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## Participation as “attingere” and Saint Thomas’ commentary on John 6:57

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## Abstract

Participation as “*attingere*” and Saint Thomas’ commentary on John 6:57

Saint Thomas Aquinas’ notion of participation is developed by Cornelio Fabro with the notion of ‘*attingere*’. In this essay I address the importance of ‘*participare*’ as *attingere* by uncovering it in Aquinas’ commentary on John 6:57. I introduce the notion of supernatural participation of grace and Fabro’s development of the notions of ‘*attingere*’ as ‘*participare per similitudinem*’ and ‘*participare per operationem*’ for a fuller understanding of the notion of participation that Fabro holds to be so essential. Afterwards we will see a concrete example in the uncovering of said notions in the Angelic Doctor’s commentary on a central verse of the Bread of Life discourse. Thus, we will be able to see both (a) the importance of the notion of ‘*participare*’ and ‘*attingere*’ in Saint Thomas’ work, and (b) have a more profound understanding of a key aspect of the thought of the Doctor Communis on grace and the Eucharist.

**Keywords:** participation, Thomas Aquinas, Eucharist, *attingere*

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## Abstrakt

Uczestnictwo jako “*attingere*” i komentarz św. Tomasza do Jana 6, 57

Pojęcie uczestnictwa św. Tomasza z Akwinu zostało rozwinięte przez Cornelia Fabra za pomocą pojęcia „*attingere*”. W tym eseju autor zajmuje się znaczeniem „*participare*” jako „*attingere*”, nawiązując do komentarza Akwinaty do Jana 6, 57. Przedstawia pojęcie nadprzyrodzonego uczestnictwa w łasce i rozwinięcie przez Fabra pojęć: „*attingere*” jako „*participare per similitudinem*” i „*participare per operationem*”. To rozróżnienie Fabro uważa za istotne dla pełniejszego zrozumienia pojęcia „uczestnictwa”. Następnie omówiony jest przykład analizy wspomnianych pojęć w komentarzu Doktora Anielskiego do centralnego wersetu dyskursu o Chlebie Życia. W ten sposób wyjaśniane jest zarówno (a) znaczenie pojęć „*participare*” i „*attingere*” w dziele św. Tomasza z Akwinu, jak i (b) głębsze zrozumienie kluczowego aspektu jego myśli na temat łaski i Eucharystii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** uczestnictwo, Tomasz z Akwinu, Eucharystia, *attingere*

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The Apostle Saint Peter states boldly that we are made “partakers of the Divine Nature” (2 Pt. 1:4)<sup>1</sup>. Participating in the divine life is what it means to live in grace. Grace and participation need to be expounded on together. The notion of participation can be understood in many ways, and it takes an important place in the philosophy and theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Studying the Angelic Doctor’s metaphysics, but also his doctrine on grace, the Sacraments, and especially the Eucharist, we encounter the notion of participation often.

In fact, the Italian Thomist philosopher Father Cornelio Fabro (1911–1995) is convinced that “the heart of the controversy [of the proper interpretation of the metaphysics of Saint Thomas] thus becomes the Thomistic notion of participation—for opponents, the condemnation, and for us, the salvation of Thomism”<sup>2</sup>. Fabro’s work *La Nozione Metafisica di Partecipazione Secondo San Tommaso d’Aquino*, is a thorough study of Aquinas’ philosophy and theology, presenting the metaphysical notion of participation is the hermeneutical key to understand the thought of Saint Thomas correctly and more fully. Fabro dedicates the most pages to the philosophical aspects, but he also gives some arguments on the supernatural participations. How is grace a participation? How is grace needed for man as participation proper to his nature? How does man in fact come to participate in this supernatural way?

The Italian interpreter of Aquinas develops the notion of *attingere* as a specific stage of supernatural *partecipare*. This pertains specifically to man, who is able and is called to become a “partaker in the divine nature” (2 Pt. 1:4), i.e., to live in grace and to participate in the divine life in a most specific way. Fabro sees this stage or degree of participation as communicated to man especially through the sacraments, and most especially through the Eucharist, as we will see in more detail. Can these notions of *partecipare* and *attingere* be uncovered in this same way in a Thomistic text on the Eucharist?

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<sup>1</sup> Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

<sup>2</sup> C. Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica Di Partecipazione: Secondo San Tommaso d’Aquino*, EDI-VI, Segni 2005, p. 14 (Opere Complete, 3): “Il nucleo centrale della controversia viene ad essere così la nozione tomista di partecipazione, la quale per gli avversari è la condanna, per noi invece è la salvezza del Tomismo”. Translations of Fabro are always mine.

