

## GOD'S PROVIDENCE: DIVINE KNOWLEDGE OF FUTURE CONTINGENTS

LUCIAN PĂULEȚ<sup>1</sup>

**SOMMARIO:** *Provvidenza di Dio: conoscenza divina delle cose contingenti future.* Come può Dio conoscere le cose contingenti future? Usa il suo intelletto trascendente o la sua volontà infallibile? Dio determina le cose contingenti future nell'ordine della creazione? Se lo fa, come viene preservata la libertà umana? Le risposte a queste domande forniscono diversi spunti per la comprensione della dottrina sulla provvidenza, sulla volontà salvifica universale di Dio, sulla predestinazione e sulla libertà umana.

Questo articolo si propone di rivisitare questi temi presentando: I. l'opinione di due scuole teologiche che hanno affrontato la questione (i neotomisti e i molinisti); II. l'insegnamento della Scrittura; III. l'insegnamento di Padri e teologi latini e greci; e IV. l'opinione di San Tommaso d'Aquino sulla prescienza divina.

San Tommaso riassume tutta la tradizione riguardo a questi aspetti. Nella sua comprensione, la conoscenza di Dio è la misura della realtà. Tutte le cose esistono perché sono conosciute da Dio e volute da lui. Questo tipo di conoscenza, in cui è coinvolta la volontà di Dio, è chiamata *conoscenza dell'approvazione*. Per spiegare come Dio conosce le decisioni future degli uomini senza violare la loro libertà, San Tommaso fa appello alla spiegazione dell'eternità. Tuttavia, la conoscenza divina non è causa di cose malvagie.

Si può concludere che in tutta la tradizione ci sono opinioni che Dio può prevedere con il suo intelletto trascendente, anche senza decreti infallibili. Allo stesso tempo, la sua causalità è richiesta per l'esistenza degli esseri, sebbene non delle cose malvagie che sono non esseri.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Lucian Păuleț obtained his doctoral degree in historical and systematic theology at The Catholic University of America in 2018. The title of his dissertation is *The Holy Spirit as the Principle of Ecclesial Unity, Catholicity, Apostolicity and Holiness in the Thought of Yves Congar*. He also published *Pneumatological Christology and Christological Pneumatology According to Yves Congar's Latest Theological Vision*. His areas of interest are ecclesiology and pneumatology. E-mail: lucianpaulet@yahoo.com

A mio parere, la risposta alla domanda principale (Dio conosce le cose per decreti infallibili o per il suo intelletto trascendente?) non puo essere data da una sola scuola di teologia. Entrambe le scuole teologice hanno riconosciuto che la volontà divina e l'intelletto divino sono trascendenti. Tuttavia, ciascuna non riesce a riconoscere l'applicazione della trascendenza divina fatta dall'altra.

**Parole chiave:** conoscenza divina, contingenti futuri, volontà di Dio, intelletto di Dio, neo-tomisti, molinisti, Tommaso d'Aquino, causalità divina, predestinație, libertă umană, Agostino, *massa damnata*.

**REZUMAT:** *Providența lui Dumnezeu: cunoașterea divină a lucrurilor contingente viitoare.* Cum cunoaște Dumnezeu lucrurile contingente viitoare? Le cunoaște prin intelectul transcendent sau prin voința sa infailibilă (care nu dă greș)? Determină definitiv sau predestinează Dumnezeu lucrurile contingente viitoare în ordinea creației? Dacă face acest lucru, cum se păstrează libertatea umană? Răspunsurile la aceste întrebări oferă mai multe perspective pentru înțelegerea doctrinei despre providență, despre voința universală de mântuire a lui Dumnezeu, despre predestinare și libertatea umană.

Acest articol își propune să revizuiască aceste probleme prezentând: I. opinia a două școli teologice care au abordat problema (tomiștii târzi și moliniștii); II. învățătura Scripturii; III. Învățătura Părinților Bisericii și a teologilor latini și greci; și IV. opinia Sfântului Toma de Aquino despre preștiința divină.

Sfântul Toma rezumă întreaga tradiție cu privire la aceste aspecte. În viziunea sa, cunoașterea pe care o are Dumnezeu este măsura realității. Toate lucrurile există pentru că sunt cunoscute de Dumnezeu și dorite de el. Acest tip de cunoaștere, în care este implicată voința lui Dumnezeu, se numește cunoaștere a aprobării. Pentru a explica cum Dumnezeu cunoaște deciziile viitoare ale oamenilor fără a le încălca libertatea, Sfântul Toma apelează la explicația eternității. Cu toate acestea, cunoașterea divină nu este cauza lucrurilor rele.

Se poate concluziona că de-a lungul tradiției există opinii teologice că lucrurile contingente pe care Dumnezeu le poate prevedea prin intelectul său transcendent, chiar și fără hotărârile sale infailibile. În același timp, cauzalitatea sa este necesară pentru existența ființelor, deși nu pentru lucrurile rele care sunt non-ființe.

