



Thomas Aquinas on Human Beings as Image of God

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Abstract

Employing a work of modern conceptual art, a manipulated photograph entitled 'The Missing Person', the author studies Thomas Aquinas on the concept of human beings as image of (the Triune) God. Typical for Aquinas' approach is the theocentric focus of his Christian anthropology. The threefold (nature, grace, glory) 'image of God', a central and dynamic concept in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, is both descriptive and prescriptive in nature, corresponding to an account of both analogical naming of the divine and living according to the vocation to become more and more image of the Triune God.

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Art can sometimes be considered as a mirror of an era. This was certainly the case in a beautiful exposition in the Netherlands, a few years ago, which was entitled 'Zie de mens', the Dutch translation of *Ecce homo*.¹ One hundred paintings and pictures were shown, all of them related to one of the years between 1916 en 2016, beginning with a self-portrait of Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980). Each year one image of a human being. These hundred images had a disturbing effect on me as a visitor of the exposition. I started to doubt the appropriateness of the titel of the exposition: No, it was not 'human being' which was pictured here. A hundred men and women were pictured, apparently without any noticeable constant, except for human nature itself. It was actually absolute diversity that was shown, and yet, perhaps precisely this was a striking feature of the modern vision of humans. Perhaps it portrayed the absolute

¹ 'Zie de mens – honderd jaar, honderd gezichten', Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle, the Netherlands, October 2016 – January 2017. See the book of the exhibition: H. den Hartog Jager, *Zie de mens – honderd portretten* (Amsterdam: Atheneum, 2016). A previous, different version of this study was published in Dutch: 'Thomas van Aquino over de mens als beeld van God', in Rudi te Velde (red.), *Homo sapiens. Thomas van Aquino en de vraag naar de mens* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2017), 139-159. A lecture based on this study was presented at the conference on Intelligence and Will in Thomas Aquinas, University of Navarra, Pamplona, April 26, 2018.

individual which is given birth to in a world that wants to say goodbye to the dark side of collectivism and cherishes difference and plurality?

All of the works of art shown were placed in a chronological sequence, related to the year it was produced. The relationship between art and time in the sense of cultural and social developments was rather explicit. This is also the case with the work of art that, from a philosophical and theological perspective, has become dear to me, and to which I would like to draw the reader's attention to begin with. It is a picture made by the Dutch artist Ger van Elk (1941-2014), made in 1976, which is called 'The missing person'.² Ger van Elk belonged to a movement which is called conceptual art. This kind of art expresses a set of ideas, and its works of art are actually only interesting in combination with the very knowledge of this set of ideas. Now, the central theme of the artist in all of his work is: attempting to see what cannot be seen; to make the invisible visible, to image that which cannot be imagined.



² This photograph of Van Elk's picture, by Peter Cox, is published here through the courtesy of Pictoright Amsterdam 2020.

What do we see here? We see a rather traditional interior, in which four men are seated at a dinner table. These four are enjoying a bread meal, and all of them are looking through their glasses at a person which is not pictured. At the head of the table is an empty chair, on which that person should have been seated. But there appears only what looks like a green blur. The picture is of course manipulated, which we can see in the blur, the colours and the shades. Sometimes it is interpreted as related to pictures that were retouched by dictatorial regimes. But I think that it is more important to notice that the image of the missing person is drawn by those who are present. We know nothing of the person who is invisible, except that which we might deduce from the table mates. Who a person is, is determined by his 'neighbours.' Identity is something we also derive from neighbours or something which is provided for by neighbours. Indeed, a hazardous affair. For one is inclined to assume that the missing person must be a male, formally dressed, and with glasses. But there is no necessity in this; it could also be a young exuberantly dressed woman... However, if we may assume that the missing person is also the person presiding the table, who invited the others for lunch, than it seems to be more likely that we should look for those traits which the four men have in common. What they have in common should provide us with an image of the invisible, missing person. And so we can imagine the unimaginable, see what is not there to be seen directly.

At the exhibition there was a short explanation of the manipulated photograph. It had a rather surprising last sentence: the artist "Van Elk thus emphasizes in a smart manner that someone can be very present, by emphatically staying out of view – which is indeed a mechanism with which God has built a beautiful career."³ I would like to suggest that we ignore the possible mocking undertone of this comment, and take it as such: are there ways in which this work of art is relevant for our search of the divine? Can we somehow imagine the unimaginable divine? What can we learn from it?

