

A TRIPTYCH ARTICLE

The Due Return

On Rendering What Cannot Be Repaid

The Creature Before God — Part II

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1 The Question the Psalmist Asked

Part I of this series ended in an unusual place for an argument: not at a proposition but at a posture. A mind that followed the metaphysics to its terminus stood arrested before its own existing—wholly real, genuinely acting, and not for one instant self-possessed—and found that the arrest, read honestly, disclosed a gift. The name this series gave the arrest was *ontological vertigo*; the name it gave the honest reading was *consent*; and the natural terminus of consent, Part I said in its last paragraph, is the reverence the tradition calls adoration.¹

But a posture is not yet a life. Consent, as Part I defined it, is an act of the will agreeing with a truth of the intellect, and such an act can in principle be performed once and be over by breakfast. The creature who performed it still wakes up the next day with a body, a schedule, neighbors, and about seventy years. If the vertigo is the truth—if I am at every instant the lit air and not the lamp—then either that truth makes some standing claim on the shape of my days, or it is the strangest large fact ever to make no difference. The present essay is about the claim. The tradition’s word for its territory is an old and now misleading one, *religion*—misleading because the modern ear hears in it a system of beliefs, whereas the tradition meant by it something closer to a debt being paid: not a creed but a virtue, a settled habit of *rendering*. What exactly is rendered, to whom, why it is owed, and what the rendering can and cannot accomplish, is the matter before us.

The oldest and best statement of the problem is a single line of a psalm, and it is worth setting down before any philosophy, because the whole difficulty is already inside it. The psalmist, delivered from death—“he hath delivered my soul from death: my eyes from tears, my feet from falling”—turns to face his benefactor and asks: “What shall I render to the Lord, for all the things he hath rendered unto me?”² In Latin the question turns on one verb used twice: *quid retribuam Domino pro omnibus quae retribuit mihi*? He has rendered to me; what shall I render back? It is ledger language, the vocabulary of debts and settlements, and that is precisely what makes the question strange. A ledger assumes two parties who can each put something on the table. Part I closed by demolishing that assumption for this case. The relation between creature and Creator has no return current: my existing adds nothing to what sustains my existing; the sustaining source cannot be enriched, inconvenienced, repaid, or affected. Asking what the song shall pay the singer is not a hard question but a malformed one—or so it appears.

Two exits from the difficulty offer themselves at once, and both are cheap. The first says: since nothing can be paid, nothing is owed. Gifts this total are beyond obligation; the very grandeur of the metaphysics dissolves the debt; gratitude may be a pleasant feeling but cannot be a requirement, and the creature, having consented once, is excused from further ceremony. The second says: something is owed and can never be paid, and therefore the creature lives in permanent, hopeless default—religion as the servicing of an infinite arrears, joyless by definition, the vertigo institutionalized into scruple. One exit abolishes the debt to save the creature; the other keeps the debt and crushes him.

The psalmist takes neither. His next line is not a payment at all. Asked—by himself—what he will render for all that has been given, he answers by reaching for *more gift*: “I will take the chalice of salvation; and I will call upon the name of the Lord.” Then vows, praise, and a public act: “I will pay my vows to the Lord before all his people.”³ Taking as rendering; reception as payment; a debt somehow discharged—no, not discharged, *answered*—by accepting still more from the creditor. Either this is pious incoherence, or the psalmist understands something about this particular debt that the ledger picture misses. The argument of this essay is that he understands it exactly; that the scholastic analysis of justice, gratitude, and the virtue of religion is in effect a long commentary on his move; and that seeing why he is right requires starting where he starts: with the honest admission that the books cannot be balanced, and the discovery that this, far from voiding the debt, is the most important fact about it.

2 A Debt Unlike the Others

Justice, in the tradition’s compact definition, is “a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by a constant and perpetual will.”⁴ Every word is load-bearing. A *habit*: not a mood or an occasion but a standing disposition. *To each one*: justice looks outward, at another; no one owes himself in the strict sense. *His due*: something already belonging to the other in advance of my generosity—justice pays, it does not donate. And underneath the definition sits its measuring rod: equality. The just act restores a balance; what is rendered matches what was owed; when the payment is made, the parties stand square, and the transaction, as a transaction, is over. That is the beauty of justice among equals, and also its limit. It is a virtue for closing accounts.

Aquinas is therefore exact—more exact than his admirers sometimes notice—about where the creature’s debt to God fits in this scheme: not inside strict justice at all. When he catalogs the virtues that cluster around justice, he distinguishes those that fall short of it in one of two ways: some cannot render what is *due*, others cannot render the *equal*. And the first case he names is this one. “Whatever man renders to God is due, yet it cannot be equal, as though man rendered to God as much as he owes Him”—and at exactly this joint in the argument, as though the analysis had been drafted with the psalm open on the desk, he cites the psalmist’s question: *quid retribuam Domino pro omnibus quae retribuit mihi?*⁵ On this ground *religion* is annexed to justice: a satellite virtue, sharing justice’s outward direction and its language of debt, permanently barred from justice’s completion. The placement is not a demotion. It is a diagnosis. The creature’s situation before God has the *form* of debt and lacks, in principle, the possibility of settlement.

There is a homelier case of the same structure, and Aquinas puts it immediately next to religion: parents. What a child owes its mother and father cannot be repaid either—not because the sum is large but because of what was given: “to be and to live,” as the Philosopher says; you cannot give that back, and you cannot give its equivalent, because every asset you might offer is downstream of the gift itself.⁶ Everyone who has been someone’s child knows this debt from the inside, knows it is real, and knows no one sane experiences it as foreclosure. It is the nearest natural analogue to the creature’s position; Part I used it, and noted the difference: the infant’s dependence has a return current—the mother is reorganized around the child—while the creature’s has none. The debt to God is the debt to parents with the last trace of mutuality removed: reception all the way down, and no way even to inconvenience the giver.

What kind of debt survives under those conditions? Aquinas answers by ranking the sources of indebtedness in his question on gratitude: the cause of debt “is found primarily and chiefly in God, in that He is the first principle of all our goods: secondarily it is found in our father, because he is the proximate principle of our begetting and upbringing”; then persons in dignity; then ordinary benefactors.⁷ And in the same question he notices the property that separates all such debts from commercial ones. A loan shrinks as you repay it; the payments approach a terminus; at zero, the relation created by the debt ends. The debt of gratitude runs the other way. A grateful return, to be grateful at all, must be freely given beyond what was received—“he does not seem to bestow something gratis, unless he exceeds the quantity of the favor received”—so that gratitude “always inclines, as far as possible, to pay back something more”; and since the benefactor’s answering generosity then exceeds in its turn, the exchange, far from converging on zero, is open-ended by design. Aquinas states the conclusion without flinching: the debt of gratitude flows from charity, “which the more it is paid the more it is due”; and therefore “it is not unreasonable if the obligation of gratitude has no limit.”⁸ A debt that grows by being paid is not a badly designed loan. It is a different kind of thing wearing the ledger’s vocabulary: a relation that the language of debt can point at but cannot close. The two cheap exits of the first section both assumed that a debt must be the closable kind—the first voided it because it could not close, the second despaired for the same reason. The tradition’s answer to both is that the impossibility of settlement is not the debt’s defect but its species. What is owed here is not a sum but an acknowledgment; not equality of things, which is impossible, but equality of wills, which is not.