În opinia mea, răspunsul la întrebarea principală (Dumnezeu cunoaște lucrurile prin hotărârile sale infailibile sau prin intelectul său transcendent?) nu poate fi dat de o singură școală teologică. Ambele școli au recunoscut că voința divină și

intelectul divin sunt transcendente. Cu toate acestea, fiecare dintre ele omite să recunoască aplicarea transcendenței divine făcută de cealaltă.

**Cuvinte cheie:** preștiința divină, lucruri contingente viitoare, voința divină, intelectul divin, scolastica târzie, moliniștii, Toma de Aquino, cauzalitatea divină, predestinare, libertatea umană, Augustin, *massa damnata*.

## Introduction

The doctrine of the divine Providence is grounded in the theology of creation and is linked with several other topics as following: the human freedom, predestination, the sufferance, the problem of evil, chance, miracles, divine foreknowledge. Regarding the divine Providence and foreknowledge, there have been two principal schools that treated about this topic, namely, the older Thomists and the Molinists.

The first school appeals to the divine will as a ground for the divine foreknowledge. The will of God is omnipotent. Therefore, he knows everything that will happen and the divine knowledge is independent of its objects.

The Molinists appeal to the divine intellect to explain divine foreknowledge. They argue against the position of the older Thomists, which considers our knowledge of God as analogous. We know the relation of dependence and collaboration between things as those relations are in creatures. When we talk about the divine foreknowledge, even if we deny any imperfection in God's knowledge, we cannot know the divine foreknowledge in itself. Therefore, the Thomist method is wrong, say the Molinists. Consequently, theologians must appeal to the divine intellect to explain divine foreknowledge.

The older Thomists answer to this saying that a thing must exist so that God can know it. However, nothing can exist if the will of God does not want that thing to exist. In this case, the will of God precedes the intellect. Everything that exists has its existence from a decree of the divine will. God knows everything through his infrustrable decrees. This can apply to the human freedom as well. God can move the human will physically and infrustrably by efficacious grace

without destroying human liberty. They also say that God can move human will only through such decrees.

Some say that their argument is not valid since evil does not require a divine causality.

In the presentation and evaluation of this problem, the material of William G. Most<sup>2</sup> will be used. The first part will be a presentation of the *status quaestiones* in principal schools after St. Thomas. The issue of divine knowledge will be the examined in Scriptures (second part), in Fathers of the Church and theologians (third part), and finally in the teaching of St. Thomas (fourth part).

A strict method is required in this matter: the investigation will begin with revelation and only afterwards metaphysics will be used. If one starts his approach concerning divine foreknowledge with metaphysics, he would end up almost denying the universal salvific will of God. Indeed, if God knows only through his infrustrable decrees, it is difficult to explain universal salvific will and predestination. The thesis that God can know only through his omnipotent will would imply that only those who are known by him would be saved.

William Most suggests that we should appeal to the Revelation and use metaphysics afterwards. Thus, one can find a solution to explain divine foreknowledge and to preserve the universal salvific will of God and human freedom.

## **I. The Opinions of the Principal Schools**

### ***A. The older Thomists***

The older Thomists hold that God moves the human will through his graces<sup>3</sup>. If God moves man with an efficacious grace, man cannot sin. If God offers only a sufficient grace, man can resist. This resistance is a sin because it is at least an omission of human cooperation. Therefore, according to some older Thomists, it is impossible for man not to commit sin if God offers only

---

<sup>2</sup> William Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God*, Front Royal, VA 1997, 497-612.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *De gratia*, Taurini 1947, 179-180.

sufficient grace. In each case, whether God moves by efficient or sufficient grace, God knows what man will do. Furthermore, they say that God can know only through such decrees.

*Critical evaluation of the system*

There is a great objection against older Thomists' system. They say that man cannot obtain efficacious grace in any way by himself. To obtain efficacious grace, he should answer positively to sufficient grace. However, accepting always sufficient grace is the same with having an efficacious grace. Thus, this is a vicious circle. Therefore, this system cannot uphold the universal salvific will of God, making it contradictory with divine Revelation. Since their explanation of divine foreknowledge lies on these decrees of God, one can conclude that this explanation must fail because their system regarding divine decrees cannot be accepted. In conclusion, one has to look for other explanation of divine foreknowledge.

***B. The Molinists***

L. Molina (1535-1600) says:

“[W]e hold that the reason why God certainly knows which alternative of any group of alternatives that depend on a free created will take place, is not the determination of the divine will bending and determining the free created will, but that it is the free decision [on the part of God] by which He decided to create this free will in this or that order of things and circumstances but [we hold that] this decision is not the only [reason why God foreknows] but [that the reason is] this divine decision together with His understanding, in His essence, of any free created will whatsoever, by His natural knowledge, by which knowledge He knows with certitude before that created will makes its decision, what that particular will would do, in its freedom, in the supposition and condition that He would create it, and place it in that particular order of things, although yet [the free will of man] could, if it willed, do the opposite; and if it were going to do [the opposite] as it can, God by that same knowledge and understanding of the free will, in His essence, would have known [it]”<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 505.