And so we arrive at the topic that I would like to discuss: human beings as an image of God, and what Thomas Aquinas teaches on this subject. After some introductory remarks, I will first dwell on the subject of analogy, similitude and image. Secondly I will summarize Aquinas' position in four points. Thirdly I will argue that 'image of God' is a central concept in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, and fourthly I will elucidate the four points that I previously indicated. Finally we will return to the picture of the missing person.

1. Introductory Remarks

In the book of Genesis, in the first creation story, humans are indeed called image of God, *imago Dei*. Few texts of Scripture have called for more reflection than this one:

³ Den Hartog Jager, *Zie de mens*, 132.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gn 1, 26-27).

Humankind is image of God, and in this respect different from all other living creatures. All other living creatures are placed under the dominion of humankind, since only humankind is image of God.

Many read these verses as primarily an explanation or even a legitimation of humankind's rule over the earth. Just as God rules humankind, so humankind rules the world. Such an interpretation has become the object of severe criticism. Humankind should not place itself above the rest of creation, should not in the first place use and exploit the other creatures, but should first and foremost consider itself to be part of the larger whole of creation. Such criticism says that the idea of humankind as image of God is in fact part of an obsolete vision that is responsible for humankind exploiting and damaging the natural world.

Whatever is true about this criticism, interestingly enough Thomas Aquinas is not at all inclined, when he explains this idea of 'image of God' to as it were look down and consider human beings as ruler of what is placed under them.⁴ Thomas does not look down, but following St. Augustine he looks up. It is not that humankind is meant to exercise dominion, but to be similar to God and to become more and more image of God. This has to do with the theology of creation, with the theology of sin, but also with Christ, who as Son of God is image of God eminently, *par excellence*. Of course, not only 'looking down' encountered criticism, this also applies to 'looking up'. Ludwig Feuerbach and other critics of religion consider what Genesis says as typical for human beings who rise to the position of God and project themselves as God. However, we will see that Thomas Aquinas himself is very conscious of this mechanism and acknowledges the hazardous nature of projecting the four photographed men to the missing person.

2. Analogy, Similitude and Image

The thought of Thomas Aquinas is radically theocentric, aimed at God. His theology concerns God and all other things under the aspect of being related to God. So, also his anthropology is in the first place of a God-ordered, theological nature. The relationship to God is the primary relationship that Aquinas acknowledges for human beings. It is a relation which is disturbed by sin, by turning away from God. And it is

⁴ I do not think it is true, but have to refer now to for instance the document "Communion and Stewardship" of the International Theological Commission (2004) or to Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, nrs. 65-66.

also a relation that is restored by the Son of God incarnate, who is called the perfect image of the Father. This relation is taken care of with help of the Holy Spirit in the space of the church, with a special and concrete role for the sacraments, and aimed at the final end of beatific vision and union with God. Human beings are both created as image of God *and* are put on the road, as image to the One whose image they are.

Aquinas's interpretation of human being as image of God is not in the first place about human beings, but in the first place about God. The fact that Aquinas regards human beings being elevated above the other corporeal creatures, not in the first place as justification for dominion, but as the difference which makes human beings, unlike other corporeal beings, similar to God, is a case in point.

As image of God human beings are enabled (*and* called) to approach God and attempt to understand and love Him, and to express that understanding in language, and that love in deeds. It is their intelligence and their ability to love which makes human beings different from other corporeal creatures. Here there are two aspects which are typical of Aquinas's thought. To human beings God is principally incomprehensible. On the one hand: God cannot be defined, God cannot be subsumed in any class of things. No concept, no word, no sentence can comprehend God as God is. And yet, on the other hand, human beings are able to understand, name and love God. For understanding and naming there are two ways of knowing and speaking available: the way which leads from the created to the Creator, and the other way around, the way that leads from the Creator to the created. The first way mentioned could be called a philosophical way, the second theological. The second depends on God who reveals Himself, for instance in the stories that are told in Scripture and the names for God that are employed there. The first way takes its point of departure in created reality and attempts on that basis to go forward to a genuine understanding of God. Here it is that the well-known adage of Aquinas applies: we cannot know what God is, only what He is not.⁵ In fact, this adage applies to both ways of knowing, because also where God reveals Himself, He is bound by created mediations with all restrictions that belong to these. Our language does not contain, by definition, words that totally do justice to God.