And this analysis, before it grounds anything else, explains a diagnosis. When Paul, in the opening of Romans, describes the ancient world’s religious catastrophe, he does not describe atheism. The nations *knew* God, he says—knowledge of the invisible through the visible, the ascent Part I traced—and what failed was not the intellect but the rendering: “when they knew God, they have not glorified him as God, or given thanks; but became vain in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened.” The rest of the passage follows the withheld acknowledgment downhill into idolatry: they “worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”⁹ Notice the sequence: not ignorance producing ingratitude, but ingratitude producing, in the end, a kind of ignorance. And notice what idolatry offers that the true relation refuses: a god of manageable scale, a god who can be fed, carried, bargained with, repaid—a god, in short, with whom the books *can* be balanced. Part I named the interior movement that reads total dependence as threat and pulls away: recoil. Here is recoil’s liturgical form. It does not usually look like the refusal of all worship. It looks like worship redirected toward something that will accept payment in full—because a debt that can be settled is a relation that can be ended, and what recoil wants, at bottom, is to get out of the relation. The psalmist’s question, asked honestly, is the refusal of that refusal. It stands at the head of the creature’s authentic religion: the acknowledgment that everything is owed, that nothing equal can be rendered, and that the debtor will nevertheless now do something.

3 The Virtue Annexed to Justice

The virtue that pays the unpayable debt has carried the name *religio* since Roman times, and the ancients already disagreed about where the word came from. Cicero derived it from *relegere*, to read over again—the religious man ponders repeatedly what concerns the worship of God. Augustine liked *reeligere*, to choose again what negligence had lost, and elsewhere *religare*, to bind: “May religion bind us to the one Almighty God.” Aquinas, reviewing the candidates, declines to arbitrate, because all three etymologies land in the same place: however the word was built, “it denotes properly a relation to God. For it is He to Whom we ought to be bound as to our unfailing principle; to Whom also our choice should be resolutely directed as to our last end.”¹⁰ Re-reading, re-choosing, re-binding: each is a *return*—the trace, inside a Latin noun, of the psalmist’s *retribuam*.

That religion is a virtue at all follows from the analysis of the previous section in one step. A virtue is a habit that makes its possessor good and his work good; and “to render anyone his due has the aspect of good, since by rendering a person his due, one becomes suitably proportioned to him, through being ordered to him in a becoming manner.”¹¹ Note where the goodness lands: not on the creditor, who in this case can receive nothing, but on the debtor, who in rendering becomes *rightly ordered*—proportioned to what is actually the case. And that religion is a *special* virtue, distinct from generic justice and from every reverence paid to creatures, follows from the uniqueness of its term: honor is due wherever there is excellence, and “to God a singular excellence is competent, since He infinitely surpasses all things and exceeds them in every way. Wherefore to Him is special honor due.”¹² One excellence without peer; therefore one honor without analogue; therefore a virtue with, so to speak, God’s name on it—the only moral virtue defined entirely by *whom* it faces.

Then comes the placement that surprises everyone on first meeting, and it is the structural heart of this essay. Religion is *not* a theological virtue. Faith, hope, and charity have God himself as their object—by them the soul reaches out to God, believes him, hopes in him, loves him. Religion does not touch God. Its matter is creatures: words, gestures, hours, vows, animals once, bread and wine, the body’s positions—acts and things *offered* to God but never arriving in him the way faith’s assent arrives. “God is related to religion not as matter or object, but as end: and consequently religion is not a theological virtue whose object is the last end, but a moral virtue which is properly about things referred to the end.”¹³ A moral virtue: acquired the way virtues are acquired, exercised in ordinary matter, seated in the will, ranked—first, indeed, but ranked—among the cardinal virtues’ companions, below the three that touch God.

The placement does two kinds of work, and both matter for a creature trying to live Part I’s conclusion. First, it makes worship *sober*. If adoration belonged to the theological order, one might suspect it of being an effusion—something performed out of the warmth of faith when the warmth is flowing, and honestly omitted when it is not. Annexed to justice, it is instead a matter of what is *owed*: due on the days one feels the vertigo and on the days one feels nothing, the way a debt is owed in every mood. The tradition, asked whether worship is really a species of enthusiasm, answers: no—of debt. Second, and oppositely, the placement keeps worship *humble* in the technical sense. A moral virtue about “things referred to the end” cannot pretend that its performances reach, please, improve, or affect God. Religion’s acts are arrows shot toward a target they cannot wound or even touch; their whole reality as acts terminates inside creation—in changed words, changed hours, a changed worshipper. Both errors about worship die together here: the error that treats it as optional sentiment, and the error that treats it as effective magic. It is neither. It is justice, doing the one thing justice can do when equality is impossible: rendering the acknowledgment that is due, with a constant and perpetual will.

One more feature of the architecture, easy to miss and impossible to overstate. Religion has, Aquinas says, two ranges of acts. Some it *elicits*—produces directly as its own: adoration, sacrifice, prayer, the acts whose immediate sense is Godward. But others it *commands*: acts produced by other virtues and bent by religion toward the honor of God. His example is deliberate: “to visit the fatherless and widows in their tribulation is an act of religion as commanding, and an act of mercy as eliciting.”¹⁴ The scriptural sentence behind the example—religion clean and undefiled is to visit the fatherless and widows—has been quoted in every century against ritualism, as if it abolished the altar in favor of the soup kitchen. Aquinas reads it more carefully: mercy performs the visit, religion refers the visit to God, and the same concrete afternoon is both. The debt owed to the source of all good is not paid only in a sanctuary. It annexes the whole moral life, the way a spring pressurizes every pipe in the house. What remains to be seen is what the elicited acts—the Godward ones proper—actually are, and why a creature made of body as well as mind cannot pay its acknowledgment in thought alone.

4 What the Body Knows

The first of religion's own acts is invisible, and Aquinas gives it a name that has narrowed sadly in modern mouths: *devotion*. The word now suggests a temperature—warmth of feeling, a candle's worth of sentiment. Its root is *devovere*, to vow away, and Aquinas's definition keeps the root's edge: devotion is “the will to give oneself readily to things concerning the service of God.”¹⁵ A *will*, not a feeling; and its differentia is not intensity but *promptness*—*prompte*, readily, without the interior dragging of feet. Devotion is what consent (Part I's word) becomes when it stops being a single act and becomes a disposition: the will's standing readiness to be handed over. Everything else religion does is this readiness taking shape in matter.

Its first shape is speech. And here the analysis meets the oldest objection to petitionary prayer, which Aquinas states as well as any contemporary: God knows the need before the asking; God's disposition does not change; therefore prayer informs no one and alters nothing; therefore it is empty. The objection assumes—note the family resemblance to recoil's mistake in Part I—that prayer, to be real, would have to act *on God*: push the divine will as one billiard ball pushes another, and since it cannot, it must be theater. Aquinas's answer relocates the whole transaction inside the created order: “we pray not that we may change the Divine disposition, but that we may impetrate that which God has disposed to be fulfilled by our prayers.”¹⁶ Providence disposes not only what will be given but *through what* it will be given, and among the throughs are asking wills. Prayer is a secondary cause among secondary causes: as the eye sees because light is poured into it, the prayer obtains because giving is disposed through it. Nothing pushes upward; everything is received downward, including the asking itself; and the asking is nevertheless really causal, in exactly the way Part I said creaturely action is really action. A person praying is dependence doing what dependence is for: not informing God but *practicing the truth*—taking up, on purpose, the position of a receiver, which was the true position all along.