In other words, divine will lets the human beings to choose freely while he knows by his knowledge with certitude what a created being will do in his freedom.

According to him, there are two steps in the foreknowledge of a future free act. First, God knows what a particular man would do if he would be placed in certain circumstances with different graces. Here, the Molinists' explanations differ from each other. Some (e.g. Robert Bellarmine) affirm that God knows by his super-comprehension of created causes. Others (e.g. I.M. Dalmau) think that God knows the objective truth of the objects of his knowledge, i.e. he knows the future possible things in themselves. Others do not explain it too clearly<sup>5</sup>.

The second step in Molina's understanding of divine foreknowledge is that God decides to place a man in that particular combination of circumstances and graces. This external placement is important because in this way God does not take away human freedom.

#### *Critical evaluation of the Molinists' system*

Molina says that the certitude of the divine foreknowledge comes from "the loftiness and unlimited perfection of the divine intellect, in virtue of which it knows with certitude that which in itself is uncertain and [it does] this most eminently by comprehension, in its divine essence, of any created will whatsoever that its omnipotence could create"<sup>6</sup>. Even though it is worthy to notice his attempt to deny any determination within man, he cannot explain how divine intellect knows. He explains this only through its "unlimited perfection".

We will explore more difficulties of the Molinist system when we will compare it with the understanding of St. Thomas in regard to the divine knowledge by way of causality<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 506.

<sup>6</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 507. Cf. L. Molina, *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis*, Q. 14, a. 13, disp. 53, memb. 3, (25.10.2020) <http://capricorn.bc.edu/siepm/DOCUMENTS/MOLINA/Molina%20'Concordia'%201588.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> For now, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 14 (ed. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol I, Allen, Texas 1981, pp. 72-86).

### ***C. The Scotists***

Many Scotists think that God knows by his infrustrable decrees. Some of the later Scotists held that God knows by codetermining or by concomitant and non determining decrees. Thus, they make an attempt to avoid any form of determination of the human will by the divine decrees. They held that the decrees are not prior to the free determination of man<sup>8</sup>.

#### *Critical evaluation of the system*

The position according to which God foresees everything through his infrustrable decrees is the same with the opinion of the older Thomists, which was criticized before. Regarding the position of the older Scotists, it is difficult to understand how can God know by decrees which do determine human will and which are not at least logically prior to the human will.

### ***D. Francisco Marín-Sola (1873-1932) and Francisco Muñiz, O.P.***

These theologians believed that God does not foresee by his determining decrees. Muñiz agreed with the Thomists that there are two way of infallible knowledge of the future: the way of causality or of the decrees, and the way of eternity. However, he explains that “the way of eternity always and necessarily supposes the divine causality and divine decree... It is the divine action that puts things in time, and eternity makes them present to God”<sup>9</sup>.

Marín-Sola thinks that there are four stages in the prevision of sin. First, God has a general providence or an antecedent will. This antecedent will is conditioned by the human will which can place an impediment by its defect. Second, God always gives his graces and he knows in his decrees the answer of man and the defect or impediment placed by human will. Third, God chooses freely by his decrees for the consequent will not to impede the sin, or chooses not to give the special grace to remove the opposition already placed by the

---

<sup>8</sup> The summary of the Scotist system is presented by W. Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 516.

<sup>9</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 516-517.

human will. Fourth, God knows the sin of the creature in those decrees of not offering the special grace. Furthermore, Marín-Sola says that the link between the divine decrees and the defect of the creature is not a causal, but a logical link. “To say that the infallibility of that connection comes not from *God*, but from the creature is the same as to say that the infallibility is found in the decree not inasmuch as it is a decree, but inasmuch as its *eternal*”<sup>10</sup>.

*Critical evaluation of those views*

Muñiz makes a very important distinction between the knowledge by the way of causality and by the way of eternity. The way of eternity does not presuppose the way of causality. Knowledge through causality is not a prerequisite for knowledge by way of eternity. Nor is divine causality needed for the defects of human beings. Saying that eternity makes things present to God, he seems to acknowledge that God knows through his transcendent intellect things that are future to us in time but present to God in eternity.

Marín-Sola’s explanation seems confusing to me. On that God knows through his decrees not in as much that they determine the future but in as much as they are eternal. On the other hand, if God does not know by his decrees, he would know by his intellect. However, his development is confusing.

## **II. The Teaching of Sacred Scripture on Foreknowledge**

According to William Most, all theologians agree that the Scripture teaches that God knows everything, even future free contingent acts. This was true until lately when some authors denied the divine omniscient knowledge on basis of Scripture.

John Sanders, for example, rejects the model of divine providence in which God foreknows everything. His main disagreement with the classical understanding of the divine foreknowledge regards the interpretation of the anthropomorphisms in Bible. He says that the theologians who support the non-risk model of providence cannot find in the Bible a rule to distinguish

---

<sup>10</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 517-518. Emphasis Sola’s.



between the anthropomorphisms and literal texts. Sanders thinks that we cannot accept the explanation given by Calvin, Helm and Ware who think that those anthropomorphisms are only means of accommodation” of God’s language for humans, because there is no way for us to know which is the “normal” discourse of God<sup>11</sup>.