Analogy is important in both ways of knowing. On the basis of the relation of creation *and* on the basis of faith there is a similarity, a likeness between God and human beings. In all cases this is a similarity within a much larger dissimilarity. What indeed could bridge the gap between eternity and time, between perfection and imperfection, between unity and multitude, between unchangeability and change? Well now, analogy has everything to do with human beings as image of God. As image of God, human beings are both the cause and the effect of that analogy. Cause in this respect, that because human beings are image of God, they are able to know and love God. Effect in this respect, that because human beings know and love God, they become image of God. There is, Aquinas says, no equality between God and

⁵ *STh* I, q. 3, proemium.

human beings. The unity of God and human beings is not according to number, or species or class, but only according to analogy or proportion.⁶ The image exists, but it is not a perfect image.

3. Aquinas' Position Summarized in Four Points

Before we take a closer look at the core text in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, let me summarize his position in four points:

a. God creates human beings in his image and likeness. Only human beings become image of God. The reason for this must lie in what human beings distinguishes from other corporeal creatures, namely in the powers to know and to love. This created likeness offers an analogy between human beings and God.

b. This likeness applies to all human beings, male and female; in this respect all human beings are equal. There are, however, differences between male and female, as there are also differences between the images of God that human beings can be. Aquinas distinguishes three types of image: the image that is given by nature (*imago naturalis*), the image that is given by grace (*imago gratiae*) and the image that is conferred in final glory (*imago gloriae*).

c. 'Image of God' is the answer to the question to what end human beings are created: to become, as image of God, more and more image of God. To become more and more image of God consists of more and more knowing and loving the Triune God. For a human being becomes what he knows and loves, and this applies above all to knowing and loving God.

d. The God Aquinas is talking about when talking about the image of God, is the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

4. 'Image of God' as Key Concept in the *Summa Theologiae*

In the next section we will turn to question 93 of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, where Aquinas treats this topic. But let us first establish that *imago Dei* is indeed a key concept in the *Summa Theologiae*. As is well-known, the *Summa* consists of three parts, that are construed according to the schema of *exitus* and *reditus*, that is God and the flowing forth of everything from God on the one hand, and the return of everything to God on the other.⁷ The first part deals with God, creation and human being. It concerns the procession of creatures from God, that is the production of creatures, the different creatures that are created, notably angels and human beings, and the conservation and government of creation. The third part of the *Summa* concerns the return to God, introduced with the incarnation of the Son of God, the mysteries of his

⁶ *STh* I, q. 93, a. 1, ad 3.

⁷ A critique of this interpretation as well as an alternative can be found in R. te Velde, *Aquinas on God. The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot-Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 11-18.

life, death and resurrection, and the sacraments. If Aquinas were given time, eschatology would have been the last subject treated, but unfortunately he was not. Between the first and the third part the second, central and largest part of the *Summa* deals with human happiness and human action. This part talks about human beings as independent, endowed with a free will and having their behaviour in their own hands. This is exactly what Aquinas says in the preface of the second part:⁸

Man is made to God's image, and since this implies, so Damascene tells us, that he is intelligent and free to judge and master of himself, so then, now that we have agreed that God is the exemplar cause of things and that they issue from his power through his will, we go on to look at this image, that is to say, at man as the source of actions which are his own and fall under his responsibility and control.⁹

This text expresses well that for Aquinas the whole of the second part of the *Summa* deals with human beings as image of God, that is about human beings in respect of their moral action. But it is also striking that Aquinas talks about God as *exemplar*, as example; in German and in Dutch the word is 'Vorbild' or 'voorbeeld', which literally translated would be something like 'pre-image' or original image. This indicates to a certain extent the first part of the *Summa*. In that first part the eternal Son of God is given the name *imago* as one of its personal names, since the Son is in eternity the perfect image of the Father. The eternal procession of the Son from the Father, translates into the temporal procession of human beings from God. Those human beings therefore are not only image of the Father, but image of the Triune God. In the third and last part of the *Summa* the incarnate Son of God, Christ, is central; Christ as man is for human beings the road back to God, as the *exemplar*. Through his work of redemption, Christ opens the road for renewal of the image of God that human beings carry within themselves, and grants his sacraments as help for this renewal.¹⁰

For these reasons I consider the concept of 'image of God' as a key concept which is able to capture the whole of the architecture of the *Summa Theologiae*.