The aim of this essay is to investigate Fabro’s argument on *atingere* as stages of participation; then to test Fabro’s assertion that participation constitutes an essential element for interpreting the work of the Doctor *Communis*, especially when writing about the Eucharist. Hence, we will uncover the developed notions of *atingere* in our reading of Saint Thomas’ commentary on John 6:57, since it is a Gospel verse that speaks very succinctly about man’s participation in the Divine Life as effect of the Eucharist<sup>3</sup>.

## 1. Man’s perfections as participations

For the sake of clarity, I need to touch briefly on the meaning of the word *atingere*. I use it mostly in the original Latin, because in English it is translated with different verbs: “to attain”, “to reach” or also “to touch”. These translations are all used in different editions and different places in Aquinas’ works. A very significative phrase from Saint Thomas with the verb *atingere* is certainly: “An inferior nature at its highest touches upon something of a superior nature at its lowest”<sup>4</sup>. *Atingere* is a mode of participation that brings the participating in some way to “touch,” to “reach” the participated<sup>5</sup>.

Now, the likeness of every creature to its Creator is according to its degree of participation, i.e., perfection. Aquinas says that “the intellectual nature attains to the divine imitation, in which in a certain way the species of its nature consists”<sup>6</sup>. The end of the species of human na-

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3 Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 79, a. 1, co.; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1391.

4 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 15, a. 1: “inferior natura in sui summo attingit ad aliquid infimum superioris naturae”. All texts from Saint Thomas Aquinas from [www.aquinas.cc](http://www.aquinas.cc), accessed December 13, 2022. English translation mine. Italics for emphasis always mine, unless otherwise noted.

5 For more on how *atingere* relates to the broader idea of the Thomistic principle of metaphysical continuity, see R. Snyder O. P., *The Principle of Metaphysical Continuity in Aquinas’s Doctrine of Participation*, Catholic University of America, D. C. Washington 2017.

6 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *In II Sententiae*, Dist. 16, q. I, a. 1 ad 3. “Consideratis divinae bonitatis processibus in creaturis, quibus naturae creatae constituuntur in similitudinem naturae increatae, ultima invenitur intellectualis dignitatis participatio, et quae omnes alias praesupponit: et ideo intellectualis natura attingit ad imitationem div-

ture is beatitude, “the ultimate perfection of the rational creature. For nothing is finally perfect unless it attains unto its principle according to its mode”<sup>7</sup>. We immediately see the relation between *participare* and *atingere*. This most noble created participation of the rational creature is still created; hence it has *esse* received and is thus still at an infinite distance from the Creator. Saint Thomas sees the imperfection of this participation of *esse* “remedied” in the perfection of the rational creature to know other creatures. By knowing, he can in some way possess the perfections of all other creatures<sup>8</sup>.

Aquinas also explains that “only the rational creature is capable of God, because it only can know and love him explicitly”<sup>9</sup>. Man is created in the image of God: “The likeness of the *image* is found in human nature, forasmuch as it is capable of God, viz. by attaining to Him through its own operation of knowledge and love”<sup>10</sup>. But the human intellect always remains restless in the interaction with creatures. It can only reach the fulness of that image in that which is Truth in essence. Aquinas explains that “Man’s perfect happiness consists not in that which perfects the intellect by some participation, but in that which is so by its essence”. But the perfection of the faculty is attained by its proper object, which in the case of the intellect “is the true”. Participated truth will never satisfy the intellect perfectly, being and truth are interchangeable, thus only God, in Whom is “His Being His Essence”, “is truth by His Essence, and that contemplation of Him makes man perfectly happy”<sup>11</sup>.

Man alone cannot fully attain the only object that can fulfil his intellectual longing, that is, to God Himself. Man is an image in the likeness

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*inam, in qua quodammodo consistit species naturae eius*”. English translations from aquinas.cc, unless otherwise noted.

7 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibet X*, q. 8, a. 1; J. Mitchell, *Cornelio Fabro on Supernatural Participations*, in: C. Fabro, *Essential Thinker Philosopher of Being and of Freedom. Acts of the Fabro Symposium Commemorating 20 Years Since Fabro’s Death*, The Catholic University of America, April 1–2, 2016, ed. by N. Dreyer, *Cornelio Fabro Cultural Project*, Chillum 2017, p. 105 (*Studia Fabriana*, 1): “*beatitudo enim est ultima perfectio rationalis naturae; nihil autem est finaliter perfectum nisi attingat ad suum principium secundum modum suum*”. English transl. mine.

