

## A Selection from the Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John by Saint Thomas Aquinas

*He came unto his own, and his own did not receive him; but whoever received him, he gave them power to become the sons of God, to all who believe in his name, who are born not from blood, nor from the desires of the flesh, nor from man's willing it, but from God.*

John 1.11-13

**H**AVING GIVEN the necessity for the incarnation of the World, the Evangelist then shows the advantage men gained from that incarnation. First, he shows the coming of the light; second, its reception by men; third, the fruit brought by the coming of the light. He shows that the light which was present in the world and evident, i.e., disclosed by its effect, was nevertheless not known by the world. Hence, he came unto his own, in order to be known. The Evangelist says, “unto his own,” i.e., to things that were his own, which he had made. And John says this so that you do not think that when he says, the Word came, he means a local motion in the sense that the Word came as though ceasing to be where he previously had been and newly beginning to be where he formerly had not been. He came where he already was. “I came forth from the Father, and have come into the world” (16.28).

He came unto his own, i.e., to Judaea, according to some, because it was in a special way his own. “In Judaea God is known” (Ps 75[76].1); “The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel” (Is 5.7). But it is better to say, “unto his own,” i.e., into the world created by him. “The earth is the Lord’s” (Ps 23[24].1). But if he was previously in the world, how could he come into the world? I answer that “coming to some place” is understood in two ways. First, that someone comes where he absolutely had not been before. And, second, that someone begins to be in a new way where he was before. For example, a king, who up to a certain time was in a city of his kingdom by his power and later visits it in person, is said to have come where he previously was: for he comes by his substance where previously he was present only by his power. It was in this way that the Son of God came into the world and yet was in the world. For he was there, indeed, by his essence, power and presence, but he came by assuming flesh. He was there invisibly, and he came to be visible.

Then when the Evangelist says, “and his own did not receive him,” we have the reception given him by men, who reacted in different ways. For

some did receive him, but these were not his own; hence he says, his own did not receive him. “His own” are men, because they were formed by him. “The Lord God formed man” (Gen 2.7); “Know that the Lord is God: he made us” (Ps 99 [100].3). And he made them to his own image, “Let us make man to our image” (Gen 1.26).

But it is better to say, his own, i.e., the Jews, did not receive him, through faith by believing, and by showing honour to him. “I have come in the name of my Father, and you do not receive me” (Jn 5.43), and “I honour my Father and you have dishonoured me” (Jn 8.49). Now the Jews are his own because they were chosen by him to be his special people: “The Lord chose you to be his special people” (Dt 26.18). They are his own because related according to the flesh, “from whom is Christ, according to the flesh,” as said in Romans (9.3). They are also his own because enriched by his kindness, “I have reared and brought up sons” (Is 1.2). But although the Jews were his own, they did not receive him.

There were not lacking, however, those who did receive him. Hence he adds, but whoever received him. The Evangelist uses this manner of speaking, saying “but whoever” to indicate that the deliverance would be more extensive than the promise, which had been made only to his own, i.e., to the Jews. “The Lord is our law giver, the Lord is our king; he will save us” (Is 33.22). But this deliverance was not only for his own, but for whoever received him, i.e., whoever believed in him. “For I say that Christ was a minister to the circumcised, for the sake of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the fathers” (Rom 15.8). The Gentiles, however, [are delivered] by his mercy because they were received through his mercy. He says “whoever” to show that God’s grace is given without distinction to all who receive Christ. “The grace of the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the Gentiles” (Act 10.45). And not only to free men, but to slaves as well; not only to men, but to women also. “In Christ Jesus then is neither male nor female, Jew or Greek, the circumcised or uncircumcised” (Gal 3.28). Then when he says, he gave them power to become the sons of God, we have the fruit of his coming. First, he mentions the grandeur of the fruit, for he gave them power. Second, he shows to whom it is given, to all who believe. Third, he indicates the way it is given, not from blood, and so forth.