Then the body itself enters, and the tradition is blunt about why it must. Man is not an angel inconvenienced by flesh; he is “composed of a twofold nature, intellectual and sensible,” and therefore “we offer God a twofold adoration; namely, a spiritual adoration, consisting in the internal devotion of the mind; and a bodily adoration, which consists in an exterior humbling of the body.” The direction of service runs inward: “we exhibit signs of humility in our bodies in order to incite our affections to submit to God, since it is connatural to us to proceed from the sensible to the intelligible.”¹⁷ The knee does not bend because God enjoys watching knees; it bends because the one kneeling learns from his own posture, the way a child learns courage by standing up straight. Aquinas's gloss on the extreme case compresses the whole of Part I into six words: when we genuflect, he says, we signify our weakness in comparison with God; but “when we prostrate ourselves we profess that we are nothing of ourselves.”¹⁸ *That we are nothing of ourselves*: not worthless—Part I spent a section distinguishing humility from self-contempt—but of-ourselves nothing, underived in no respect, the lit air owning no light. A body stretched flat on the ground is the ontological vertigo with the pretense of standing removed: the creature assuming, for one deliberate minute, the shape of what it is at every minute. The gesture does not represent a feeling. It represents a fact, and the feeling, if it comes, is instructed by the gesture rather than expressing it.

This ordering—exterior for the sake of interior, sign for the sake of truth—is guarded on both flanks by a clause that must be quoted in full, because it is the tradition's permanent answer to the suspicion that worship is a tribute exacted by vanity. Why honor God with words, knees, incense, anything, if none of it reaches him? Aquinas: “we pay God honor and reverence, not for His sake (because He is of Himself full of glory to which no creature can add anything), but for our own sake, because by the very fact that we revere and honor God, our mind is subjected to Him; wherein its perfection consists, since a thing is perfected by being subjected to its superior, for instance the body is perfected by being quickened by the soul, and the air by being enlightened by the sun.”¹⁹ The air enlightened by the sun: Aquinas reaches, at the exact point where worship's purpose must be stated, for the identical image Part I used for creation itself. That is not coincidence; it is the same structure appearing twice. Conservation gives being to a receiver who adds nothing to the giver; worship gives *acknowledged* being to the same receiver, and adds nothing to the same giver. The lamp gains nothing when the air is bright, and gains nothing further when the air, per impossibile made articulate, says so. But an articulate air that refused to say so would be darkened in the one way still open to it—in its truthfulness, its alignment with what it is. Worship changes the only party in the relation that has an unfilled capacity to change. It is enacted truth, and its entire efficacy lands on the side of the one who kneels. Which raises the last and oldest question about the elicited acts: if the honor adds nothing, what is the creature doing when it goes beyond words and knees and starts *handing things over*—when acknowledgment becomes sacrifice?

5 Sacrifice, Visible and Invisible

Sacrifice is the act of religion with the strangest résumé. Every other religious act has skeptical explanations ready at hand; sacrifice has mostly embarrassment. Killing an animal, burning grain, pouring out wine—destroying good things on purpose, for no one’s use—looks, to a certain modern eye, like the clearest possible case of religion as waste. Yet the practice is as close to universal as anything in the human record, and Aquinas opens his question on it from exactly that datum: “At all times and among all nations there has always been the offering of sacrifices.”²⁰ Whatever sacrifice is, it is not a local invention. Something in the creature as such produces it, the way something in the creature produces language.

Aquinas’s account of that something is a compressed anthropology. Natural reason tells a man that he is subject to something above him: he registers “the defects which he perceives in himself, and in which he needs help and direction from someone above him”—he did not make himself, does not sustain himself, cannot complete himself. Natural reason likewise dictates that submission and honor be shown to what is above one. But—here is the human twist—“the mode befitting to man is that he should employ sensible signs in order to signify anything, because he derives his knowledge from sensibles.” A pure spirit could submit in pure act; man must *say* it with things. “Hence it is a dictate of natural reason that man should use certain sensibles, by offering them to God in sign of the subjection and honor due to Him, like those who make certain offerings to their lord in recognition of his authority.”²¹ Sacrifice, in its natural-law core, is the tenant’s basket of first fruits carried to a landlord who owns the orchard, the basket, and the tenant: materially absurd, and precisely therefore perfectly clear as a *sign*. Nothing is transferred; everything is acknowledged. Which things, which rites, which days—all that, Aquinas immediately adds, is determination, positive institution, not natural deduction. Nature dictates that the acknowledgment be enacted in stuff; it does not write the rubrics.

What the enacted sign signifies, he states with a precision that dissolves the embarrassment: “the sacrifice that is offered outwardly represents the inward spiritual sacrifice, whereby the soul offers itself to God,” and it offers itself to God “as its beginning by creation, and its end by beatification.”²² Beginning by creation; end by beatification: the two anchors of Part I’s whole argument, reappearing as the content of the burnt offering. The animal on the altar was never the payment; it was the pronoun. *This—this life, this substance, this mine—stands for me; I am the thing being handed over.* And because the self being handed over is received-being all the way down, the handing-over adds nothing to God and was never supposed to: it is the acknowledgment, in the costliest available sign, that there was never anything to withhold.

The deepest ancient meditation on this grammar is Augustine’s, in the tenth book of *The City of God*, and it repays quotation because it contains, at fifteen centuries’ distance, both of this series’ governing images. God needs nothing, Augustine begins: “who is so foolish as to suppose that the things offered to God are needed by Him for some uses of His own?” Right worship “profits not Him, but man. For no man would say he did a benefit to a fountain by drinking, or to the light by seeing.”²³ The fountain and the light: Part I’s spring and lamp, in Augustine’s own hand, deployed for exactly this point—the drinker and the seer receive everything and confer nothing. Then the definition that governs everything after it: “A sacrifice, therefore, is the visible sacrament or sacred sign of an invisible sacrifice.” And then, in the next chapter, the widening: “Thus a true sacrifice is every work which is done that we may be united to God in holy fellowship, and which has a reference to that supreme good and end in which alone we can be truly blessed.” Mercy shown to a neighbor, the body disciplined, the soul turned—each, done for God’s sake, is sacrifice in the proper sense; the visible rites were always signs of this.²⁴

To this point, the argument has stayed on the ascent’s side of the seam this series keeps visible: everything said of sacrifice so far—its natural-law root, its sign-grammar, its terminus in the self-offering of the soul—is available to reason reflecting on creaturehood. But Augustine does not stop there, and honesty requires marking where his next sentence stands. The chapter’s climax is not a definition but a confession: the “whole redeemed city, that is to say, the congregation or community of the saints, is offered to God as our sacrifice through the great High Priest, who offered Himself to God in His passion for us, that we might be members of this glorious head”; and so, he concludes, “This is the sacrifice of Christians: we, being many, are one body in Christ”—the sacrifice the Church “continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, . . . in which she teaches that she herself is offered in the offering she makes to God.”²⁵ Philosophy can demonstrate that an offering is owed. It cannot discover the Cross or manufacture the Eucharist from creaturely dependence. What revelation claims—and it is a claim of faith, not a theorem—is that the incarnate Son freely offered his human life to the Father for our salvation, and that creatures are invited to be *included* in his prior oblation as members of the body being offered.