8 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. II, a. 2. English transl. mine.

9 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. XXII, a. 2, ad 5. English transl. mine.

10 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae III*, q. 4, a. 1, ad 2.

11 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae I–II*, q. 3, a. 7.

of the Creator, but he needs the gift of grace. Grace elevates the rational creature to enter a so-called next “stage” of participation, the participation in which he is likened more to Christ in grace. This participation in supernatural life, in grace, has two degrees, which correspond to the two stages of being an image. Man in the “Image of Grace” participates in the imperfect way in the divine light, through faith. Man in the “Image of Glory”, participates fully in the divine light, a perfect participation of vision, perfect as from the part of man<sup>12</sup>.

## 2. “Partecipare”, “attingere” and being “partakers of divine nature”

Having treated the basic arguments for the foundation of supernatural participation in the natural disposition of the rational creature, and having asserted that there are different degrees of supernatural participation, I will now elaborate more on *partecipare* and *attingere*. We will consider how these relate, and what that implies for the way in which man participates in the divine nature. We will follow Fabro’s interpretation of the Angelic Doctor. Let us start with a text from Aquinas on beatitude:

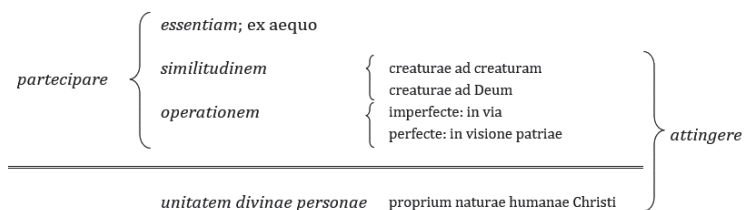
Beatitude is the ultimate perfection of rational nature; yet nothing is finally perfect unless it attains unto its principle according to its mode. Which for this reason I say that unto the principle which is God something attains in two ways: in one way through likeness, which is common to every creature, which has of perfection as much as it obtains of divine likeness; in another way through operation (so that that mode which is singular to Christ might be passed over), yet

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, c. I, lect. 4; cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, c. V, lect. 4. On what condition God gives grace or in what mode, exceeds the scope of this essay, and is taken as a given in treating our current topic, always based on St. Thomas Aquinas and the interpretation of Fabro. For more on the relation between faith, the knowledge of grace, and reason, natural knowledge, in Saint Thomas Aquinas and Fabro, see: M. J. Navarro Muñoz, *Faith—Reason: a Problematic Relationship? Theology as an Extension of Faith in Reason*, “Polonia Sacra” 25 (2021) no. 3, p. 169–188. See also R. Hütter, *Grace and Charity. Participation in the Divine Nature and Union with God: The Surpassing Contemporary Significance of Thomas Aquinas’s Doctrine of Divinization*, “Espíritu” (2016) no. 65, p. 173–99.

I say through operation, inasmuch as a rational creature knows and loves God. And because the soul immediately is made by God, for this reason it could not be blessed unless it should see God immediately, that is, without the medium which is a likeness of a thing known<sup>13</sup>.

Saint Thomas distinguishes between two modes of participations, that is, of participation in the *esse* of God: *participare per similitudinem* and *participare per operationem*. “The first signals the pinnacle of natural participation, while the second indicates the summit of supernatural participations”<sup>14</sup>. The highest natural participation is *participatio per similitudinem*, although it seems in the following also that the “beginning” of the life of grace or the “foundational dispositions” of the life of grace are in fact also a *participatio per similitudinem*. It is helpful to use a scheme that Fabro himself uses, combined with a second scheme of his<sup>15</sup>.



Fabro explains that there are three main meanings of *participare*. The first refers to the predicamental mode of participation, the remaining

<sup>13</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibet* X, q. 8, a. 1. “Beatitudo enim est ultima perfectio rationalis naturae; nihil autem est finaliter perfectum nisi attingat ad suum principium secundum modum suum. Quod ideo dico quia ad principium quod est Deus attingit aliquid dupliciter: uno modo per similitudinem, quod est commune omni creaturae, quae in tantum habet de perfectione quantum consequitur de divina similitudine; alio modo per operationem (ut praeter mittatur ille modus qui est Christo singularis, scilicet in unitate persone), dico autem per operationem, in quantum rationalis creatura cognoscit et amat Deum. Et quia anima immediate facta est a Deo, ideo beata esse non poterit nisi immediate videat Deum, id est absque medio quod sit similitudo rei cognitae”. English transl. mine.