Therefore, according to Sanders, we should interpret all the texts in the same way, that is, literally. Whenever the Bible says that God does not know what people will do, we should interpret the text literally. For instance, God intend to test the faith of Abraham (Gen 22:12) in order to find out if he is faithful. God did not know, now, after the test, he knows<sup>12</sup>. Even though God is immutable regarding his project, we cannot admit that he is omniscient regarding the means in accomplishing his project, Sanders concludes.

*Critical evaluation of Sander’s Position on divine foreknowledge*

One can uphold the principle denied by Sanders that there is a contradiction in Bible between God’s transcendence and anthropomorphisms, one has to choose the divine transcendence. Sanders is wrong saying we cannot know God’s “normal” discourse. There are in Scripture two ways of speech of God. The “normal” speech of God presents him as omniscient and transcendent, and the anthropomorphisms present him in his relationship to us. On the one hand, it is true that the anthropomorphisms cannot be literally true because all of them taken together constitute incompatible contradictions of what God must be. On the other hand, the transcendent statements, not being metaphorical or imaginative, can be collectively applied to God without contradiction because they are *denials of imperfections*, not affirmations of limited anthropomorphic perfections. On this basis, we can choose the model of providence in which God is omniscient.

---

<sup>11</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, Downers Grove 1998, 67-68. Furthermore, for a full critique of Sander’s position, one has to state that it is not just a question of biblical language and interpretation. Sanders is also concerned with preserving the real contributions of creatures to the direction of world history. He assumes that God’s omniscience excludes the possibility of the creature actually determining the course of an outcome.

<sup>12</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 52.

Furthermore, Sanders thinks that we cannot know God in himself but only in relation to us. One of his basic assertions is that “God may be different in himself than God with us, but we can have no knowledge of that difference”<sup>13</sup>. However, revelation itself presents God not only in relation with us, but also in himself. He is God for us precisely because he is God in himself. In the Latin Catholic tradition, all theologians agree that economic Trinity reveals truly the immanent Trinity<sup>14</sup>.

In conclusion, we can accept as valid the position of William Most according to whom the Bible teaches that God truly knows the future contingent free acts, but does not explain how.

### **III. The Teaching of Tradition on Divine Foreknowledge**

#### **A. The Greek Fathers**

##### *Athenagoras*

In his *Plea for Christians*, Athenagoras says: “But since we know that God is present day and night to those things which we think and speak, and since we are convinced that since He is all light, he sees the things that are in our hearts”<sup>15</sup>.

Athenagoras does not speak about the foreknowledge of God. However, God knows our thoughts because he is present and “he is all light”. It seems that Athenagoras ascribes the perfection of divine knowledge to God’s intellect rather than to the causality of his will. Even though Athenagoras does not treat about divine foreknowledge, it is sure at least that, according to him, God does not know our thoughts by the way of his decrees.

---

<sup>13</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 30.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Rahner defines this basic axiom of Trinitarian theology: “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity”. (Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel, New York 1998, 22).

<sup>15</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 527. Cf. Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christiani*, 31 (25.10. 2020) <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0205.htm>

*St. Theophilus of Antioch*

St. Theophilus of Antioch writes to Autolyucus: "It pertains to the most high and omnipotent God not only to be everywhere, but also to see all things, and to hear all"<sup>16</sup>.

Like Athenagoras, St. Theophilus does not speak about foreknowledge. He does not say explicitly that God foreknows everything because he is present to all things. However, it seems that Theophilus says that God knows all things because of his transcendence. Furthermore, the acts of seeing and hearing describe rather an act of intellect than of the divine will.

*St. Irenaeus*

St. Irenaeus writes against Marcionites who tried to call God the author of evil: "therefore even now God, since he foreknows all things, has handed over to their infidelity as many as he knows will not believe, and has turned his face away from such ones, *leaving them in the darkness which they chose for themselves*"<sup>17</sup>.

It is clear that Irenaeus teaches that God's reprobation is not previous to the knowledge of their demerits. This means that God foresees before making the decree of reprobation. William Most thinks that the Fathers could not affirm that God foresees demerits by infallible decrees to permit individual sins, as the older Thomists would say, because this is against the universal salvific will of God<sup>18</sup>. Hence, if Irenaeus rejects reprobation by previous knowledge of demerits and he also implicitly rejects divine foreknowledge by infallible decrees, it means that Irenaeus holds that God can foresee at least sins without the use of infallible decrees as the means of his knowledge<sup>19</sup>.

---

<sup>16</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 527.

<sup>17</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 260. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haereses*, 4.29.2. English version in *Ante-Nicene-Fathers: The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, Peabody, Mass., 1885; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2005, p. 502.

<sup>18</sup> See above: *Critical evaluation of the older Thomists' system*.

<sup>19</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 526-527.

