Firmiter credimus (cum suis propriis resurgent corporibus, quae nunc gestant)*; Denzinger n. 801.
- Council of Vienne, session III (6 May 1312), constitution *Ad nostrum qui*, fifth listed error and the censure (*anima non indiget lumine gloriae*); Denzinger nn. 895, 899.
- John XXII, bull *Ne super his* (3 December 1334) (*in quantum status et condicio compatitur animae separatae*); Denzinger nn. 990–991.
- Benedict XII, apostolic constitution *Benedictus Deus* (29 January 1336) (*visione intuitiva et etiam faciali, nulla mediante creatura in ratione obiecti visi se habente*); Denzinger nn. 1000–1002.
- Council of Florence, bull of union with the Greeks *Laetentur caeli* (6 July 1439) (*intueri clare ipsum Deum trinum et unum, sicuti est, pro meritum tamen diversitate alium alio perfectius*); Denzinger n. 1305.
- Council of Trent, session VI (13 January 1547), decree on justification, canon 32 (*gloriae augmentum*); Denzinger n. 1582.
- All six read 2026-07-26 in the Latin of the *Enchiridion symbolorum* at the patristica.net web presentation of the Latin text with dual numbering, the edition registered in the source library for this witness. The presentation does not identify the printed edition it transcribes; that is the stated verification ceiling. English renderings in the article are labelled working glosses governed by the Latin. The acts themselves are public domain; printed editions of Denzinger retain their own editorial rights.

Catechetical and conciliar teaching

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 992–1004 (the resurrection of the body), 1023–1029 (heaven, the beatific vision, identity, communion), 1042–1050 (the new heaven and the new earth), official Vatican English web text, vatican.va (1023–1029) with the adjacent pages for 992–1004 and 1042–1050, all read 2026-07-26. Brief excerpts of a copyrighted official text, quoted with attribution. The IntraText delivery renders typographic dashes as spaced hyphens and lowercases some sentence-initial words; quotations restore standard punctuation only where the quoted words are unaffected.
- Second Vatican Council, dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* (21 November 1964), nn. 48–51 (the eschatological character of the pilgrim Church and union with the heavenly Church), official English text, vatican.va, read 2026-07-26.
- Second Vatican Council, decree *Unitatis redintegratio* (21 November 1964), n. 17 (Eastern and Western theological expressions “often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting”), official English text, vatican.va, read 2026-07-26.

Patristic and Eastern witnesses

- Basil of Caesarea, Letter 234 (“His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach”); trans. Blomfield Jackson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 8 (1895); public domain; read 2026-07-26 at New Advent.
- John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John*, Homily 15 (on Jn 1:18); trans. Charles Marriott, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 14 (1889); public domain; read 2026-07-26 at New Advent.
- Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (the soul as a vessel that “never stops enlarging”); trans. William Moore, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 5 (1893); public domain; read 2026-07-26 at New Advent.
- John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* I.4 (“all that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility”); trans. S. D. F. Salmond, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 9 (1899); public domain; read 2026-07-26 at New Advent.
- Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei* XXII.15–21 (the risen body, with the disclaimer at XXII.21), XXII.29 (whether the glorified eye sees God; “the authority of Scripture does not definitely pronounce”), XXII.30 (the degrees of honour and the further gift of contentment); trans. Marcus Dods, *The City of God*, vol. II, in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, A New Translation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871); public domain; wording read 2026-07-26 in the source library’s tracked transcription of the 1871 printing (artifact lines 20263–21600).
- Gregory Palamas, *Triads* III.i.29, 33–34; III.ii.5, 8–10; III.iii.9; in *Gregory Palamas: The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff, trans. Nicholas Gendle, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1983); a copyrighted selection and translation, quoted here in short clauses with attribution. Read 2026-07-26 in an optical-character transcription of a scanned copy at the Internet Archive. The Greek was not consulted and no printed copy was collated; the transcription contains visible uncorrected scanning errors elsewhere. Meyendorff’s introduction to the same volume is the article’s sole witness for the reception history of 1341, 1347, and 1351; the conciliar acts themselves were not reached.

Latin school theology

- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 12, aa. 1–8 (whether the created intellect can see God’s essence; not by a created likeness; not by the bodily eye; not by natural power; the *lumen gloriae*; degrees; non-comprehension; not all that God can do); I-II, q. 4, aa. 5–6 and 8 (the body and happiness; the fellowship of friends); II-II, q. 26, a. 13 (the order of charity in heaven). English from the public-domain translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province via New Advent; Latin of I, q. 12 checked in the Corpus Thomisticum online corpus. All loci read 2026-07-26; part, question, article, and division govern over either site’s presentation.

- *Summa theologiae*, Supplement, qq. 82–85 (impassibility, subtlety, agility, clarity of the glorified body) and q. 96 (the aureoles); same translation and site, read 2026-07-26. The Supplement was assembled after Aquinas’s death from his commentary on the *Sentences* and is identified as such at every use.

Reference works

- *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company), art. “Pope John XXII” (vol. 8, 1910), art. “Benedict XII” (vol. 2, 1907), art. “Summa Theologiae” (vol. 14, 1912); public domain; read 2026-07-26 at New Advent (John XXII), New Advent (Benedict XII), and New Advent (Summa Theologiae). Used for chronology, the preparation of the constitution, and the compilation of the Supplement; never for doctrinal authority, and its probability judgments are reproduced as probabilities.

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