And with that, the psalmist's answer finally parses. Asked what he will render for all that has been rendered to him, he does not reach for an asset; he reaches for the cup: "I will take the chalice of salvation; and I will call upon the name of the Lord." *Taking* is the rendering. In a relation with no return current, where every payment would be made in the creditor's own coin, the one thing the debtor can genuinely contribute is the manner of his receiving: to take the gift knowingly, name the giver aloud, and bind himself publicly to go on doing so—"I will pay my vows to the Lord before all his people." The Latin verbs face each other across the verse like a diptych: *quid retribuam—accipiam*. What shall I give back? I shall receive. It is not evasion; it is precision. Reception with the eyes open is the only currency that was ever really the creature's own, and the psalm, the analysis of gratitude, and the theology of sacrifice all converge on it from their three directions.

6 A Due That Cannot Be Compelled

Everything argued so far the Catholic Church teaches in her own condensed registers, and—as in Part I—the seam between the ascent and the teaching should be marked, not blurred: the paragraphs quoted in this section are cited as the Church's teaching, not as further conclusions of this essay's philosophical thread. The Catechism places the creature's debt under the first commandment and states the annexation thesis in a sentence: charity "leads us to render to God what we as creatures owe him in all justice," and "the virtue of religion disposes us to have this attitude."²⁶ Adoration it calls "the first act of the virtue of religion," and its description of that act could serve as an abstract of this series: "To adore God is to acknowledge, in respect and absolute submission, the 'nothingness of the creature' who would not exist but for God." And then, in the same paragraph, the consequence that recoil never predicts: "The worship of the one God sets man *free* from turning in on himself, from the slavery of sin and the idolatry of the world."²⁷ The Catechism's paragraph on adoration is Part I's fork, taken in the right direction, stated as catechesis. The paragraphs that follow it walk in order through prayer, sacrifice—quoting Augustine's definition from the last section—and the promises and vows by which the free creature binds its own future, which is the psalmist's "I will pay my vows" given institutional form. And the First Vatican Council, in the same constitution Part I quoted on free creation, grounds the whole order of obligation one level down, in dependence itself: "Since man wholly depends on God as his Creator and Lord, and created reason is completely subject to uncreated Truth, we are bound to render by faith to the revealing God the full homage of intellect and will"—*quum homo a Deo tamquam Creatore et Domino suo totus dependeat. . . plenum revelanti Deo intellectus et voluntatis obsequium fide praestare tenemur*.²⁸ Because the creature depends wholly—*totus*—the return engages the whole of him: intellect, will, body, time. Dependence is not part of the case for the debt. It is the case.

It is the Second Vatican Council that completes the account with the clause a modern reader has been waiting for since the word "debt" first appeared. In 1965 the Council issued a declaration on religious freedom, and its first chapter performs a balance that superficial readers on both sides have missed. On one side, the duty stands untouched and is restated: the declaration "leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ"; all men "are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church, and to embrace the truth they come to know, and to hold fast to it." On the other side, the same document declares "that the human person has a right to religious freedom," meaning "that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly."²⁹ A duty owed by everyone, which no human power may compel anyone to perform: stated as two propositions it looks like a committee's compromise. Stated as one, it is the metaphysics of this essay. The Council's own ground for the immunity is the nature of the act: "the exercise of religion, of its very nature, consists before all else in those internal, voluntary and free acts whereby man sets the course of his life directly toward God. No merely human power can either command or prohibit acts of this kind."³⁰

Consider what the two halves, held together, reveal about the debt itself. What is owed—the whole argument has been converging on this—is not a performance but a *will*: devotion, the readiness to be handed over; adoration, the professed truth about oneself; sacrifice, the self offered under signs; the psalmist's knowing reception. Every one of these is constituted by its freedom. A coerced genuflection is a bent knee, not adoration; a compelled offering transfers matter, not acknowledgment; forced worship is not a partial payment of the due return but counterfeit currency, containing none of the thing owed. Hence the paradox that is not one: precisely *because* worship is owed in justice, it must be immune from compulsion—the due is a due of consent, and consent extracted is not consent. Part I found intimacy and distinction rising together at the heart of creation; the same double structure returns here in

the moral order: obligation and freedom rising together, each the condition of the other's seriousness. The creature is genuinely bound—*religare*—and the binding is of a kind that only the bound one can tie.

7 The Open Account

The argument can now be laid out whole. The debt is real: existence received and presently sustained is the first and chief cause of indebtedness. Settlement is impossible: nothing the creature could tender is not already the creditor's, and no rendering reaches equality. The impossibility is the debt's species, not its defect: what is owed is not a sum but an acknowledgment—equality of wills where equality of things cannot be. The virtue that renders it is annexed to justice: sober as debt, humble as sign, engaging the whole embodied creature, which knows and speaks through its body. The rendering profits only the renderer, who is the one party capable of profit; and it must be free, because a consent extracted is not a consent. Whatever else remains obscure about religion, its skeleton is this.

One temptation remains, and it is the subtlest, because it wears the argument's own clothes. A creature persuaded of the whole argument can still quietly retain the ledger picture at one remove: very well, the debt cannot be *closed*—but perhaps it can be *served*; perhaps a life of punctual acknowledgment, vows kept and knees bent, accumulates a kind of standing, until the worshipper, without ever saying so, comes to regard himself as paid up—square with heaven at last, self-possessed in the moral order as no creature is in the ontological one. This is recoil's final disguise: not the refusal of worship but the *use* of worship to end the relation worship acknowledges. And it fails as every version fails: the acts were never payments; each was itself received—the borrowed breath spent on naming the lender is still borrowed breath, and the naming, too, is on loan. Aquinas's serene remark closes the door: the debt of gratitude is the kind that grows by being paid, “and it is not unreasonable if the obligation of gratitude has no limit.”³¹ Every act of the due return, performed, enlarges what there is to acknowledge—one more gift taken with the eyes open—and so the account stands further open, not nearer closed. A worshipper who understands this stops experiencing the open account as arrears. The account is open the way a window is open, not the way a wound is: it is the relation itself, seen from the side of action, and to want it closed is to want the relation over—which was recoil's desire from the beginning.

The psalm knew. Its most quoted line about servitude comes wrapped around an image of release, and the two are not fighting: “O Lord, for I am thy servant: I am thy servant, and the son of thy handmaid. Thou hast broken my bonds: I will sacrifice to thee the sacrifice of praise.”³² I am thy servant; thou hast broken my bonds: in any human institution the sentences contradict. Here they explain each other. The bond to the unfailing principle—*religare*, the etymology that binds—is the breaking of every other bond, because a creature that has acknowledged the one total claim can no longer be totally claimed by anything else: not by the idols that accept payment in full, not by the State that may not touch the debt, not by the self's own project of getting square. The psalmist says it in two verses that end, like this series' every trail, at public thanksgiving.

And justice's last act, here as everywhere, is to point past itself. The analysis of gratitude left an arrow embedded in the argument: the limitless debt “flows from charity”—from love, which is why paying enlarges it. Aquinas's map of the virtues says the same structurally—the theological virtues *command* religion—and the Catechism's first-commandment paragraph opened with the same order: it is charity that “leads us to render to God what we as creatures owe him in all justice.” Follow the arrow and the entire apparatus of debt begins to look penultimate. Justice can establish that the return is owed and describe its acts; it cannot say what the relation is *for*—why the fountain wanted drinkers, why the singer wanted a song that could answer. A benefactor, Aquinas noticed, is not finally after repayment; the exceeding, gratis-upon-gratis structure of gratitude already behaves less like accounting than like friendship. What the giver wants, the whole tradition ventures, is not the payment but the payer. That claim—that the relation of total dependence is aimed at something scandalously mutual; that the creature is not only sustained and obligated but *desired*; that the end of the whole architecture is not acknowledgment but union—is not a claim justice can underwrite or the ascent can reach. It is the matter of charity, and of revelation, and of Part III.

