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***Catholic Physics - Reflections of a
Catholic Scientist - Part 40
Free Will and God's Providence - Part III
The Problem of God's Grace***



- ♦ 1200's
- ♦ Authority on physics, geography, astronomy, mineralogy, chemistry, zoology, and physiology
- ♦ "The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature"
- ♦ He understood that the Church is not opposed to study of nature
- ♦ Patron Saint of Scientists

Free Will and God's Providence - Part III

The Problem of God's Grace

"Do not say 'It is the Lord's doing that I fell away', for he does not do what he hates.

Do not say 'It was he who led me astray', for he has no need of the sinful.....

It was he who created mankind in the beginning, and he left them in the power of their own free choice." - Sirach 15:11-15

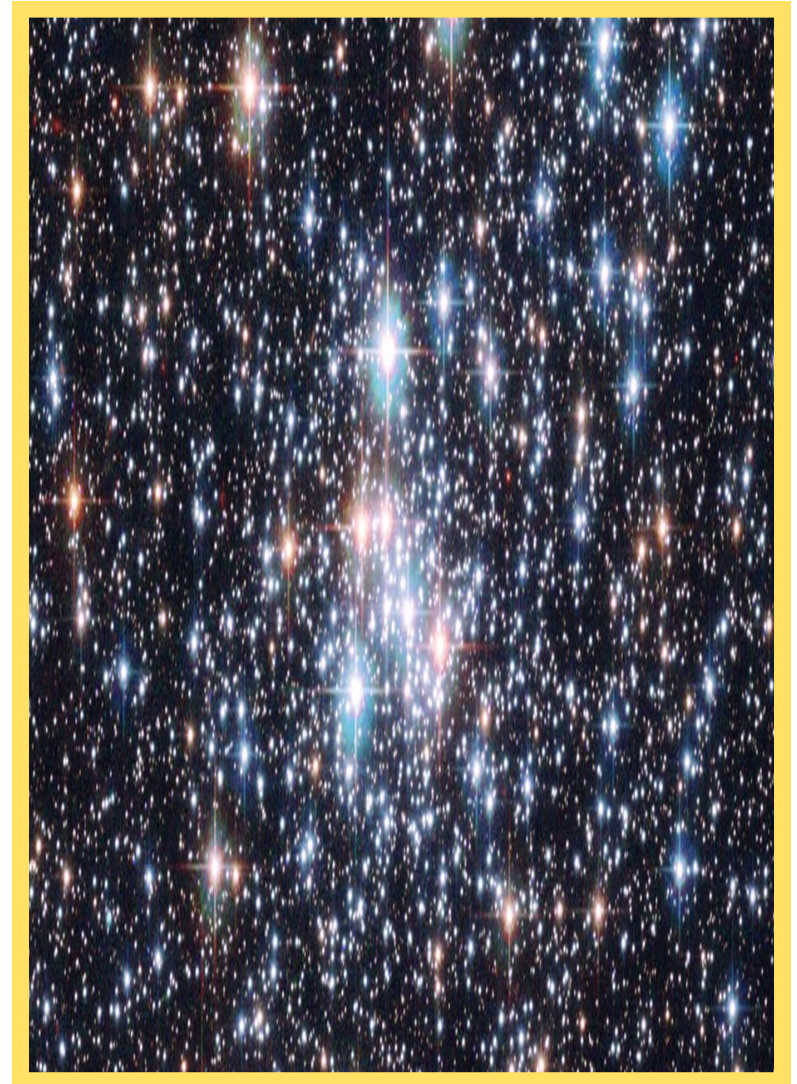
The objections to Free Will stated in Part II of this series were

Physics gives only one future for the Universe;
Our brains are pre-wired, so moral choices are not possible;
Our environment determines what our moral choices will be;
God's grace determines our actions.

I countered the first three objections in Part II, and in Part III (here) will examine the most difficult, #4, using in part propositions set forth by Fr. Luis de Molina, a 16th century Jesuit theologian and philosopher. Before giving these arguments, I should summarize the Church's position on free will and God's foreknowledge. Please note that as a theological novice, I would be grateful for corrections and emendations where I err or am wanting. The term "grace" in what follows is used without definition or exegesis (that would need a book), but my meaning is that of "Actual Grace" (God's gift undeserved by us), the push the Holy Spirit gives us to do moral deeds and salvific acts.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON FREE WILL AND GOD'S GRACE

"To God, all moments of time are present in their immediacy. When therefore he establishes his eternal plan of "predestination", he includes in it each person's free response to his grace..."For the sake of accomplishing his plan of salvation, God permitted the acts (The



responsible for their actions and so forgiveness is automatic. Given the Molinist view, that we are freely responsible for our actions, then we can be held responsible for sins. But as Christians, we can forgive the sinner, but not the sin.

Finally I'll say that I'm not entirely satisfied with the Molinist interpretation. It seem to me that if God knows what we will do--even if he does not determine that we do it--we are not totally free in our moral choices. There need to be options, different possibilities for what we can do, in order that freedom of choice--free will--be exercised. In the fourth post of this series I'll explore what quantum theory might offer to give this freedom, with God's complete knowledge of the future and will for what occurs to hold.