*Clement of Alexandria*

Clement of Alexandria writes: “For God knows all things, not only the things that exist, but also the things that will be, and how each one will be; and foreseeing individual moments, He ‘surveys all things and hears all things’, seeing the soul bare within; and through eternity he has thought of each thing individually. [...] For in eternity He sees all things together and each thing individually”<sup>20</sup>.

Clement states that God foresees all things at once because he is eternal. As Boethius will say later, the knowledge by eternity does not imply infrustrable decrees of will. Therefore, one can conclude that Clement teaches that God foresees because he is eternal and without a need of infallible decrees.

*Origen*

Origen says in his commentary on Romans: “A thing will happen not because God knows it as it is as future; but because it is future, it is on the that account known by God, before it exists”<sup>21</sup>.

It seems that Origen teaches that the knowledge of God is not the cause of things. St. Thomas clarifies the doctrine of Origen. “Origen spoke in reference to the aspect of knowledge to which the idea of causality does not belong unless the will is joined to it [...]. But when he says the reason why God foreknows somethings is because they are future, this must be understood according to the cause of consequence, and not to the cause of essence. For if things are in future, it follows that God knows them; but not that the futurity of things is the cause why God knows them”<sup>22</sup>.

In my opinion, we should sustain the position of St. Thomas because Origen was not interested at that time in formal distinction between cause of consequence and cause of essence. No one can expect that he may use this language. However, St. Thomas, believes that Origen does not think that God knows things because they exist, but rather that they exist because they are

---

<sup>20</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 528.

<sup>21</sup> St. Thomas, *The Summa Theologica*, I, q.14.8 ob. 1.

<sup>22</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I q. 14.8 ad 1.

known by God in order of causality. Thomas is concerned to argue that God's knowledge is not caused by the things he knows (as with us), but the things that exist because God's knowledge causes them (and is hence prior to them). His interpretation of Origen is to prevent someone an authority like Origen's to argue for what is an heretical opinion — that God needs the world in order to know it. This is important for understanding how the next three Fathers can hold up that the divine foreknowledge does not determine the decisions of free human will.

*Eusebius of Caesarea*

Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Preparatio Evangelica* states: "If it is necessary to speak, we will say that foreknowledge is not the cause of the things that happen (for God does not lay hold of the one who is foreseen as sinning when he does sin) but [we will say] a thing that is more unexpected but true: that a thing is the cause of the foreknowledge of itself being such [as it is]"<sup>23</sup>.

In my opinion, Eusebius' statement should be interpreted that a sinner truly is the cause of his state and is the reason why God has always foreknown to become the sinner he chose to be.

*St. Epiphanius*

St. Epiphanius declares something in the same line of thought: "For we do not do these things because Scripture predicted it; but Scripture predicted it because we were going to do them, on account of antecedent knowledge of God"<sup>24</sup>.

*St. John Chrysostom*

St. John Chrysostom teaches something similar regarding the relationship between Scripture and the scandals that took place in history. "So his prediction [that scandals would come] did not bring scandals. Banish the thought! Neither did they happen for the reason that he foretold them; but he predicted them for the reason that they were definitely going to happen"<sup>25</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 529.

<sup>24</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 531.

<sup>25</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 531.

First remark is that one should interpret these texts as St. Thomas interpreted Origen. Therefore, one cannot say that Fathers affirm that the upcoming things are the cause of the divine foreknowledge (of their being foreknown). As St. Thomas said, it is rather a cause of consequence; if things are in future, it follows that God knows them, as how the future agent causes them to be.

Second, in these three texts it appears that divine foreknowledge does not determine the free will of those who will sin. Hence, God can foresee even without the use of decrees as meaning of knowing.

#### *Other Greek Fathers*

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, St. John Damascene reject the doctrine of reprobation before seeing the demerits<sup>26</sup>. One can use the same method as in case of Irenaeus. If these Fathers reject God reprobating before seeing the demerits and also reject that God can foresee through his infallible decrees (since this would be against the universal salvific will of God), this means that the same Fathers claim that God can foresee at least sins without the means of infallible decrees. Therefore, it seems all these Fathers agree that God can foresee without infrustrable decrees.

### ***B. The Latin Fathers and Theologians before St. Thomas***

#### *St. Hilary, St. Ambrose and St. Jerome*

St. Hilary, St. Ambrose and St. Jerome reject reprobation before foreseen demerits<sup>27</sup>. The same conclusion as the previous one can be applied to their teaching, namely, that they think that God can foresee without infallible decrees.

#### *St. Augustine*

“There can be no [predestination] without foreknowledge: but there can be foreknowledge without predestination. For in his predestination, God

---

<sup>26</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 530-533.

<sup>27</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 533-534.

foreknew the things that He Himself was going to do... But he is able to foresee even the things that he does not do so, such as all sins"<sup>28</sup>.

"God would have willed to keep the first man in that salvation in which he was made... if He had foreseen that he will have a perpetual will of remaining as he was made, without sin"<sup>29</sup>.

It is known that St. Augustine founded the theory of the *massa damnata*, of negative reprobation before prevision of demerits. However, if for Augustine God reprobates before foreseeing demerits, nevertheless he foresees by other means than through infallible decrees.