<sup>14</sup> J. Mitchell, *Cornelio Fabro on Supernatural Participations*, p. 105.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 314–315.

two to transcendental participations<sup>16</sup>. Every transcendental participation also has an aspect of *attingere*, “attaining” always more to the divine life in every next degree. Fabro writes:

In supernatural participations, and in particular in the beatific vision, there is not properly a *participare similitudinem*, as is the case in natural participations, but the Divinity itself, as it is in itself, is the terminus of the creature’s act. It is a participation that is also an *attingere*, which could be called the third mode of participation, beyond the univocal and analogous participation found in the natural order<sup>17</sup>.

Fabro explains how the two terms of *participare* and *attingere* relate: “The more perfect the ‘participation,’ the less it is ‘participation’: it becomes properly precisely ‘*attingere*.’ And the more ‘*attingere*’ increases in perfection, the more it is immediacy of union and fulness of communication”<sup>18</sup>. Ultimately, the rational creature gifted with grace is searching to grow in the perfection of the supernatural participation, so as to “attain” more and more to God himself, a mode of participation that is already imperfectly present in the life of faith and will be perfect, truly the noblest participation of a creature, an “attaining” of God, which seems to escape the realm of participation properly speaking. “*Attingere* also occurs in the immediate union of the blessed soul with God”<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. J. Mitchell, *Cornelio Fabro on Supernatural Participations*, p. 106–107. More elaborate explanation of the scheme on *participare* and the scheme on *attingere*, in: C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 314–315 and J. Mitchell, *Cornelio Fabro on Supernatural Participations*, p. 106–107.

<sup>17</sup> C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 313: “Nelle partecipazioni soprannaturali, ed in particolare nella visione beata, non si ha propriamente un «participare similitudinem», quale si verifica nelle partecipazioni naturali, ma è alla stessa Divinità, quale è in sé, che termina l’atto della creatura. È un partecipare che è anche un «ATTINGERE», che potrebbe esser detto il terzo modo di partecipazione, sopra quello univoco e analogo quali si verificano nell’ordine naturale”.

<sup>18</sup> C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 314: “Più il «participare» è perfetto e meno è «participare», e diventa propriamente «attingere». E l’«attingere» più cresce in perfezione, più dice immediatezza d’unione e pienezza di comunicazione”.

<sup>19</sup> C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 314: “«Attingere» si ha ancora nell’unione immediata dell’anima beata con Dio”.



Saint Thomas explains this *atingere* in another way. He distinguishes between the natural happiness that man can reach by his human faculties and the supernatural happiness, reached only by divine power, by which one participates in an elevated way in the Godhead. Saint Thomas cites the Apostle Peter as confirmation:

Now man’s happiness is twofold, as was also stated above. One is proportionate to human nature, a happiness, to wit, which man can obtain by means of his natural principles. The other is a happiness surpassing man’s nature, and which man can obtain by the power of God alone, by a kind of participation of the Godhead, about which it is written (2 Pt. 1:4) that by Christ we are made *partakers of the Divine nature*<sup>20</sup>.

Following Saint Thomas, Fabro explains that the participation of faith that surpasses man’s nature is instilled in man by the infusion of the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity<sup>21</sup>. However, the supernatural virtues are a *partecipare per similitudinem* that still have the potency to be brought into act, to become a *partecipare per operationem*. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are precisely those gifts which grant a *partecipare per operationem*, the highest possible perfection and most intense union with God as is possible for a creature here on earth. By the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the human soul is ordered to God in the most perfect way that is possible in this life of pilgrimage. Fabro expounds on this profoundly in a passage that is worth citing in full:

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20 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia–IIae, q. 62, a. 1: “Est autem duplex homini beatitudo sive felicitas [...]. Una quidem proportionata humanae naturae, ad quam scilicet homo pervenire potest per principia suae naturae. Alia autem est beatitudo naturam hominis excedens, ad quam homo sola divina virtute pervenire potest, secundum quamdam divinitatis participationem secundum quod dicitur II Petr., 1, 4, quod per Christum facti sumus consortes divinae naturae”.