Part I ended with the discovery that the falling was being carried. This essay has added the second, which is the first made practical: the carried creature can answer. Not repay—answer: take the cup knowingly, say the giver's name aloud, kneel until the body has taught the mind, hand over under signs a self that was never self-possessed, keep the vow in public, and do it all freely or not at all. The due return is not the price of the gift; nothing was ever the price of the gift. It is the gift's completion in the only place completion could occur—in the receiver, who alone can change, and whose change is this: the gift at last received *as* a gift, by someone who knows it, says so, and stays.

Notes

¹Part I, *Ontological Vertigo: On Being Held in Being*, establishes the claims this essay inherits and does not re-argue: existence in creatures is received and presently conserved (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 104, a. 1); the dependence is asymmetric, God having no real relation to creatures (I, q. 13, a. 7); and the asymmetry, rightly read, is the signature of gift (I, q. 20, a. 2). The coined terms *ontological vertigo*, *recoil*, and *consent* are defined there and used here in the same senses. English quotations from the *Summa* throughout this essay are from the public-domain translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province; Latin is checked in the Corpus Thomisticum web corpus. Both witnesses checked 2026-07-24.

²Psalms 115:12 in the Vulgate and Douay–Rheims numbering (Psalms 116:12 in the Hebrew numbering; the Hebrew psalm 116 appears as psalms 114–115 in the Vulgate). Scripture quotations in this essay are from the public-domain Douay–Rheims translation (Challoner revision), wording checked 2026-07-24 at the online Douay–Rheims text; the deliverance verses quoted are Psalm 114:8. The Latin of the question is *quid retribuam Domino pro omnibus quae retribuit mihi?*, checked 2026-07-24 in the Clementine Vulgate text hosted at the same site.

³Psalms 115:13–14, Douay–Rheims, checked 2026-07-24 as above. The same psalm continues: “O Lord, for I am thy servant: I am thy servant, and the son of thy handmaid. Thou hast broken my bonds: I will sacrifice to thee the sacrifice of praise” (115:16–17), verses this essay returns to in its final section.

⁴*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 58, a. 1, corpus (*iustitia est habitus secundum quem aliquis constanti et perpetua voluntate ius suum unicuique tribuit*); wording checked 2026-07-24, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The definition is the Roman jurists’ (Aquinas takes it from the *Digest*), adopted and defended through the article.

⁵*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 80, a. 1, corpus (*quidquid ab homine Deo redditur, debitum est, non tamen potest esse aequale, ut scilicet tantum ei homo reddat quantum debet; secundum illud Psalm., “quid retribuam domino pro omnibus quae retribuit mihi?”*); checked 2026-07-24 as above. The article is Aquinas’s map of the virtues annexed to justice; religion is annexed precisely because it renders another his due while being “unable to render the equal due.”

⁶The impossibility of equal return to parents is Aristotle’s (*Nicomachean Ethics* VIII, 14), cited by Aquinas at II-II, q. 80, a. 1 (piety annexed to justice because “it is not possible to make to one’s parents an equal return of what one owes to them”) and again at II-II, q. 106, a. 6, ad 1 (“if we consider the effect of beneficence, which a son receives from his parents, namely, to be and to live, the son cannot make an equal repayment”); checked 2026-07-24 as above. This essay cites Aristotle through Aquinas and does not separately quote the *Ethics*.

⁷*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 106, a. 1, corpus; checked 2026-07-24 as above. The article distinguishes religion, piety, observance, and gratitude as answering four causes of debt, each “falling short” of the one before—the same cascade of unequal debts, with God at its head, that q. 80 mapped from the side of justice.

⁸*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 106, a. 6, corpus (the exceeding return) and ad 2 (“The debt of gratitude flows from charity, which the more it is paid the more it is due, according to Romans 13:8, ‘Owe no man anything, but to love one another.’ Wherefore it is not unreasonable if the obligation of gratitude has no limit”); checked 2026-07-24 as above. Ad 3 adds the resolving distinction: commercial justice measures “equality of things,” gratitude “equality of wills.” Aquinas’s own citation of Romans 13:8 marks the forward edge of this essay: the limitless debt belongs finally to charity, which is Part III’s matter, not this essay’s.

⁹Romans 1:21 and 1:25, Douay–Rheims, checked 2026-07-24 as above. The exegetical claim made here is modest and textual: in Paul’s ordering, failed glorification and failed thanksgiving precede and produce the darkened intellect and the turn to idols, not the reverse. The verses’ larger argument about natural knowledge of God (Rom 1:19–20) was cited in its own right by the First Vatican Council and stands behind Part I; this essay uses only the ingratitude clause.

¹⁰*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 81, a. 1, corpus, reviewing Cicero’s *relegere* (via Isidore), Augustine’s *reeligere* (*De civitate Dei* X.3), and *religare* (*De vera religione* 55); the quoted conclusion is Aquinas’s own. Checked 2026-07-24, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. “Unfailing principle” and “last end” deliberately echo the two directions of Part I’s argument: the source from which being is presently received, and the good toward which the receiver is ordered.

¹¹*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 81, a. 2, corpus; checked 2026-07-24 as above. The interior argument is worth pausing on: rendering the due is good not because the creditor profits but because the renderer becomes *rightly ordered*—proportioned to reality. Applied to God, this is the whole efficacy of worship, as section 4 develops.

¹²*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 81, a. 4, corpus; checked 2026-07-24 as above. The same question grounds the traditional distinction between *latría*, the worship owed to God alone, and the reverence (*dulia*) paid to excellent creatures—a distinction Part I touched at II-II, q. 84, a. 1, and which Augustine’s *City of God* X develops at length (section 5 below).

¹³*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 81, a. 5, corpus; checked 2026-07-24 as above. The reply to the first objection completes the picture from above: the theological virtues, whose acts do bear on God as proper object, “by their command . . . cause the act of religion, which performs certain deeds directed to God”—faith, hope, and charity command what religion executes. II-II, q. 81, a. 6 then ranks religion first among the moral virtues as “approaching nearer to God than the other moral virtues, in so far as its actions are directly and immediately ordered to the honor of God.”

¹⁴*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad 1; checked 2026-07-24 as above. Aquinas’s example quotes James 1:27 (“Religion clean and undefiled before God and the Father, is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their tribulation: and to keep one’s

self unspotted from this world,” Douay–Rheims), which he reads through the eliciting/commanding distinction: mercy performs the visit, religion refers it to God. The essay returns to this joint when Augustine identifies mercy as “the true sacrifice” in section 5.

¹⁵*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 82, a. 1, corpus (*devotio nihil aliud esse videtur quam voluntas quaedam prompte tradendi se ad ea quae pertinent ad Dei famulatum*); checked 2026-07-24, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The article’s opening ties the noun to *devovere*: the devout are those who “in a way, devote themselves to God, so as to subject themselves wholly to Him.”

¹⁶*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 83, a. 2, corpus (*non enim propter hoc oramus ut divinam dispositionem immutemus, sed ut id impetremus quod Deus disposuit per orationes sanctorum esse implendum*), quoting Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues*: “that by asking, men may deserve to receive what Almighty God from eternity has disposed to give.” Checked 2026-07-24 as above. The underlying scheme is the primary/secondary causality summarized in Part I from ST I, q. 105, a. 5: divine providence disposes not only which effects occur but through which causes they occur.

