Foreword

If ever it were true that missteps on first principles reap enormous consequences further on down the line, this most certainly applies to the nature-grace question. Very often this debate has seemed needlessly pedantic and far from the core of the Christian story. However, Dr. Swafford brings out well in this fine text how the question of the relationship between nature and grace is intimately tied to the following questions: the engagement with secularism and the question of evangelization; the relationship between faith and reason; the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the question of religious pluralism—in other words, what did the Person and Work of Christ actually accomplish for humanity? Or, is the grace of salvation simply something that bubbles up from within our very humanity, in which case Jesus is perhaps inspiring, but by no means necessary. Dr. Swafford returns again and again to these and like questions as the proper motivation and context for the central importance of this issue of nature's relation to grace.

The history of the question tends to have been something of a seesaw where one or another aspect has received emphasis. For example, the medieval scholastics and their commentators tended to emphasize the integral autonomy of nature and the natural order; they did so, on their account, in order to preserve the supernatural dignity of the grace of Christ; in other words, it was felt that nature had to stand in no strict and inherent *need* of grace in order for grace to truly be *gratuitous*. Conversely, if nature stood in need of grace, it would seem that God's gift of grace would become in some way obligatory (and thus no longer gratuitous).

Henri de Lubac saw this trajectory of a self-enclosed natural order (however benign its origin) as coming into full blossom in the Enlightenment period and in the birth of modern secularism. In other words, de Lubac saw that such an emphasis upon an autonomous natural order found a natural home in secularism—because it appeared that

the supernatural was in the end simply *unnecessary*. In this way, Neo-Scholastic apologetics (which placed a heavy emphasis on the autonomy of the natural order) found an odd fraternity with the very secularism it so despised.

For this reason, de Lubac made his case in the twentieth century that secular humanism was something of a contradiction in terms; that deeply rooted in human nature was a desire for God, and that true and authentic human fulfillment was tied up with man's relationship with the divine. Thus, the notion of a closed and autonomous natural order was for him a fiction: all things were created *in* and *for* Jesus Christ (cf. Col 1:16), leaving no domain beyond the reach of the God-Man—that is, leaving no *purely* secular domain.

At least in Catholic circles, de Lubac's analysis carried the day after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), whereas the more robust (Neo-Scholastic) emphasis on the integral natural order was predominant from Cajetan in sixteenth century to eve of Vatican II. Perhaps surprisingly, however, in the last fifteen years or so there has been a revival in this question, and most of it has come as a pushback against de Lubac. Modern Thomistic scholars such as Lawrence Feingold and Steven A. Long have argued that de Lubac's analysis pushed the balance too far; that in de Lubac's account grace has swallowed up nature, and strange as it may sound, secularism has once again become the unintentional result: if human nature is so tuned to the divine, grace need not come to us from the *outside*, as it were, in which case this divinization proceeds from *within*; and therefore one need not emphasize the singularity of Jesus Christ, making all religions more or the less the same with respect to their access to the divine—the root of which again stems from human nature itself, not from God coming to us from the outside.

But this Thomistic revival has once again brought the debate to a stalemate. And here is where Dr. Swafford is especially poised to make his contribution: in this work, he shows convincingly that the resources to resolve this debate existed all along in the relatively little known German theologian of the nineteenth century, Matthias Joseph Scheeben. What Dr. Swafford captures is that Scheeben's analysis is able to pull together the chief contributions of each side, while at the same time avoiding the chief pitfalls characteristic of each respective side. Scheeben, in short, is able to distinguish the orders of nature and grace, so as to bring to light the true sublime grandeur of supernatural grace

and the singularity of the Cross of Jesus Christ; but he does so in order to show forth the splendor of their *union* in the heart of each believer. And so Scheeben exemplifies the phrase: "distinguish in order to unite." As with the Incarnation, Christ's human and divine nature are properly distinguished, but no less important is their union in the Divine Person of the Son; the same goes for the mystery of nature and grace: they are intelligibly distinguished, but they are divinely-ordained to come together in a nuptial union.

It is for this reason that Scheeben is praised by the likes of thinkers as diverse as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Réginald Garrigou Lagrange—no mean feat, to be sure; but such is the strength of Scheeben's ability to synthesize and reconcile diverse viewpoints. And such is likewise the merit of Dr. Swafford's analysis here; whatever the cause, Scheeben is seldom if ever brought into this debate. For this reason, I believe Dr. Swafford's work will bear fruit for years to come, if only for the reason that he has been able to move this debate forward, so to speak, beyond the impasse of rival groups and their competing accounts of nature and grace.

For the first time, it seems, Scheeben has entered the discussion; and if we follow Dr. Swafford's account, Scheeben just may hold the key to resolving this issue. If such is the case, Dr. Swafford's work will have brought us to a new threshold, at least as it concerns the Catholic discussion of nature and grace over the last seventy years or so and beyond.

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