21 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, 62, 1 ad 1: “A certain nature may be ascribed to a certain thing in two ways. First, essentially: and thus these theological virtues surpass the nature of man. Second, by participation, as kindled wood partakes of the nature of fire: and thus, after a fashion, man becomes a partaker of the Divine Nature, as stated above: so that these virtues are proportionate to man in respect of the Nature of which he is made a partaker”.

Finally, by the communication of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit the soul in a certain way attains to the very conditions of the life of the heavenly homeland. In fact what is properly supernatural in the infused virtues, including the theological virtues, is the essence of the habit—i.e., the end and the object—and not yet the “mode of operation”, which is still “according to the human condition” (In III Sent., Dist. 34, q. I, a. 1; cf.: I-II, q. 68, a. 1), i.e., “according to the rule of reason”. Under the action of the gifts on the other hand, the soul acquires a divine mode of operation, and measures its actions by another rule “which is Divinity itself shared by man in his own way, so that he works no longer humanly, but as if he had become God, by participation” (In III Sent., Dist. 34, a. I, a. 3). In this way the gifts come to be the normal, and necessary, completion and continuation of the infused virtues, and the intensity of the spiritual life increases, departing from the virtues and moving toward a predominance of the gifts, as is seen in the great saints. Thus *the gifts are the highest participation in the Divinity to which the soul can arrive on earth: by them the soul is ordered to God in the most immediate way possible here below* (In III Sent., Dist. 34, q. III, a. 2). While in the natural life the appetitive and operative powers are subject to the command of reason, in the supernatural life, by the infusion of the gifts the indwelling Holy Spirit becomes the principle and rule of the life of the soul, which for its part, enters more and more within itself, becomes more docile and sensitive to every movement of the “Gentle Guest”, almost by an immediate assimilation and passivity to divine things<sup>22</sup>.

22 C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 293–294: “Infine per la comunicazione dei Doni dello Spirito Santo l’anima raggiunge, in un certo modo, le condizioni stesse di vita della patria celeste. Invero ciò che propriamente è di soprannaturale nelle virtù infuse, anche teologali, è la sostanza dell’abito, cioè il fine e l’oggetto, non ancora il «modo di operare», che rimane ancora «secundum conditionem humanam» (In III Sent., Dist. 34, q. I, a. 1; cfr.: Ia-IIae, q. 68, a. 1), cioè «secundum regulam rationis». Sotto l’azione dei Doni, invece, l’anima acquista un modo divino di operare, e misura le sue azioni da un’altra *regula* «*quae est ipsa Divinitas ab homine participata suo modo, ut jam non humanitus, sed quasi Deus factus, participatione, operetur*» (In III Sent., Dist. 34, q. I, a. 3, P. VII, 384). I Doni vengono così ad essere il completamento e prolungamento normale, e necessario, delle virtù infuse e l’intensità della vita spirituale s’accresce a partire dalle virtù e andando verso un predominio dei Doni, quale appare nei grandi Santi. A questo modo i Doni sono la *partecipazione suprema* della Divinità, a cui arriva l’anima sulla terra: per essi l’anima è ordinata a Dio nel modo più immediato che quaggiù è possibile (In III Sent., Dist. 34, q. III, a. 2, q. la III, Sol. 1). Mentre nella vita naturale le potenze appetitive e operative soggiacciono all’impero della ragione, nella vita soprannaturale per l’infusione dei Doni, è lo Spirito Santo inabitante che diventa il principio e la regola della vita dell’anima e questa, da parte sua, sempre più ripiegandosi all’interno di sé, si fa più

*Attingere* in the highest degree is only found in the hypostatic union of the human nature of Jesus Christ with the divine nature. His human nature does not participate in the divine nature, but is united in the very Person, thus “attaining” in the fullest possible sense. In the above scheme this is indicated as the last instance, falling outside of the “scope” of *partecipare*. All participation of the degree of attainment through grace, in fact, is only possible through a participation in Christ, who himself possesses these perfections in fulness in himself<sup>23</sup>. Of all the perfections in which man can participate in Christ, the divine filiation has a special place. Our participation in the divine nature, as expressed by Saint Peter the Apostle, reaches to all that man is. For just as Christ is by nature the Son of God the Father, so we can become adopted sons of God the Father: “He (Christ) was predestined to be the natural Son of God, whereas we are predestined to the adoption of sons, which is a participated likeness of natural sonship”<sup>24</sup>.