¹⁷*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 84, a. 2, corpus, citing John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa* IV.12; checked 2026-07-24 as above. Part I cited q. 84, a. 1 (adoration owed to God on account of the divine excellence) in its closing paragraph; the present section is that citation unfolded. On the priority of the interior act see also II-II, q. 81, a. 7: exterior worship exists for interior worship, not conversely.

¹⁸*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 84, a. 2, ad 2; checked 2026-07-24 as above. The reply orders the signs: adoration “consists chiefly in an interior reverence of God, but secondarily in certain bodily signs of humility.” The profession made by prostration—that *we are nothing of ourselves*—asserts non-aseity, not worthlessness; Part I’s pairing of humility with magnanimity (II-II, q. 161 with q. 129) governs its sense here.

¹⁹*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 81, a. 7, corpus (*Deo reverentiam et honorem exhibemus non propter ipsum, qui in seipso est gloria plenus, cui nihil a creatura adiacere potest, sed propter nos... sicut corpus per hoc quod vivificatur ab anima, et aer per hoc quod illuminatur a sole*); checked 2026-07-24 as above. The same corpus grounds the sensible signs: “the human mind, in order to be united to God, needs to be guided by the sensible world,” citing Romans 1:20; hence “the internal acts of religion take precedence of the others and belong to religion essentially, while its external acts are secondary, and subordinate to the internal acts.”

²⁰*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 85, a. 1, *sed contra*; checked 2026-07-24, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The argument-form—what all peoples do is seemingly natural—is an appeal to natural inclination, not a statistical survey; the corpus supplies the reason the inclination exists.

²¹*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 85, a. 1, corpus (*ex naturali ratione procedit quod homo quibusdam sensibilibus rebus utatur, offerens eas Deo, in signum debitae subiectionis et honoris*); checked 2026-07-24 as above. The reply to the first objection adds the boundary this essay observes: the offering of sacrifice belongs *generically* to the natural law, “but the determination of sacrifices is established by God or by man”—which victims, rites, and times is positive determination, not natural deduction. No claim is made here that any particular rite is naturally required.

²²*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 85, a. 2, corpus, citing Psalm 50:19 (“A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit”) and Augustine, *De civitate Dei* X.19 on words offered to God signifying what the heart offers; checked 2026-07-24 as above. The corpus draws the exclusivity conclusion: because the soul offers itself to God alone as beginning and beatifying end, outward sacrifice too is offered to God alone—the act of latria that cannot be transferred to any creature.

²³Augustine, *De civitate Dei* X.5, in the public-domain translation of Marcus Dods (*The City of God*, vol. I, in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, A New Translation*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871; Book X is Dods’s own translation within the collaborative edition); wording checked 2026-07-24 in the source library’s tracked transcription of the 1871 printing, at the registered passage covering X.5–6, and against the New Advent transcription of the same translation. The fountain and the light are Augustine’s own vehicles for the point Part I made with the spring and the lamp; the convergence is inherited from him, not engineered by this essay.

²⁴*De civitate Dei* X.5 (the visible sacrament or sacred sign) and X.6 (the true-sacrifice definition; mercy for God’s sake as sacrifice; the body and the soul as offerings, citing Romans 12:1–2), Dods translation, checked 2026-07-24 as above. Augustine’s X.6 argument runs through Romans 12:1—“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercy of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God, your reasonable service” (Douay–Rheims, checked 2026-07-24)—and its “living sacrifice” is the hinge on which the chapter turns from definition to ecclesiology. Note the continuity with II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad 1 (section 3 above): what Aquinas parses as religion *commanding* the act of mercy, Augustine states as mercy *being* true sacrifice when referred to God.

²⁵*De civitate Dei* X.6, Dods translation, checked 2026-07-24 as above; the interior quotation is Romans 12:5. These sentences are cited as Christian confession and the Church’s teaching, not as conclusions of the natural-theological thread: Christ’s unique saving oblation is prior, and creatures are incorporated into it rather than left to duplicate it. The philosophical argument of this essay establishes that acknowledgment in sign is owed; it does not and cannot establish the Priest, the Passion, or the altar.

²⁶*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2095, official Vatican English web text, wording checked 2026-07-24. The paragraph’s first clause—“The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity inform and give life to the moral virtues”—compresses ST II-II, q. 81, a. 5, ad 1 (the theological virtues command the acts of religion). Quotations from CCC 2095–2109 in this section are brief excerpts of the official English text, cited with attribution.

²⁷*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2096–2097, checked 2026-07-24 as above (emphasis added in the last quotation). CCC 2098 continues with prayer (“Lifting up the mind toward God is an expression of our adoration”); CCC 2099–2100 with sacrifice, quoting Augustine’s *City of God* X.6 definition and adding: “The only perfect sacrifice is the one that Christ offered on the cross. . . . By uniting ourselves with his sacrifice we can make our lives a sacrifice to God”; CCC 2101–2102 with promises and vows, the vow being “a deliberate and free promise made to God concerning a possible and better good” (the Catechism here quoting the 1983 Code of Canon Law, c. 1191 §1). The sequence adoration–prayer–sacrifice–vow tracks the psalmist’s own: chalice, invocation, vows.

²⁸First Vatican Council, dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* (24 April 1870), ch. 3 (*Quum homo a Deo tamquam Creatore et Domino suo totus dependeat, et ratio creata increatae Veritati penitus subiecta sit, plenum revelanti Deo intellectus et voluntatis obsequium fide praestare tenemur*). Latin checked 2026-07-24 at the Holy See web text; the English rendering here is a labeled working gloss governed by the quoted Latin. The council’s sentence concerns the obedience of *faith* owed to God revealing; it is cited for its premise—total dependence grounding total obligation—which is the dogmatic register of this essay’s argument. Part I quoted ch. 1 of the same constitution on creation *ex nihilo*, “not for increasing his own beatitude.”

²⁹Second Vatican Council, declaration *Dignitatis humanae* (7 December 1965), nn. 1 and 2, quoted from the Holy See’s English web text, checked 2026-07-24; the promulgated Latin is the authoritative text and the web rendering names no translator. N. 2 adds that the right “has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person” and—closing the loophole a cynic would probe—that it “continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it.” The declaration concerns civil immunity from coercion; it neither relaxes the moral duty (n. 1) nor addresses the distinct obligations of those who have already freely embraced the faith. This essay takes no position on the declaration’s juridical applications; canonical and civil questions are outside its scope.

³⁰*Dignitatis humanae* n. 3, checked 2026-07-24 as above. The sentence’s context is the argument from conscience: man perceives the divine law through conscience, must follow it to reach God, and therefore “is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience” nor “restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious.” The Catechism incorporates the teaching at CCC 2104–2106, checked 2026-07-24.

³¹*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 106, a. 6, ad 2, checked 2026-07-24 as in section 2 above. The present paragraph’s target—fulfilled religious acts construed as installments toward a discharged, self-possessed standing before God—is this essay’s own formulation, offered as project synthesis and attributed to no source; the underlying principle (no aggregate of acts closes the creature’s relation to its sustaining source) follows from ST I, q. 104, a. 1 as argued in Part I.

³²Psalms 115:16–17, Douay–Rheims, checked 2026-07-24 as in section 1 above. The verses’ juxtaposition of avowed servanthood and broken bonds is the textual ground for this paragraph’s reading; the resolution offered—the bond to the unfailing principle as the breaking of every other bond—is this essay’s synthesis, in the sense of *religare* from II-II, q. 81, a. 1 and of CCC 2097 (“The worship of the one God sets man free from turning in on himself”).