In the first text, Augustine says that God can foresee without causing. God can foresee the sins, which he does not cause. The question is, does God foresee good deeds through his infallible decrees and the sins through his infallible permissions of them, as the older Thomists say? William Most answers negatively<sup>30</sup>. In the second text, Augustine discusses the prelapsarian condition of man. God would had given Adam the grace to remain in that state of grace, if Adam would have wanted this. It was Adam's power to persevere or to fail in this perseverance. This means he could persevere with the grace that God had given him. A further causation on God's part is not involved since he had already given to Adam the necessary help to persevere. In conclusion, it seems that Augustine says that God foresaw Adam's fall without infallible permission since it was in Adam's power not to fall.

Furthermore, if Augustine teaches that God foreknows without an infallible permission of sin, one can conclude that Augustine thinks that God knows by his divine intellect.

### *Boethius*

It seems that Boethius thinks that future contingents as future do not contain definite or determined truth before they happened. Hence, as future, they are not knowable. Not even God could know them as future. Nonetheless,

---

<sup>28</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 536.

<sup>29</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 536.

<sup>30</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 538-539.

God knows them, not as future but as always present in his all-encompassing eternity. This idea is taken from Aristotle and not from Revelation<sup>31</sup>.

Boethius describes divine foreknowledge as following:

“For there are two necessities: one is simple, for example, it is necessary that all men are mortal; the other of condition, for example, if you know that someone is walking, it is necessary that he is walking. For what anyone knows, that cannot be other than it is known to be. But this conditional necessity by no means entails that simple necessity. For it is not the nature that produces this [conditional] necessity, but the addition of the condition. For no necessity forces a man to walk who is walking voluntarily, even then when he is walking, it is necessary true that he is walking. Therefore, in the same way, if Providence sees anything as present, it is necessarily true that is so, even though by nature it is not necessary that it be so. But God sees those future things that come from free will as present. These things, then in relation to the divine view, become necessary by condition of divine knowledge: but considered in themselves, they do not lose the absolute liberty of their nature”<sup>32</sup>.

This full quotation helps us understand how the divine foreknowledge does not impose necessity on the things known. Furthermore, divine knowledge is not conditioned by the nature nor the existence of things. God knows them as present to him and not as future. The future contingents are indeterminate to us, but in relation to God they become necessary by the condition of the divine knowledge, that is, if God knows them as present, they must be true.

It remains the question if Boethius thinks that God knows the future free contingents (future in regard to us) as present to him by this intellect or by his decrees. As we have seen, he thinks that the future decrees are not yet determined in themselves and therefore they are unknowable to God in themselves; they are knowable only in his divine present, that is eternity. W. Most considers that Boethius had two ways to explain how God can make those things knowable. God either would determine them through his infallible decrees or would make them knowable to him by making them present to him.

---

<sup>31</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 544.

<sup>32</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 543.



If God would make them knowable by determining them, he would have no need of eternity in order to know them. If Boethius explains the knowledge of God by recourse to eternity, it means that he excludes the knowledge of God through infallible decrees<sup>33</sup>. In my opinion, the conclusion of W. Most regarding Boethius understanding of divine knowledge is well grounded, logic and valid.

In conclusion, Boethius is the first Christian writer who explains explicitly that the eternity is necessary to God in order to know the future things which are unknowable in themselves. The future contingents remain undetermined in themselves as future. Consequently, the human freedom is not annihilated. At the same time, these future contingents are always present to God in his eternity and therefore God can know them infallibly.

*St. Anselm*

St. Anselm follows the teaching of St. Augustine. He clearly states: "If whatever things exist take their being from the knowledge of God, God is the maker and author of evil works, and so he is not just in punishing wicked... However, this question can easily be solved, if we first note that good [...] is really some being; but evil [...] lacks all existence"<sup>34</sup>. The evil does not require the divine causality because evil is a lack of being. Furthermore, St. Augustine, as we saw above, does not teach the theory of divine foreknowledge through infallible permission of sin. Hence, it is presumed that St. Anselm, who follows St. Augustine, does not hold that God can know only through infallible decrees.

St. Anselm follows also Boethius using the theory of simple necessity and necessity of condition or supposition and the explanation of divine knowledge through eternity<sup>35</sup>. As we have seen, the appeal to eternity excludes divine knowledge of future contingents by infallible decrees.

*Peter Abelard*

Even though Peter Abelard was criticized for some theological statements, he was not criticized in this matter. He writes: "Now that we have considered

---

<sup>33</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 545, 581-582.

<sup>34</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 548.

<sup>35</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 549.

[God's] power and its effects, let us discuss a bit about wisdom. So, in wisdom there is included providence or, what is the same thing, foreknowledge and predestination"<sup>36</sup>.

He discussed divine knowledge by divine power and will in the previous chapter. He explains now that the divine knowledge is also possible through divine intellect. His explanations and distinctions follow those of Boethius (through God's eternity) and Augustine.