5. Human Beings as Image of God in *Quaestio* 93

There are nine questions concerning the topic of human beings as image of God that Aquinas discusses. The first is whether there indeed is an image of God in human beings. The affirmative answer calls for a second question, whether this also applies

⁸ *STh* I-II, prologue.

⁹ Aquinas mentioned these words from John Damascene twice already in his question on human beings as the image of God: *STh* I, q. 93, a. 5 obj. 2, and a. 9 c. This is another indication of the strong connection between the theology of human beings as image of God and of human moral action, the core of the *Summa*.

¹⁰ See Anton M. ten Klooster, "The Beatitudes, Merit, and the Pursuit of Happiness in the *Prima Secundae*: The Action of the Holy Spirit at the Heart of Moral Theology", in *Nova et Vetera* 18.1 (2020), 179-200, 195.

to irrational creatures. This possibility is of course already excluded by the text of Genesis, and receives its denial through quotation of Augustine's commentary on Genesis: human beings are image of God through the gift of intelligence, which places human beings above irrational animals. Since angels possess an intelligence which is more perfect than human intelligence, Aquinas indicates in the third article that in an absolute sense angels are more image of God than human beings. The next two articles are interesting for us, since they present questions that modern people also ask. Article 4 addresses the issue whether the image of God is found in all human beings alike: for instance male and female, sinners and faithful. Article 5 addresses the relationship between the one and the triune God: is in human beings the image found of the one or of the triune God? And given the spiritual nature of the image of God in human beings: in what sense do the non-spiritual creatures resemble God? This is the subject of the sixth article, which is treated extensively. It discusses the ways in which the non-spiritual creatures can be called traces of God. Articles 7 and 8 form an inheritance of Augustine, who locates an image of the triune God in the spiritual functioning of human beings. The ninth and last article discusses the different conceptual content of the terms 'image' and 'likeness': why does Genesis use these two words?

So, the questions Aquinas formulates in the *Summa Theologiae*, concern the content of concepts used, the difference between human beings and other creatures, equality and distinction between human beings as image of God, and the trinitarian character of this image. As I mentioned, his position can be summarized in four points. Let me now further elaborate these four points.

5.1 Image of God – by Approximation

Aquinas's primary explanation of the idea of an image of God in human beings is aimed at establishing a certain balance; 'image' does add something to 'likeness', because not anything which is like something else can be called an image of that something else; to be an image of something the thing must have a certain imprint of expression of the thing imaged; there must be a certain imitation. So image is more than likeness. But on the other hand image is less than equality; only a perfect image is equal to its exemplar. This we only encounter in the Son of God. The image of God that human beings are, thus is an imperfect image and does not entail equality. A king finds a perfect image of himself in his son, but an imperfect one on a coin which bears his image. So human beings are image of God by approximation, and this is why the text in Genesis speaks about '*ad imaginem et similitudinem*', as the Vulgate has. Aquinas interprets this preposition *ad* as an *accessus*, an approach which fits something which is at a distance.¹¹ This reading brings human beings, who are at a distance, to approximate God and in doing so they become an image, a likeness of God. It is as if

¹¹ *STh* I, q. 93, a. 1 c., ad 2 and a. 5 ad 4. Aquinas' interpretation, despite his lack of knowledge of Hebrew, is similar to modern interpretations, cf. *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (third edition) s.v. Gottebenbildlichkeit.

human beings were already existent, and brought by God to a potential resemblance with Him. Human beings become image of God; God by approximation.