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 Part II of a three-part series, *The Creature Before God*; each part is a complete essay. Part I (*Ontological Vertigo*) established received being, present conservation, the one-sided real relation, and the fork of recoil or consent; this essay inherits those conclusions without re-arguing them. Its governing question is what the consenting creature owes: in what sense a return is due to God when no equal return is possible, and what form the rendering takes in an embodied life. Its claim: the creature’s situation before God has the form of debt without possibility of settlement; the tradition locates the rendering virtue—religion—among the moral virtues annexed to justice, falling short of justice’s equality but not of its due; what is owed is acknowledgment rather than equivalence (equality of wills, not of things); religion’s elicited acts (devotion, prayer, adoration, sacrifice) engage the body because man signifies through sensibles; the rendering profits the renderer alone, God receiving nothing; sacrifice’s natural-law core is acknowledgment in sign, while revelation discloses the incarnate Son’s unique saving oblation and creatures’ dependent participation in it; the due return must be free because what is owed is consent itself; and no aggregate of fulfilled acts closes the account, the debt of gratitude belonging finally to charity—the threshold of Part III.

The argument proceeds in epistemic order: the psalmist’s question and the two false exits; justice’s definition and its failed equality toward God, with religion and gratitude analyzed from Aquinas; the ingratitude diagnosis of Romans 1 read textually; the virtue of religion’s placement and its two ranges of acts; the elicited acts with their anti-magical boundary (ST II-II, q. 81, a. 7); sacrifice argued from natural reason and then Augustine’s *City of God* X.5–6, with the seam between definition and Christian confession expressly marked; the Church’s teaching (CCC 2095–2109, *Dei Filius* ch. 3, *Dignitatis humanae* 1–3) cited as received teaching; and the closing synthesis on the open account. Revealed claims (Christ’s oblation, the Church’s self-offering, the sacrament of the altar, the obedience of faith) are labeled as received where they appear and are nowhere presented as conclusions of the philosophical thread. English is the working language; no liturgical rite, civil or canonical jurisdiction, or mutable discipline governs any conclusion; the canonical and liturgical determinations of worship (which rites, days, and obligations) are expressly outside scope. All online witnesses were checked on 2026-07-24.

Source class	Function in the article	Governing boundary
Scripture	Psalm 114–115 (Vulgate numbering) supplies the governing question and its answer; Romans 1:21, 25 the ingratitude diagnosis; Romans 12:1, 5 the living-sacrifice hinge inside Augustine’s argument; James 1:27 cited through Aquinas.	Quoted from the public-domain Douay–Rheims (Challoner) at exact loci; readings are textual and modest; no independent exegetical apparatus is claimed.
Thomistic framework	ST II-II, qq. 58, 80–85, 106 govern the analysis of justice, religion, devotion, prayer, adoration, sacrifice, and gratitude; ST I, qq. 13, 20, 104 and II-II, qq. 84, 129, 161 are inherited from Part I.	Adopted as the article’s framework where Catholic theology permits schools; not asserted as dogma; each locus used at its exact argumentative level.
Patristic witness	Augustine, <i>De civitate Dei</i> X.5–6, supplies the sign-theology of sacrifice and the fountain/light images; X.3 and X.19 appear inside Aquinas’s citations.	The X.6 climax (the redeemed city offered through the High Priest; the sacrament of the altar) is marked as Christian confession, not ascent.
Authoritative Catholic teaching	CCC 2095–2109 on the virtue of religion; <i>Dei Filius</i> ch. 3 on dependence grounding the obedience of faith; <i>Dignitatis humanae</i> 1–3 on the untouched duty and civil immunity from coercion.	Cited as the Church’s teaching at its stated authority; <i>Dignitatis humanae</i> is read for its stated ground (the free nature of religious acts) with juridical applications excluded.

Source class	Function in the article	Governing boundary
Project synthesis	The reading of <i>quid retribuam/accipiam</i> ; the ledger, pronoun, basket, window/wound, and counterfeit-currency images; “recoil’s liturgical form”; the “spiritual bookkeeping” diagnosis; all final formulations.	Original editorial synthesis argued from the checked sources; attributed to no source and creating no doctrine.

A.2 Included and excluded scope

Included are: the psalmist’s question (Ps 115:12 Vulg.) with its answer in reception, invocation, vows, and public praise; justice as rendering the due by a constant and perpetual will (II-II.58.1); the annexation analysis (II-II.80.1) with its citation of the psalm; the parental analogue and the ranked causes of debt (II-II.106.1); the exceeding, limitless debt of gratitude (II-II.106.6 with ad 2); Romans 1:21, 25 as ingratitude preceding idolatry; religion’s etymologies and definition (II-II.81.1), its status as virtue (81.2), special virtue (81.4), moral not theological virtue (81.5 with ad 1), chief of moral virtues (81.6); elicited versus commanded acts (81.1 ad 1) with James 1:27; devotion (82.1); petitionary prayer and providence (83.2); twofold adoration and the profession of prostration (84.2 with ad 2); worship’s profit to the worshipper alone (81.7); sacrifice’s natural-law core and positive determination (85.1 with ad 1); the outward sign of the soul’s self-offering (85.2); Augustine on divine non-need, the visible sacrament of the invisible sacrifice, true sacrifice, mercy, and the redeemed city (*De civ. Dei* X.5–6); CCC 2095–2109; *Dei Filius* ch. 3; *Dignitatis humanae* 1–3; and the closing analysis of the open account with its arrow toward charity.

Excluded are: any treatise-scale account of virtue, law, grace, merit, sacraments, liturgy, or ecclesiology; the history of sacrificial practice and of Sabbath or Sunday observance; every canonical determination of worship, including the Sunday obligation, feast days, and their excuses (no current-law claim is made anywhere); Eastern Catholic law and particular law; the Mass considered sacramentally and the theology of Eucharistic sacrifice beyond Augustine’s and the Catechism’s quoted sentences; vows and states of life beyond the Catechism’s definition; the juridical interpretation and application history of *Dignitatis humanae*; theodicy; merit and the supernatural quality of acts; interreligious questions and the status of non-Christian sacrifice beyond Aquinas’s natural-law claim; ascetical and penitential practice; scrupulosity and pastoral counsel; and judgments about any person’s obligations, culpability, or interior state.

A.3 Material qualifications

1. *Ontological vertigo*, *recoil*, and *consent* are Part I’s coinages, used here in the senses defined there; *religion* is used throughout in the tradition’s sense of a virtue of rendering, not the modern sense of a belief system, and the essay says so where the word is introduced.
2. “Debt,” “ledger,” “account,” and cognates are analogical throughout. The essay expressly denies that the creature’s due is a closable obligation, that creation was a contract, or that God gains by the rendering; the analogical register is stated in sections 1–2 and governs every later use.
3. The claim that religion is a moral virtue annexed to justice, not a theological virtue, is Aquinas’s (II-II.81.5) and is presented as the adopted framework of broad Thomistic tradition, not as dogma; the Catechism’s placement of religion under the first commandment (CCC 2095–2096) is cited as its catechetical register.
4. The reading of Romans 1:21–25 asserts only Paul’s stated order (failed glorification and thanksgiving preceding darkened thought and idolatry) and builds no claim about the salvation, culpability, or interior state of any historical people or person.
5. “Recoil’s liturgical form” (idolatry as preference for a repayable god) is project synthesis offered as an interpretation of the Pauline sequence, not as exegetical consensus or a historical thesis about ancient religion.
6. Aquinas’s natural-law claim about sacrifice (II-II.85.1) is generic: that acknowledgment in sensible sign is naturally fitting. The determination of rites is positive (85.1 ad 1); the essay makes no claim that any particular rite, victim, or observance is naturally required, and no comparative-religion thesis.

