

Dr. Moorman's Reply to John's Post-Interview Remarks
By Dr. Mary Moorman

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the thoughtful reflection offered here. The concerns posed by our presenter provide a welcome enrichment to the ongoing conversation about the various dimensions of the Church's rich and beautiful doctrine of justification.

As I understand it, two basic concerns are presented here, which may be resolved together.

The first concern pertains to the significant question of whether the theme of imputation in general has an appropriate place within Catholic soteriology, particularly since our presenter carries a keen sense for the apparently problematic disjunct which has separated an emphasis on "reckoned" righteousness from "actual" righteousness since the conversations of the 16th century. The second concern addresses the imputation of merit in particular.

For purposes of responding to the first concern about imputation in general, we might point to the ongoing work in the best Thomistic scholarship which takes serious note of the Scriptural and liturgical language of God's merciful "reckoning" and "attribution" and "imputation" with His people. Here I think of the excellent work which my own supervisor Dr. Bruce Marshall has contributed on the theme of imputation and justification in St. Thomas. Marshall has been supported in his reflections on St. Thomas' commentaries on the Psalms and the *Lectura* on Romans 4 by many others, including Matthew Levering, Fr. Dominic Legge at the Dominican House of Studies, and Fr. Emmanuel Perrier in suggesting that to avoid the language of imputation is to depart from St. Thomas, rather than to follow him. As Marshall concludes in a recent article:

"...in St. Thomas's understanding of justification... there is not only a causal and transformational element, nor only a forensic disposition ordered to a transformational act, but also the element of a purely forensic disposition... Aquinas cannot, in any case, be summoned as chief witness for a trans-formational theology of justification, in opposition to a dispositional and forensic one. For him the two evidently are not opposites. While justification cannot, as a whole, be purely dispositional or forensic, there must be a purely forensic moment in justification. When God declines to reckon or impute our sins to us, he does more than forgo his undoubted right to punish us for our sin and corruption rather than change us for the better, important as that is. He overlooks what is odious to him, but which he cannot change, namely our past sinful acts themselves. He covers them, conceals them from his sight, and treats them as though they were not." (Bruce Marshall, "*Beatus Vir: Aquinas, Romans 4, and the Role of 'Reckoning' in Justification*" in *Reading Romans With St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Mathew Levering and Michael Dauphinais (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

In this regard, Marshall acknowledges the standing concern: "we (could) turn justification into a legal fiction, even a kind of self-deception on God's part. Catholic theology has to be on guard against any suggestion that in justifying the ungodly, God somehow pulls the wool over his own eyes, concealing the ugly truth about us from himself rather than doing anything about it (ibid).

Nonetheless, Marshall continues with support from St. Thomas: "God can and does correct the deformity, remove the stain, and thereby eliminate our liability to punishment. But that I have committed this disordered act can never be changed, even by divine power. It can only be covered, as the Psalmist says, treated, by divine mercy, as though it had not happened. Saint Thomas comments: "Another [element of sin—besides offense and debt] is the guilty disordered act itself. Once this has been perpetrated, there is no way it can be undone. Instead it is covered by the hand of God's mercy, and treated as though it had not been done."(ibid)

In another place we find: "(of) the stain of the past act of sin... Aquinas says (as he had in the *Lectura on Romans*), '(it) is not taken away, because it is not given to the sinner that he did not commit the act. The gift rather is that its guilt is not imputed—reckoned—to him. Instead it is covered.' In just this twofold way, God not only cleanses our souls, but covers our sinful acts. For God to forgive sins is not only for him to be undeterred by the foulness of what he intends to change, but for him to overlook—to cover—what cannot be changed." (ibid)

Thus Marshall works out the place of the forensic non-imputation of sin in this way: "Thomas concludes: 'The stain of sin and the debt of eternal punishment grace simply removes. But it *covers past acts of sin, so that God does not, because of them, deprive a person of grace and exact the debt of eternal punishment. And what grace once does remains forever.'" (ibid)

One final quotation brings us to the second concern, which has to do particularly with the positive imputation of merit to compensate for the temporal debts and losses that follow from our sin. Here we consider the mode by which the satisfactory merits of Christ, first in Himself and also in His saints, are imputed or applied to the needy penitent:

"In sum Thomas comments: '.. (God) does not remember the sins of those for whom Christ has made full satisfaction, whether actual or original, for the sake of punishing them. In this sense God is said to have reconciled us to himself, in that he does not impute our sins to us. Ps 31[32]:2: 'Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute his sin.' Our justification therefore stems ultimately from the love the Father has for his Son, who in fulfillment of ancient cultic figures offered himself up as the bloody propitiation for our sins, an offering "applied to us," as Thomas observes, "by faith" (cf. Rom 3:25)." (ibid)

At this point we may move from the legitimacy of forensic imputation at work in Catholic theories of justification in general, which has to do with the guilt of sin. If we turn to the contribution which my own book may have offered, we deal with a consideration of the uniquely covenantal structure of indulgences which pertains to the residual debts that are owed even after the guilt of sin has been forgiven. and the need for "the imputation of merit". My book purports to highlight the way in which an indulgence is obtained: the penitent makes a prescribed act of faith, **in return for which** he is granted a share in the perfectly satisfactory self-offering which was given to the Father by the Son, and which is continued over time in the self offering of the saints who are in the Son. In this structure, there is in fact no legal fiction at work, because in reality and in justice the needy penitent has become, by his own deliberate act of assent, a third party beneficiary of a prior covenant, a recipient of an arrangement which was justly instituted and consummated for his benefit, by another. As stated in the beautiful words of Ephesians 5:2: "Christ loved us... and gave Himself to God, for our sake."

In this way, indulgences do provide a juridical and dispositional means of arriving at reconciliation with God simply because they are non-sacramental enactments of faith which take place "extra nos". But, when we speak of indulgences, we find ourselves in a sphere which has more to do with the civic structure of contracts and covenant making than with the legal verdicts of a criminal law court and the possibility of "legal fictions". Indulgences come into play only *after the penitent has received forgiveness for the guilt of his sin and has received the ontological benefits of the sacrament of reconciliation. I agree wholeheartedly with Marshall's description of the non-imputation of our sin, in as much as God – as our Judge – mercifully decides not to look on our sins when He forgives us forever, and in effect obliterates the fact of our past sin from His sight.

Following that forgiveness, when we speak of the imputation of merit/satisfaction in indulgences which is provided for debts within the mystical body of Christ, we are speaking of a different mechanism, a covenantal mechanism, whereby we are provided with the means of recovering what we have lost through our sin only when we have deliberately signified our participation in the ultimate satisfaction which has been offered once and for all. Our acts of faith in prayer, pilgrimage, almsgiving, etc. become a kind of payment by which the penitent gains access to a treasury that he could never have earned on his own. In this way, the language of the "distribution" or the "application" or "imputation" of the merits of another to the penitent is entirely appropriate. It remains that the penitent has in fact does something to attain these benefits, so that we may also say that he is actually owed them, and he does actually deserve them in justice, because he has done something prescribed by the rubrics of the Church in order to attain them. Simply put, the penitent who has obtained an indulgence has **earned** the right to be covered by the benefits which belong to another. It is in this way that these merits may be said to be imputed to the penitent as though they were his own.

Thus, in response to our presenter's concern stated here:

"... what is really going on, as I see it, is not that merits are transferred in a way that involves a subject being deemed as a true meritor when he or she did not merit... rather, a penitent is granted access to the means of satisfaction by which he or she satisfies (the) temporal debt owed"

.... I would say that we have reached a point of true agreement, because the assignment of an indulgence is a matter of justice. The penitent who has received the satisfactory merits of another receives them because those benefits were acquired and offered to God for his sake, and because he has in turn duly appropriated them to compensate for his debts in his own time and circumstances.

Finally, I would note that the issues addressed here throw us back on the most vital principle of all, which is our **incorporation** into Christ. His are the merits, His is the forensic forgiveness, His is the healing, His is the satisfaction that makes all of these aspects of our restoration possible in the first place. At any stage of our salvation, whether we are considering our need for ontological healing, or forensic forgiveness, or the restorative covenants which we enact in indulgences, it is always the case that we have nothing of our own to offer to God that we have not first received from Him, through His Son and His Son's body, the Church.

To use Marshall's words, the God of truth does indeed see and declare all things simply as they are, but what He looks upon is what He Himself has caused; even our mere belief and assent to Him is the first act of justice, which He Himself has worked in us. Fundamentally our salvation is a matter of our participation in the life of God. It is only when we are "in Christ" that old things pass away and we become new; and this is the fundamental vicarious element in our salvation that both allows and requires us to use the juridical jargon which is in some ways necessary to express the full sense of our incorporation in Him.