*REFERENCES

Controversies on Grace, The Catholic Encyclopedia

Divine Providence, the Molinist Account, Thomas Flint.

Dual Agency: A Thomistic Account of Providence and Human Freedom, Robert Koons.

Molina / Molinism, Alfred Freddoso.

On Grace and Free Will, St. Augustine of Hippo.

Physical Premotion and Predetermination, Bernard Boedder, S.J.

From a series of articles written by: Bob Kurland - a Catholic Scientist

Passion of Jesus Christ) that flowed from their blindness." - CCC, 600

A brief account of the history of the teaching of Catholic theologians on free will and God's grace is given below. For a more extended explanation see the references below.* In the Old and New Testaments are many references to the tension between God's Will and man's free will (including the most excellent one from Sirach, given above). See On Grace and Free Will for a compendium of these.

ST. AUGUSTINE ON GRACE AND FREE WILL

St. Augustine of Hippo laid the foundations for the Church's teaching on God's grace and man's free will in his treatise against the Pelagian heresy, "On Grace and Free Will". His arguments, based on Scripture, can be summed up in the following quote:

".. not only men's good wills, which God Himself converts from bad ones, and, when converted by Him, directs to good actions and to eternal life, but also those which follow the world are so entirely at the disposal of God, that He turns them wherever He wills, and whenever He wills [emphasis added]—to bestow kindness on some, and to heap punishment on others, as He Himself judges right by a counsel most secret to Himself, indeed, but beyond all doubt most righteous." St. Augustine, On Grace and Free Will, Ch. 41

THEOLOGIC ARGUMENTS ON GRACE AND FREE WILL

If it is by grace given by the Holy Spirit that God affects men's will, and if, as St. Augustine says, this is done "wherever He wills, and whenever He wills", where is man's free moral choice? In order to unravel this theological knot, we have to think about how God bestows grace, given His omnipotence, His omniscience, and His will to create good.

To give in detail the theological arguments on this question would require a chapter, not a blog post, so I'll summarize the extreme points of view by an example. (For fuller accounts refer to the references below, particularly Controversies on Grace.) Consider St. Maximilian Kolbe, who took the place of another prisoner at the Nazi concentration camp, Auschwitz, to die by starvation and carbolic acid injection. We can think about this salvific act in two ways:

Scenario 1--God wills that St. Maximilian Kolbe acts as he does and knows by His "Free Knowledge" that St. Kolbe will perform this salvific act. He knows that because he wills to give him grace ("efficacious" grace) to perform the act.

Scenario 2--God knows by his "Middle Knowledge" that St. Maximilian Kolbe, given God's grace, would perform this salvific act, but the performance of the act is dependent on St. Kolbe's free will assent to that grace. This grace is "neutral", that is to say it is neither "efficacious" nor "sufficient". ("Sufficient grace" is that which would be given by God even though He knows it will not be used.)

Scenario 1 reflects the Thomistic interpretation of Grace and Free Will, emphasizing the supreme sovereignty of God, His omnipotence and omniscience. The Thomists add an extra impetus, Divine Premotion or Predetermination such that good moral actions will "infallibly result", but since these actions are not necessarily invoked, free moral choice is still available to the agent. Both Boedder and I are puzzled by this: "If we object to this that it is exceedingly difficult to understand how a creature thus predetermined can possibly have the actual use of its freedom, our opponents do not deny that there is some mystery in this. But they refer us to the incomprehensibility of Divine causation at once most sweet and most efficacious." Physical Premotion and Predetermination, Bernard Boedder, SJ.

The philosopher Robert Koons has attempted to explain this apparent "incomprehensibility" by symbolic logic, legerdemain that establishes the identity of the propositions below, such that free will is still operative:

The character of X is such that he freely wills to do the morally correct action in circumstance C;

God predetermines the moral choices of X by efficacious grace. (I have to confess I don't understand the symbolic logic manipulations or the final conclusion.)

Scenario 2 gives a Molinist interpretation, emphasizing the importance of man's free will. There are variations of this position--Congruism, Syncretism--that vary the importance of God's sovereignty in relation to man's free will. Thomists object to the Molinist position because it apparently sets limits to God's authority. I don't agree with this objection. God gave Adam and Eve freedom to commit Original Sin, as a necessary consequence of free will. If He did not, if all we do--sinful and good--is by His will, not ours, then we are puppets on a stage; the whole notion of moral responsibility fails.

THOUGHTS ON PRAYER AND FORGIVENESS.

As a Catholic I pray privately and in public for the Holy Spirit to give me the grace to do the right thing and for those I love to do also. If our actions are pre-ordained by God then these prayers are futile, and that I cannot believe. Thomists object that active praying, absent God's pre-ordained outcome for the desired event, smacks of the Pelagian heresy that man can save himself without the grace of God. The theologian Thomas Flint counters this argument: praying for the Holy Spirit to make you better, for example to rid yourself of an addiction, is praying for God to do something TO you, not FOR you and is certainly dependent on God's grace.

Now we come to what the initial thrust of this series of posts was all about: can we hold those who commit sins morally responsible for their actions and can we forgive them for their sinful deeds. Given the Thomist view, that God predetermines our moral behavior, I don't see how one can hold sinners