7. The efficacy denied of worship (adding nothing to God) and the efficacy affirmed (the perfection of the worshipper) are both Aquinas’s (II-II.81.7); the essay’s “enacted truth” formulation is its own gloss and claims nothing about sacramental efficacy *ex opere operato*, which is outside scope.
8. Prayer is treated only at the joint of providence and secondary causality (II-II.83.2); the essay makes no claim about what may be asked, the certainty of being heard, or contemplative prayer, all reserved to their own treatments.
9. Augustine’s X.6 climax and the Catechism’s sentences on Christ’s one perfect sacrifice are received Christian confession, labeled as such; the essay’s philosophical thread establishes that acknowledgment in sign is owed, and neither reaches nor argues the Priest, the Passion, or the altar. The sacrament of the altar is named, not developed; Eucharistic theology belongs to Part III’s territory and beyond.
10. *Dei Filius* ch. 3 concerns the obedience of faith owed to God revealing; it is cited for its dogmatically stated premise (total dependence grounding total obligation), and the essay does not conflate the obedience of faith with the virtue of religion.
11. *Dignitatis humanae* is cited at its stated level: a conciliar declaration on civil immunity from coercion that itself declares the traditional moral duty untouched. The essay takes no position on its juridical applications, on church–state arrangements, or on the declaration’s reception debates, and does not derive the immunity from the moral analysis alone—the Council’s own grounds are quoted.
12. The freedom required of religious acts concerns their constitution as acts of the virtue (a coerced act renders nothing); nothing here denies that obligations can bind in conscience, that parents rightly form children in worship, or that the Church may order her own common life—all outside scope.
13. “Spiritual bookkeeping”—fulfilled acts construed as installments toward a discharged standing before God—is project synthesis naming a temptation; it neither denies the objective goodness of fulfilled religious acts nor addresses the theology of merit, satisfaction, or indulgences, which are excluded.
14. The closing claims about what the giver “wants,” about mutuality, desire, and union, are named as the matter of charity, revelation, and Part III; they are pointers beyond this essay’s argument, not conclusions of it.
15. No pastoral, canonical, or liturgical advice is given, and no judgment is made about any person’s obligation or culpability in worship.

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

The numbered Notes carry exact citations, edition and translation identifications, verification dates, and qualifications that would interrupt the argument; no indispensable premise lives only in a note. Scripture is quoted from the public-domain Douay–Rheims translation (Challoner revision), with the Vulgate Latin of Psalm 115:12–13 checked against a public Clementine text. Aquinas is quoted from the public-domain English Dominican translation with Latin checked at Corpus Thomisticum. Augustine is quoted from the public-domain Dods translation (1871), checked in the source library’s tracked transcription of the 1871 printing at the registered passage for *De civitate Dei* X.5–6 and against the New Advent transcription of the same translation. *Dei Filius* is quoted from the Holy See’s Latin web text with a labeled working gloss; *Dignitatis humanae* and the Catechism are quoted briefly from the official Vatican English web texts with attribution. Official texts and third-party translations remain outside the project’s CC BY 4.0 grant; project-created prose, images, and organization are project content.

All online witnesses were checked on 2026-07-24; no mutable law or discipline is relied on, and no canonical obligation is asserted or interpreted. This revision received internal argumentative, source-consistency, quotation, rights, and production review by the authoring agent. Independent scriptural, patristic, Thomistic, theological, liturgical, literary, and ecclesiastical review is outstanding; no imprimatur, nihil obstat, or ecclesiastical approval is claimed, and internal checking is not independent review.

B References

Scripture

- Psalms 114:8 and 115:12–17 (Vulgate/Douay numbering; Hebrew Psalm 116); Romans 1:21, 25; 12:1, 5; 13:8 and James 1:27 (the latter two through Aquinas’s citations). Quoted from the public-domain Douay–Rheims translation (Challoner revision), wording checked 2026-07-24 at the online Douay–Rheims text; the Latin of Psalm 115:12–13 (*quid retribuam... calicem salutaris accipiam*) checked 2026-07-24 at the same site’s Clementine Vulgate text. The translation is an identified working witness, not a critical edition.

Patristic witness

- Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei* X.5 (divine non-need; the fountain and the light; the visible sacrament or sacred sign of an invisible sacrifice) and X.6 (true sacrifice; mercy; the redeemed city offered through the great High Priest; the sacrifice of Christians); trans. Marcus Dods, *The City of God*, vol. I, in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, A New Translation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871); public domain; wording checked 2026-07-24 in the source library’s tracked transcription of the 1871 printing (registered passage for X.5–6) and against the New Advent transcription of the same translation. X.3 and X.19 are cited within Aquinas’s texts, not independently.

Thomistic framework

- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 58, a. 1 (the definition of justice); q. 80, a. 1 (the virtues annexed to justice; religion unable to render the equal due, citing Ps 115:12); q. 81, a. 1 with ad 1 (religion’s etymologies and relation to God; elicited and commanded acts), a. 2 (religion a virtue), a. 4 (a special virtue), a. 5 with ad 1 (a moral, not theological, virtue; commanded by faith, hope, and charity), a. 6 (chief of the moral virtues), a. 7 (worship profits the worshipper, not God; the air enlightened by the sun); q. 82, a. 1 (devotion); q. 83, a. 2 (prayer and providence); q. 84, a. 2 with ad 2 (twofold adoration; prostration professing that we are nothing of ourselves); q. 85, a. 1 with ad 1 (sacrifice of the natural law; positive determination) and a. 2 (the outward sign of the inward sacrifice); q. 106, a. 1 (the ranked causes of debt) and a. 6 with ad 2–3 (the exceeding return; the limitless debt flowing from charity; equality of wills). Inherited from Part I: I, q. 13, a. 7; q. 20, a. 2; q. 104, a. 1; II-II, q. 84, a. 1; qq. 129 and 161. English from the public-domain translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province via New Advent; Latin checked in the Corpus Thomisticum online corpus for II-II.58.1, 80.1, 81.7, 82.1, 83.2, and 85.1. All loci checked 2026-07-24; work, question, article, and division govern over either site’s presentation.

Authoritative Catholic witnesses

- First Vatican Council, dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* (24 April 1870), ch. 3 (*Quum homo a Deo tamquam Creatore et Domino suo totus dependeat...*); Holy See Latin text, vatican.va, checked 2026-07-24. The English rendering in this essay is a labeled working gloss governed by the Latin. Ch. 1 (creation *ex nihilo, non ad augendam suam beatitudinem*) is inherited from Part I.
- Second Vatican Council, declaration *Dignitatis humanae* (7 December 1965), nn. 1–3 (the untouched moral duty; the right to immunity from coercion; the internal, voluntary, and free nature of religious acts); Holy See English web text, vatican.va, checked 2026-07-24; no translator is named on the page, and the promulgated Latin is the authoritative text.
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2095–2109 (the virtue of religion: adoration, prayer, sacrifice, promises and vows; the social duty of religion and the right to religious freedom), official Vatican English web text, vatican.va, checked 2026-07-24. CCC 2102 quotes the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, c. 1191 §1, which is cited here only as quoted by the Catechism.

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