*Peter Lombard*

Peter Lombard follows Origen in saying that the divine foreknowledge causes the existence of things and not that things cause the existence of knowledge. However, like St. Augustine, he claims that divine knowledge causes only the existence of good things and not of evil. At the same time, he recognizes that God knows also the evil. He speaks about two types of necessity as Boethius and Anselm, although he does not mention eternity<sup>37</sup>.

In conclusion, Peter Lombard follows the previous tradition, that is, God can foreknow without the recourse of infallible decrees.

*St. Albert the Great*

St. Albert the Great follows Augustine, Boethius and Anselm. It seems to me that his originality consists of the explicit affirmation that God knows all things through his essence: "It is to be said that He knows through Himself, the cause"<sup>38</sup>. However, he restricts the divine will by causality only to good things. God knows all things, including evil and sin. But his will does not will all things, excluding evil and sin. Using the comparison between God and an artisan, he claims that the defects of creation do not belong to the artisan but to the created thing. God is not the author of evil. Furthermore, the human will remain free, in contrast with a piece of wood which is carved<sup>39</sup>.

---

<sup>36</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 550-551.

<sup>37</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 554-556.

<sup>38</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 558.

<sup>39</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 558.

How does God know the evil? Does he know through his infallible decrees of permission of sin or through his intellect? It seems that his answer implies that God knows through divine intellect since he remarks that man is not like a piece of wood. If the decrees of God would be infallible (that is, a determination by God alone that excludes human agency), the man would not remain free.

Furthermore, he writes:

“The light of divine intelligence, which is of infinite power and penetrates into hidden parts, I mean, hidden in themselves and in cause, as are singular contingents about the future, which are known to us neither in themselves nor in their proximate cause: it penetrates through all necessary things, and contingent things that have come to be, and through things that are contingent [and not settled in regard] to both alternatives”<sup>40</sup>.

In conclusion, although St. Albert states that God knows through his essence, it seems that he also recognizes a divine knowledge by transcendent intellect.

### ***C. Conclusion from tradition and theologians before the time of St. Thomas***

One can conclude that throughout tradition there are opinions that God can foresee by his transcendent intellect, even without infallible decrees. At the same time, his causality is required for the existence of beings, although not of the evil which are non-beings.

## **IV. The Opinion of St. Thomas on Divine Foreknowledge**

### *General observations about the teaching of St. Thomas*

St. Thomas' theology has to be understood as a whole. One cannot explain the divine knowledge if he does not understand the essence of God. Therefore, one has to understand first the essence of God and second how the things are related to God.

---

<sup>40</sup> Most, *Grace, Predestination, and the Salvific Will of God* 559.

According to Thomas, in the world everything is a potentiality actualized. The movement from potentiality to actuality is an act which cannot happen by itself but requires another thing that is in the state of actuality. Thomas applies these principles and says that God has to be a pure act since any motion from potentiality to actuality in him would require another being. He states that, if God is a pure act, he is simple (that is, there is no potentiality and no composition in him). The essence and existence are the same in God. Furthermore, if the essence and the existence are the same in God, God is necessary<sup>41</sup>.

To summarize, God is the pure act of subsistent existence itself. Therefore, he is simple. If he is simple, he is perfect. He demonstrates this in the following way: if God is the existence itself, we cannot introduce an imperfection since an imperfection is a non-existence, which would be contrary to his nature. His existence has the fullness of all perfections. Hence, for God being is the same with being good in a perfect way.

### *Divine knowledge*

All these truths are necessary to understand how St. Thomas explains the divine knowledge. First, God knows himself through himself. The reason that we can know a thing is because our intellect is informed by sensible or intelligible species. These are in a state of potentiality before we know something. However, since in God there is no potentiality, it follows that the intelligible species must simply be; it is the divine intellect itself, that is, the divine essence itself; therefore, God knows himself through himself<sup>42</sup>.

Furthermore, God knows all things in one; divine knowledge is not discursive. God sees all things in one (thing) which is himself<sup>43</sup>. It is not possible for discursion to exist in God because discursion presupposes succession. But succession, because it implies potency, is not possible in God, since he is pure actus, God does not know discursively.

---

<sup>41</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 2-4.

<sup>42</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 14, a. 2.

<sup>43</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 14, a. 7.

*Divine knowledge is from eternity*

This brings us to the essence of our topic. Because God is simple (there is no potentiality in him) and God does not know in a discursive way, he knows all things as they are present to him and not as they will be. Future contingent things become actual successively in themselves and we know them in a successive way. However, God knows them simultaneously for the reasons mentioned above. God knows things as present to him from eternity. One cannot say that God knows the future because those things are not in future but are present to him. On the other hand, those things remain undetermined in relation to their own causes and, thus, they are unknowable to us<sup>44</sup>.

*Divine knowledge is the cause of all things*

A very important distinction is necessary at this point. From what is said above (God knows things that are present to him), one cannot say that God gathers his knowledge by examining those things. Yet it is not only a matter of succession (we saw that God does not know things discursively) but also a matter of causality. Human beings know things because they exist. God does not know things because he examines them, but rather things exist because God knows them. The divine knowledge is to all things what the knowledge of an artisan is to his work. The knowledge of God is the measure of created reality<sup>45</sup>.