The participation of divine filiation is communicated to man in the concrete application of grace, which is principally in and through the sacraments instituted by Christ. The sanctifying grace of the sacraments is the giving of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The sacraments are a prolongation of the Incarnation, and they are derived from Christ:

as in the person of Christ the humanity causes our salvation by grace, the Divine power being the principal agent, so likewise in the sacraments of the New Law, which are derived from Christ, grace is instrumentally caused by the sacraments, and principally by the power of the Holy Spirit working in the sacraments<sup>25</sup>.

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docile e sensibile ad ogni movimento del «Dolce Ospite», quasi per un’assimilazione e passione immediata alle divine cose”.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 295.

<sup>24</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 24, a. 3. For a detailed discussion of sanctifying grace as participation in God more in detail, see: A. Contat, *Réflexions Sur l’ontologie de l’état de Grâce et de l’état de Pêché*, in: *San Tommaso e La Salvezza*, a cura di S.-T. Bonino, G. Mazzotta, Urbaniana University Press, Rome 2020, p. 157–185 (Doctor Communis).

<sup>25</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 112, a. 1 ad 2. See M. Eitenmiller, *Grace as Participation According to St. Thomas Aquinas*, “New Blackfriars” 98 (2017) no. 1078, p. 15.

There is one sacrament that stands out among the other sacraments, for the nature of the sacrament in itself, but also because of its effects: the Eucharist. Saint Thomas will simply call the Eucharist the most perfect sacrament<sup>26</sup>. It is the most perfect because it contains Christ himself really<sup>27</sup>, and also: “As Baptism is called the sacrament of Faith, which is the foundation of the spiritual life, so the Eucharist is termed the sacrament of Charity, which is the bond of perfection”<sup>28</sup>. This sacrament thus brings about a unique degree of perfection, namely “to become a partaker in the Divine nature” (2 Pt. 1:4), which for Saint Thomas, as Fabro explains more explicitly, is a mode of being partaker that is to “attain” to the divine nature, or, to put it into even stronger words: “All of the work of the faithful’s sanctification is conceived of by St. Thomas, in conformity with Sacred Scripture, as a divinization, an elevation to become gods by participation”<sup>29</sup>.

Having examined several key steps of the exposition of Fabro on participation and grace, specifically in relation to the notion of *attingere*, the next step is to apply this brief analysis to a short passage of the Angelic Doctor’s commentary on the Gospel of Saint John. Let us see how these notions allow us to understand his commentary more fully, thereby understanding better the Sacred Scriptures themselves.

### 3. “Partecipare” and “attingere” in the Angelic Doctor’s commentary on John 6:57

We can now uncover the notions of *participare* and *attingere* discussed above in the commentary that Saint Thomas Aquinas writes on John 6:57. Without going into exegesis properly speaking, it is helpful to have

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<sup>26</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. XXVII, a. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. XXVII, a. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 73, a. 3 ad 3.

<sup>29</sup> C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 299: “tutta l’opera di santificazione dei fedeli è concepita da S. Tommaso, in conformità della S. Scrittura, come una divinizzazione, un’elevazione a diventare dèi per partecipazione”. For the importance of the thomistic notion of participation in a proper understanding of Ecclesiology, inherently connected to someone’s participation in the Eucharist, especially when interpreting the Second Vatican Council, see: A. Contat, *L’ermeneutica del Vaticano II e la metafisica della partecipazione*, “Alpha Omega” 17 (2014) n. 3, p. 485–541.

some context. In the discourse of the Bread of Life, after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus expounds his Eucharistic teaching. In the final part of the discourse, Jesus explains what the power and the effects are of this “Bread of Life”, of his own Body and Blood. In this context Jesus says: “*As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me*” (John 6:57; Revised Standard Version).<sup>30</sup> Saint Thomas comments on this verse in four parts: a brief introduction as layout for the argument, then two main distinctions that he expands on, and a short summary. The most effective method of analysing this commentary is to read through the text step by step and show the insights at each step.

In the introduction Saint Thomas lays down the minor premise that is included in what Jesus says, namely that whoever is united to Christ, in and through this sacrament, according to the context, has life. Saint Thomas immediately points out that Jesus shows a *similitudine* in the analogy that He uses. The text explicitly introduces terminology for an understanding of grace as participation in divine life.

Now He presents his minor premise, that is, whoever is united to Christ has life. He mentions this to show the following similarity: the Son, because of the unity He has with the Father, receives life from the Father; therefore one who is united to Christ receives life from Christ. And this is what He says: *just as the living Father has sent me, and I live because of the Father*<sup>31</sup>.