Thomas also makes clear that the thought that human beings are created as image of God does not contradict the Old Testament prohibition to make images of God. "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol?", Isaiah says (40, 18-19). The images that are prohibited are physical images, whereas human beings are images of God according to their intelligent spirit. Aquinas amplifies this in the second article of question 93, where he explains that irrational creatures, or the sun's radiation, or even the whole of the universe in a certain respect can be considered to participate in God as their cause. For this reason there is a certain likeness, and something of an image. But to be able to speak of an image in full there has to be a likeness in kind, or at least something which is typical of the exemplar which is reproduced in the image, such as a likeness of shape. A worm which springs from a man is not an image of man as man, and the same goes for something white, which is not an image of a white exemplar as such.

When Aquinas discusses these various other possible images of God suggested by the objections, he gives two fundamental statements. The sun's radiation could be called, in a certain respect, an image of divine goodness, as Pseudo-Dionysius says. But that which is essential to the image of God that human beings are, is lacking in the sun's radiation, that is the dignity, the intrinsic worth of its nature. Human beings are image of God because of their intelligent nature, and therefore they have their high dignity, with all moral consequences that go with it. The other possible image of God is the universe. In a certain respect the universe perhaps is a more perfect image of God than intelligent creatures, but in another respect, which is more important, not: intelligent creatures namely are *capax summi boni*, they have a capacity for the highest good, a capacity to know and love God, and this the universe does not have.

5.2 Image of God – In Every Human Being but Not the Same Image

All human beings are image of God, and thus all human beings are equal. Aquinas emphasizes this equality for men and women, and brings to mind that Genesis explicitly says: "in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them".¹² Aquinas, however, also stipulates that the ways in which human beings are image of God are different. Such is the case for men and women, for those who do or do not live in a state of grace, and for those who are in heaven.

The difference between men and women is a secondary one. Primary is that both are gifted with an intellectual nature and therefore image of God. Secundarily, however, is what St. Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians (11, 7-9); there is a difference between men and women, since man is the image of God as beginning and

¹² *STh* I, 93, a. 4 ad 1. Cf. 93, a. 6 ad 2 where Aquinas says the same in other words: the image of God does not admit of a sexual distinction.

end; for man is the beginning and end of woman, just as God is the beginning and end of all creation.

The image which is primary, in which men and women are one, does have different forms or stages. For a human being who gravely sins, does something which affects his likeness to God. He loses in a sense the image of God he is; He does not lose the natural aptitude for understanding and loving God, but he does lose his actual knowledge and love of God. And a human being who is admitted by God to eternal beatitude, is image of God in yet another way. For the faithful have only an imperfect knowledge and love of God, but the beatified see God face to face, and their knowledge and love are thus perfect.

And so Aquinas distinguishes a threefold image of God in human beings: image according to rational nature, image according to grace, and image according to glory.¹³ This threefold distinction makes clear that we are not only concerned with an anthropological, but also with a salvation historical distinction. Aquinas reckons here with the influence of the different stages in salvation history concerning the relationship between God and human beings. So he speaks of the image of creation, of re-creation, and of likeness (*similitudo*). And next to this the distinction has an epistemological character as well, since it also accounts for the different possibilities and degrees of knowledge of God.¹⁴

Let me finally emphasize that even though Aquinas distinguishes between different images of God among human beings, he does not distinguish between different degrees of dignity. The dignity awarded to human beings being in the image of God, is founded upon the worthiness of their nature. Since this nature is universal to all human beings, this dignity is universal to all human beings as well, regardless of their sex or state of grace.

5.3 Image of God – Vocation of Human Beings

Already in the first sentence of *quaestio* 93, Aquinas places the issue of the image of God in human beings in the framework of the purpose of the creation of human beings. Human beings are created to be image of God, and image of God human beings are in order to be able to understand and love God.¹⁵ But the discussion of this

¹³ *STh* I, q. 93, a. 4. Elsewhere Aquinas employs slightly different formulations. In *QD De Potentia* he mentions *vestigium*, *imago creationis* and *imago recreationis* (IX, a. 9); in *STh* I, q. 33, a. 3 *similitudo vestigii*, *similitudo imaginis*, *similitudo gratiae*, and *similitudo gloriae*.