*Knowledge of approbation*

St. Thomas says that a natural form, which exists in a thing to which it gives existence, indicates a principle of action only if it has an inclination to an effect. Similarly, an intelligible form indicates a principle of action only if an inclination to an effect is added. This inclination is given by the will moved by the good appetite. The intelligible form (the will as appetite) has a relation to the opposite things (because the mind can know many things, including contraries) but it would not produce a particular effect if it would not be moved toward

---

<sup>44</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 14, a. 13.

<sup>45</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 14, a. 8.

one by the appetite. In a similar way, God's knowledge, to which his will joins, causes the existence of things. This type of knowledge is called knowledge of approbation<sup>46</sup>.

*Knowledge of vision and knowledge of intelligence*

God does not know only the things that are in act but also all the possible things. A possibility is 'a something' that has some degree of existence, it is something that can come to be. But God is existence itself. Therefore, God knows all the things, not only those which are in act, but also all that were and all that will be. St. Thomas calls this knowledge of possibles knowledge of vision. Regarding the things that will never be, but they could be, God knows them too for he is existence itself. This type of knowledge is called knowledge of intelligence<sup>47</sup>.

*Knowledge of evils*

If one knows a thing in a perfect way, he knows even the things that can be accidental to it. St. Thomas says that evil is a privation of good and it is something accidental to that thing. Consequently, God knows even evil things not in themselves because they do not exist in themselves, but in relation to good things that he knows<sup>48</sup>. (In this sense we could say that it is not possible to know pure evil because, since pure evil is not related to any existence, it does not exist and it cannot exist.)

*Is this knowledge due to infallible decrees?*

The older Thomists would say that St Thomas holds that God can know nothing except through his decrees. However, St. Thomas says in regard to predestination that God always wills everything to an ultimate end. God wills the end and he orders means to reach that end. Likewise, in regard to reprobation, God does not will the end of men who are damned and therefore,

---

<sup>46</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 14, a. 8.

<sup>47</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 14, a. 9.

<sup>48</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 14, a. 10.

there is nothing to order as means<sup>49</sup>. In predestination to the good there is active willing in God. In reprobation, there is an absence of willing in God. There is not an act but is an absence of the will of God.

Since the will of God is absent in reprobation of the damned and God knows the free evil acts of men, it follows that God knows the evils through his intellect and not through his will.

To summarize, St. Thomas follows the tradition. In my opinion, his contribution is to treat the divine knowledge in a system as a whole. His teaching on divine knowledge can be traced back to the issue of God's essence, his simplicity and his being good as the way of existing. He teaches that God can know through his causality precisely because he is the existence itself. Following Aristotle, he says that the intellect of God is cause of things in so far as his will is joined to the intellect. Furthermore, in the explanation through eternity, he follows Boethius. In this way, the divine knowledge does not impose an absolute necessity on contingent future things. There is only a conditional necessity. Namely, if God knows from eternity things that are not yet determined in regard to their causes and if God knows them as true, it is necessary that those things are as God knows them. However, it seems that St. Thomas teaches also that there are things that God knows through his intellect since there is no act of divine will in regard to those reprobated. God necessarily must know everything - actual, possible, substantial, accidental, privation. But God only wills what he freely wills, which in terms of creation is not all that he knows.

## V. Conclusion

From the study of divine knowledge in Scripture, Tradition and theological schools, one can draw the following conclusions:

- the understanding of divine knowledge is intimately connected with the understanding of God as existence itself. God knows all the possible things not merely because of his transcendent intellect but rather because every possible thing contains a degree of existence, which comes from God;

---

<sup>49</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I. q. 23.

- the knowledge of God is causative. All good things exist because God knows them;

- God knows things from eternity. Even the things that are future and contingent in regard to their causes always are present to God and infallible known to him in eternity;

- God knows future contingent evil things through his intellect. There is no act of divine will in regard to the free future contingent evils—not in the evil, but there is divine will involved in the good that evil is found in, and also the order to divine justice that the disorder of evil falls under. However, the knowledge through divine intellect has to be understood not only on basis of transcendence (God knows the evil because he has a transcendent intellect) but also on basis of existence (God knows the evils because they are non-beings, namely, privations in goodness; God knows the non-beings by knowing the good that ought to be). Yet divine causality is not required for the occurrence of non-beings;

- divine knowledge does not impose absolute necessity on the future contingent acts of human will. The human will is not like a piece of wood worked by an artisan. God wanted the human will to be voluntary and responsible—it is his creative work that the will be like this. To violate it by imposing necessity upon it would be for God to contravene his own act of creation. Thus, the human freedom remains and co-exists with the divine knowledge;

- the deficiencies in human free acts are not due to the Creator but to the possibility of resistance of men;

- nor we can say that these deficiencies are wanted by God since in regard to those damned there is no act of divine will.

This understanding of divine knowledge can provide some insights for the understanding of divine providence, predestination, reprobation and human freedom.