There is a relation between the life that the believer receives from Christ, on the one hand, and the unity that Christ himself has with the Father, on the other hand. Saint Thomas immediately makes a necessary distinction: Christ can be speaking about his human nature or about his divine nature. He notes that the meaning of the words does slightly change when applied to the one or to the other: “These words can be

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<sup>30</sup> In the Latin that Saint Thomas used: “*Sicut misit me vivens Pater, et ego vivo propter Patrem: et qui manducat me, et ipse vivet propter me*”.

<sup>31</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, cap. 6, lect. 7, no. 977. Accessed on December 13, 2022. Italics in Latin and English original from version on aquinas.cc.

explained in two ways about Christ: either in reference to his human nature, or in reference to his divine nature”<sup>32</sup>.

Aquinas starts by applying this principle to Christ in his divinity. From the perspective of Jesus as the Son of God, there is a “similarity” between Christ and creatures in some respect, but also dissimilarity in another way. The similarity between Christ and other creatures is that they both exist “from another”. However, the mode of being “from another” is different. Christ as the Son of God is from another, i.e., from the Father, but He has received the entire fulness of the divine nature in the eternal procession. As Christ not only has *esse*, like the creatures, but is his own *esse*, namely the *Ipsium esse subsistens*, so here Saint Thomas says explicitly that Christ in his divinity has not received a certain particular perfection and nature but possesses the fulness of the divine nature.

If they are explained as referring to Christ the Son of God, then the *as [sicut]* implies a similarity of Christ to creatures in some respect, though not in all respects, which is, that He exists from another. For to be from another is common to Christ the Son of God and to creatures. But they are unlike in another way: the Son has something proper to himself, because He is from the Father in such a way that He receives the entire fullness of the divine nature, so that whatever is natural to the Father is also natural to the Son. Creatures, on the other hand, receive a certain particular perfection and nature. For *as [sicut enim] the Father has life in himself, so [sic] He has also given to the Son to have life in himself (John 5:26)*<sup>33</sup>.

Saint Thomas reiterates the distinction between the mode of being of the Son of God and the mode of being of the creatures. He points out that Christ Himself is accurate in his wording that He is not from the Father as having eaten the Father, but as being generated.

He shows this because, when speaking of his procession from the Father, He does not say: *as [sicut] I eat the Father, so [et] I live because of the Father*, as He said, when speaking of [participating] in his body and blood, *he who eats me, he also will live*

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<sup>32</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, cap. 6, lect. 7, no. 977.

<sup>33</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, cap. 6, lect. 7, no. 977.

because of me. This eating makes us better, for eating implies a certain sharing. Rather, Christ says that He lives because of the Father, not as eaten, but as generating, without detriment to his equality<sup>34</sup>.

In his explanation, Saint Thomas uses *partecipazione* twice, for the participation that our eating of the Eucharist does in fact give. By eating *corporis et sanguinis eius*, we participate in some way in this being from another. One can speak here of *partecipazione per similitudinem* in the divine nature of the Word Incarnate, a true *attingere* to the divine life that we receive in the grace of this sacrament.

Applying the words of Christ to himself in his human nature gives another nuance to the analogy, and more specifically to the precise meaning of *sicut*. We are speaking of the highest mode of *attingere* for any creature not hypostatically united to the Godhead. This is the lifting up of the creature to its highest mode of participation, to the *partecipazione per operationem*, which is the highest possible mode of *partecipare* in the divine nature. The analogy is a closer one now: Christ in his humanity receives spiritual life through his hypostatic union with God, and in a like manner we receive spiritual life when we receive this sublime sacrament. The human life that Christ has is derived from his union with the divine Word, and through the sacrament of the Eucharist we are united with Christ himself. We do also see a difference here, because between the human and divine nature of Christ there is a unity in person, whereas our union with Christ is a union of participation. The union of the human nature of Christ with the divine Word is the *attingere in unitatis divinae personae* and is immediate. The union of the receiver of the Eucharist with Christ is mediate, a *partecipare per operationem*. *Attingere* is the highest mode possible for creatures, an “touching” of the divine nature, that is participation of a mode so high that it, in the words of Fabro, becomes more *attingere* than *partecipare*<sup>35</sup>. Saint Thomas affirms:

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<sup>34</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura Super Evangelium S. Ioannis*, no. 977.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 314.

If we explain this statement as applying to Christ as man, then in some respect the *as [sic] ut* implies a similarity between Christ as man and us: that is, in the fact that as Christ the man receives spiritual life through union with God, so we too receive spiritual life in the communion or sharing in this Sacrament. Still, there is a difference: for Christ as man received life through union with the Word, to whom He is united in person; while we are united to Christ through the sacrament of faith<sup>36</sup>.