¹⁴ Cf. F.J.A. de Grijns, *Godelijk mensontwerp, Een thematische studie over het beeld Gods in de mens volgens het Scriptum van Thomas van Aquine* (Hilversum/Antwerpen: Paul Brand, 1967), 32. See also D. J. Merriell, *To the Image of the Trinity: A Study in the Development of Aquinas' Teaching* (Toronto: PIMS, 1990), and Klaus Krämer, *Imago Trinitatis: Die Gottebenbildlichkeit des Menschen in der Theologie des Thomas von Aquin* (Freiburg i. B.: Herder, 2000).

¹⁵ As is mentioned explicitly in a quotation from Augustine in *STh* I, q. 93, a. 7 ad 4: "Si secundum hoc facta est ad imaginem Dei anima rationalis quod uti ratione atque intellectu ad intelligendum et conspiciendum Deum potest, ab initio quo esse coepit fuit in ea Dei imago" (*De Trinitate* XIV, 4).

question itself accentuates that to be image of God is the life's mission of any human being. Aquinas does this, in the first place, by distinguishing not only a natural image, but also an image of grace and an image of glory. But when he compares the way in which human beings make God present to the way in which the rest of creation makes God present, he refers to two important sayings of Saint Paul.

Aquinas compares the image of God in human beings with traces, *vestigia* of God that can be found in the rest of creation, and determines the proper aspect of the image to be a mental, spiritual representation of God, something which traces do not do. In this context Aquinas quotes two sayings of Paul that not only express the spiritual character of representation, but also clarify that we are dealing here with the life's mission of human beings: "be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, [which is created according to God and which is renewed in the image of Him who created him]" (Eph 4, 23). The renewal of human beings, which is achieved by putting on the new man, has reference to the mind. This renewal, Aquinas says, Paul attributes to God's image: "Putting on the new man, who is being renewed for the recognition of God, according to the image of Him who created him" (Col 3, 10).¹⁶ The new man is the man who lives according to the image of God that he bears within himself. According to that image human beings know God, and according to that image human beings renew themselves. They grow to be more and more the image of God, the God they get to know better and better, and this is their life's mission.

5.4 Image of God – One and Threefold

The tradition of the theology of the image of God is dominated by Augustine. Augustine employs the belief that human beings are image of God to search for analogies of the Triune God in the human mind. He comes up with quite a number of those analogies, such as *mens*, *notitia*, *amor*, or *memoria*, *intelligentia*, *voluntas*. We need to emphasize that these analogies do not belong to the first way of knowledge of the divine, the more philosophical one, that we mentioned above, but to the second, the more theological one; it attempts to understand the revelation of God as Triune, using a variety of analogies taken from the human mind, later called intrapersonal or intrasubjective psychological analogies.¹⁷

This search to understand how there can be one divine nature in God, while three divine persons differ from each other because of their relations of origin, calls forth a question that we mentioned before, but in a different manner. The question concerns the universality of the image of God in each person. For there are good reasons to assume that the image of God in each human being concerns divine nature, and not so much the trinity of persons. Does not Augustine himself say that the

¹⁶ *STh* I, q. 93, a. 6 s.c.

¹⁷ Anne Hunt, *Trinity. Nexus of the Mysteries of Christian Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 23, 35 and passim. Cf. Kevin O'Reilly, o.p., *The Hermeneutics of Knowing and Willing in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Louvain: Peeters Publishers, 2013).

operations of God *ad extra*, certainly including his work of creation, are one, of one God? How can the human mind represent the trinity of God? And furthermore, if the image would be threefold, would it not be the case that our natural knowledge of God would be knowledge of God triune, whereas this is exactly what the tradition denies?

The primary answer to this question says that the human being who is mostly image of God, is image of the God who knows and loves Himself, and therefore image of the Triune God.¹⁸ One can admit that in the tradition talk of the image of God often has been talk about representing the essential, natural properties of God, such as intelligence, or freedom, or goodness. But, so Aquinas says, we have to understand that the distinction of the divine persons must be a distinction which fits to the one divine nature. And if the image of God follows divine nature, this does not exclude that the trinity of persons is imaged as well; on the contrary, the one follows the other. Image of God, Aquinas says, concerns both divine nature and divine persons.¹⁹ And there is no reason to assume that that image of the Triune God in human beings is so strong, that one could conclude to a Triune God apart from faith; faith in the Triune God remains just that: faith.