The fruit of the coming of the Son of God is great, because by it men are made sons of God: “God sent his Son made from a woman . . . so that we might receive our adoption as sons” (Gal 4.5). And it was fitting that we who are sons of God by the fact that we are made like the Son, should be reformed through the Son. So he says, he gave them power to become the sons of God. To understand this we should remark that men become sons of

God by being made like God. Hence men are sons of God according to a threefold likeness to God. First, by the infusion of grace; hence anyone having sanctifying grace is made a son of God: “You did not receive the spirit of slavery . . . but the spirit of adoption as sons,” as is said in Romans (8.15); “Because you are sons of God, God sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts” (Gal 4.6). Second, we are like God by the perfection of our actions, because one who acts justly is a son: “Love your enemies . . . so that you may be the children of your Father” (Mt 5.44). Third, we are made like God by the attainment of glory. The glory of the soul by the light of glory—when he appears we shall be like him” (1 Jn 3.2)—and the glory of the body—“He will reform our lowly body” (Phil 3.21). Of these two it is said in Romans (8.23), “We are waiting for our adoption as sons of God.”

If we take the power to become the sons of God as referring to the perfection of our actions and the attainment of glory, the statement offers no difficulty. For when he says “he gave them power,” he is referring to the power of grace; and when a man possesses this, he can perform works of perfection and attain glory, since “the grace of God is eternal life” (Rom 6.23). According to this interpretation, “he gave them” (“them” referring to those who received him) power, i.e., the infusion of grace, to become the sons of God, by acting well and acquiring glory.

But if this statement refers to the infusion of grace, then his saying, he gave them power, gives rise to a difficulty. And this is because it is not in our power to be made sons of God, since it is not in our power to possess grace. We can understand, he gave them power, as a power of nature; but this does not seem to be true since the infusion of grace is above our nature. Or we can understand it as the power of grace, and then to have grace is to have power to become the sons of God. And in this sense he did not give them power to become sons of God, but to be sons of God.

The answer to this [difficulty] is that when grace is given to an adult, his justification requires an act of consent by a movement of his free will. So, because it is in the power of men to consent and not to consent, he gave them power. But he gives this power of accepting grace in two ways: [first] by preparing and offering it to him. For just as one who writes a book and offers it to a man to read is said to give the power to read it, so Christ, through whom grace was produced (as will be said below), and who “accomplished salvation on the earth” (Ps 73[74].12), gave us power to become the sons of God by offering grace.

Yet this is not sufficient since even free will, if it is to be moved to receive grace, needs the help of divine grace, not indeed habitual grace, but movent grace. For this reason, second, he gives power by moving the free

will of man to consent to the reception of grace, as in “convert us to yourself, O Lord” (by moving our will to your love) “and we will be converted” (Lam 5.21). And in this sense we speak of an interior call, of which it is said, “those whom he called” (by inwardly moving the will to consent to grace) “he justified” (by infusing grace) (Rom 8.3).

Since by this grace man has the power of maintaining himself in the divine sonship, one may read these words in another way. He gave them—i.e., those who receive him—power to become the sons of God—i.e., the grace by which they are able to be maintained in the divine sonship. “Every one who is born from God does not sin, but the grace of God” (through which we are reborn as children of God) “preserves him” (1 Jn 5.18). Thus, he gave them power to become the son of God, through sanctifying grace, through the perfection of their actions, and through the attainment of glory; and he did this by preparing this grace, moving their wills, and preserving this grace.

Then when John says, “to all who believe in his name,” he shows those on whom the fruit of Christ’s coming is conferred. We can understand this in two ways: either as explaining what was said before, or as qualifying it. We can regard it as explaining as the Evangelist had said, “whoever received him,” and now to show what it is to receive him, he adds by way of explanation, “who believe in his name.” It is as though he were saying: to receive him is to believe in him, because it is through faith that Christ dwells in your hearts, as in “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3.17). Therefore, they receive him, who believe in his name.

Origen regards this as a qualifying statement, in his homily *The Spiritual Voice*. In this sense, many receive Christ, declaring that they are Christians, but they are not sons of God because they do not truly believe in his name; for they propose false dogmas about Christ by taking away something from his divinity or humanity, as in “every spirit that denies Christ is not from God” (1 Jn 4.3). And so the Evangelist says, as though contracting his meaning, he gave them—i.e., those who receive him by faith—power to become the sons of God, to those, however, who believe in his name, i.e., who keep the name of Christ whole, in such a way as not to lessen anything of the divinity or humanity of Christ.