In concluding, the Angelic Doctor adds that Christ in fact wants his words not to refer to the divine alone, or to only the human nature, but to both. The fact that Christ both says, “sent me” and “Father”, respectively, refers to his human nature and divine nature.

And so He says two things: *sent me* and *Father*. If we refer these words to the Son of God, then He is saying, *I live because of the Father*, because the Father himself is living. But if they are referred to the Son of man, then He is saying, *I live because of the Father*, because the Father has sent me, i.e., made me incarnate. For the sending of the Son is his incarnation: *God sent his Son, made from a woman* (Gal 4:4)<sup>37</sup>.

According to Saint Thomas, Christ speaks of this effect of the highest possible participation in the Godhead when partaking of the Eucharist as flowing forth from the fulness of the Incarnation.

Before concluding our research, I would like to return briefly to the section where I discussed the gifts of the Holy Spirit, with a length that might have seemed out of place for the focus of this essay. However, it is in that section that Fabro so clearly distinguishes between the two different transcendental participations of *similitudine* and *operatione*. These two types of participations are increasing modes of *atingere*, in relation to the supernatural virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit respectively.

Baptism is characterized by Saint Thomas as the sacrament of faith, where the Eucharist is the sacrament of charity, the *vinculum caritatis*.

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 314.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. C. Fabro, *La Nozione*, p. 314.



Faith is a supernatural virtue, even a theological virtue, but charity, a supernatural and theological virtue, is the greatest of all according to the Apostle Saint Paul (1 Cor. 13:13). Just as Baptism and the supernatural virtues make man to participate *per similitudinem*, by laying the foundations, giving the grace of the supernatural dispositions (as Fabro is wont to say), so through the Eucharist, in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, man is given to participate *per operationem*. This is a mode of *attingere* that approaches the *attingere* of the human nature in the hypostatic union with the divine Word in the most perfect of ways, considered from the perspective of the subject.

## Conclusion

We followed several important steps in Fabro’s argument on the supernatural participations and grace, and his development of the notion of *attingere*, which could be found already in Aquinas’ work. As we reflected on the foundation of the end of the rational creature, on the grace necessary to attain to the end in the most perfect way, we came to the more explicit ways in which man can participate in the divine nature, which truth was stated by Saint Peter so simply and strongly. Following the distinctions made by Fabro in the modes of participation, as he explains Saint Thomas, we saw how the increasing perfection of participation can be described by the notion of *attingere*, such as to show the analogical continuity from the union of the human nature in Christ’s hypostatic union to the union that man can reach with God in the *participazione per operationem*, that not only applies to the dispositions, but in fact implies the whole soul and its operations, as dotted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This mode of *participare*, of *attingere*, the highest perfection of participation possible for a creature, which will be fully complete only in the vision of glory, is given in the sacrament of the Eucharist, the most sublime of sacraments. We saw this explained in the Angelic Doctor’s commentary on John’s Gospel on the supernatural effects of the Eucharist in the soul of man.

Fabro argued thoroughly that the notion of participation is the hermeneutical key to understanding the very foundation of all the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas. In the Angelic Doctor’s commentary on John

6:57 we can now recognize how the metaphysical notion of participation is a necessary hermeneutic key to understand the coherence and deeper meaning of the truths that Aquinas recognizes in the words of Scripture. Saint Thomas' commentary on John 6:57 has thus served as an illustrative example of the importance of the notion of participation, and, in this case, of the added notion of *attingere*.

It is precisely by expanding on the notions presented by Fabro, on participation as a metaphysical notion, then man understood as having a participation of being so unique that, being capable of God by his capacity of understanding and reaching for the infinite, as well as the gift of grace and faith that allow man to participate in a fuller sense of the word in the very divine Being of God Himself. Wanting to describe better how special this mode of participation is, Fabro developed the notion of *attingere*, as already found in Saint Thomas, to describe the fulness of participation that man can reach in this life, of which the culmination in this life truly is the participation in the Holy Eucharist, a foretaste of the reality that will be revealed in full glory in the life hereafter. The concept of participation in its fulness, i.e., including the understanding of *attingere* as was expanded more explicitly by Father Fabro, thus gives a coherent and fuller insight into the philosophical foundation and meaning of the commentary of Saint Thomas Aquinas on such an important passage of the Beloved Disciple's Gospel.

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