First is that the human being who is mostly image of God, is an image of God who knows and loves Himself, and so an image of the Triune God. When he elaborates this (q. 93, aa. 7-8), Aquinas situates the image of God in human beings not in the first place in the intelligent powers, but in the first place in the understanding of and love for God; in the conceived word (understanding) of divine knowledge and the love that flows forth from it. In the end, Aquinas not so much emphasizes the spiritual nature of human beings as such, but instead that which human beings according to their spiritual nature undertake in God's direction. Emphasis is not so much on what human beings are, but on what human beings become. And since each human being in that way can become image of God, they are image of God. Aquinas's conception of *imago Dei* is indeed a dynamic one.

6. Academic Sermon

The above finds a nice summary in a passage from one of the academic sermons of Aquinas, sermons that have recently been published in a textcritical version.²⁰ The fifth sermon, *Ecce Rex Tuus*, is a sermon on the first Sunday of Advent. Aquinas focuses on the kingship of Christ. Christ can be called your, that is to say our, king, because we can carry his image:

First, I say that Christ is called "your king," that is, the king of humankind, because of the likeness of his image. You know that we say that those who wear

¹⁸ *STh* I, q. 93, a. 4 c.

¹⁹ *STh* I, q. 93, a. 5.

²⁰ *Sermones*, in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia*, Vol. 44.1, ed. L.J. Bataillon o.p. et al. (Paris: Commissio Leonina, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2014).

the decorations of the king belong to the king in a special way, as if they bear his image. And although every creature is God's, still we say more specifically that there is only one creature of God that bears God's image, and this is the human being. Thus we read in Gn 1, 26: "Let us make the human being to our image and likeness." In what does this likeness consist? I say it does not apply to a physical likeness, but to the intelligible light of the mind: in God is the originality of the intelligible light, and we have the sign of this light. Thus we read in Ps 4, 7: "The light of your face, O Lord, is imprinted (*signatus*) upon us"; humankind bears the seal (*sigillum*) of this light. Hence this image is created in man. But it happens that it is diminished and obscured through sin. Ps 73, 20 reads: "And you will bring their images back to nothing." Because of this, God has sent his Son, in order to reform this image that is deformed by sin. Thus we apply ourselves to be reformed in accordance with the Apostle who says: "As you lay aside the old man, put on the new man, which is created according to God and which is renewed in the image of him who created him" [Eph 4, 24]. And how are we renewed? Surely, when we follow Christ. This image, which is deformed in us, is perfect in Christ. Thus we ought to bear the image of Christ, as we read in the Apostle's Letter to the Corinthians: "Just as we have borne an image of the earthly, let us bear the image of the Heavenly" [1 Cor 15, 49] and in today's Epistle reading: "Put on Christ" [Rom 3, 14], which means "act like Christ"; the perfection of the Christian life consists in this.²¹

7. Returning to 'The Missing Person'

We began looking at the modern artist's picture entitled 'The Missing Person'. Whoever wants to get to know the person who is not visible, cannot do otherwise than focus on that which the persons who are visible have in common. The visible persons unanimously look at the invisible person. The chair of the invisible one is furthermore placed at the head of the table, and two place settings which are unused mark the distance between the invisible and those present who are visible. How to make the invisible visible, how to imagine the unimaginable?

There is actually a personal story behind this picture. When the artist was twelve years old, and was home alone, he discovered in some cupboard a number of pictures. The pictures portray his mother, but someone had taken a pair of scissors and cut off the other person. The boy's father had left the house when the boy was only six years old, and his parents split up. Never did he see his father again. The artist's father was the missing person of the pictures, the one his mother took away because of hatred, the missing person of his life, absent but present as well.

²¹ Sermon 5, 2.2.1., in: *The Academic Sermons*, Translated by Mark-Robin Hoogland, c.p. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 71-72.

For a while I have been tempted to interpret this picture in a eucharistic way. The bread, the focus, the presence of a blur indicating some sort of personal presence, the participants making the invisible host in a way visible. But since I heard the story of the father, I am more inclined to think in terms of sin, which made the father disappear and which distorted the picture. The missing one who nevertheless maintains some presence, in those who bear his image, who are eager to get to know and love him. And there the work of art gains its relevance for the subject we have been discussing and offers us several interesting possibilities for further reflection.