We can also refer this to formed faith, in the sense that to all, that is, he gave power to become the sons of God, who believe in his name, i.e., those who do the works of salvation through a faith formed by charity. For those who have only an unformed faith do not believe in his name because they do not work unto salvation. However, the first exposition, which is taken as explaining what preceded, is better.

Then when John says, “who are born not from blood,” he shows the way in which so great a fruit is conferred on men. For since he has said that the fruit of the light’s coming is the power given to men to become the sons of God, then to forestall the supposition that they are born through a material generation he says, “not from blood.” And although the word “blood” has no plural in Latin, but does in Greek, the translator [from Greek into Latin] ignored a rule of grammar in order to teach the truth more perfectly. So he does not say, “from blood,” in the Latin manner, but “from bloods” (*ex sanguinibus*). This refers to whatever is generated from blood, serving as the matter in carnal generation. According to the philosopher [Aristotle], “semen is a residue derived from useful nourishment in its final form.” So “blood” indicates either the seed of the male or the menses of the female. The cause moving to the carnal act is the will of those coming together, the man and the woman. For although the act of the generative power as such is not subject to the will, the preliminaries to it are subject to the will. So he says, “nor from the desires of the flesh,” referring to the woman; “nor from man’s willing it,” as from an efficient cause; “but from God.” It is as though he were saying: “they became sons of God, not carnally but spiritually.”

According to Augustine, “flesh” is taken here for the woman, because as flesh obeys the spirit, so woman should obey man. Adam (Gen.2.23) said of the woman, “This, at last, is bone of my bone.” And note, according to Augustine, that just as the possessions of a household are wasted away if the woman rules and the man is subject, so a man is wasted away when the flesh rules the spirit. For this reason, the Apostle says, “We are not debtors of the flesh, so that we should live according to the flesh” (Rom 8.12). Concerning the manner of this carnal generation, we read, “in the womb of my mother I was moulded into flesh” (Wis 7.1).

Or, we might say that the moving force to carnal generation is twofold: the intellectual appetite on the one hand, that is, the will; and on the other hand, the sense appetite, which is concupiscence. So, to indicate the material cause he says, not from blood. To indicate the efficient cause, in respect to concupiscence, he says, nor from the desires of the flesh [*ex voluntate carnis*, literally, “from the will of the flesh”], even though the concupiscence of the flesh is improperly called a “will” in the sense of Galatians (5.17), “the flesh lusts against the spirit.” Finally, to indicate the intellectual appetite he says, “nor from man’s willing it.” So, the generation of the sons of God is not carnal but spiritual, because they were born from God. “Every one who is born from God conquers the world” (1 Jn 5.4).

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cause. Thus we say a blacksmith makes a knife *de ferro* (“from” iron), and a father generates his son *de seipso* (“from” himself), because something of his concurs somehow in begetting. But the preposition *ab* (“by”) always signifies a moving cause. The preposition *ex* (“from,” or “by”)—[ in the sense of “out of” or “by reason of”]—is taken as something common since it implies an efficient as well as a material cause, although not a consubstantial cause. Consequently, since only the Son of God, who is the Word, is “of” (*de*) the substance of the Father and indeed is one substance with the Father, while the saints, who are adopted sons, are not of his substance, the Evangelist uses the preposition *ex* saying of others that they are born from God (*ex Deo*), but of the natural Son, he says that he is born of the Father (*de Patre*).

Note also that in the light of our last exposition of carnal generation, we can discern the difference between carnal and spiritual generation. For since the former is from blood, it is carnal; but the latter, because it is not from blood, is spiritual: “What is born from flesh is flesh itself; and what is born of Spirit is itself spirit” (3.6). Again because the material generation is from the desires of the flesh, i.e., from concupiscence, it is unclean and begets children who are sinners: “We were by nature children of wrath” as it says in Ephesians (2.3). Again, because the former is from man’s willing it, that is, from man, it makes children of men; but the latter, because it is from God, makes children of God. But if he intends to refer his statement, “he gave them power” to baptism in virtue of which we are reborn as sons of God, we can detect in his words the order of baptism: that is, the first thing required is faith, as shown in the case of catechumens, who must first be instructed about the faith so that they may believe in his name; then through baptism they are reborn, not carnally from blood, but spiritually from God. ❧