

Thomas Aquinas on Christ's Death and Resurrection: Responding to the Mystery of Death

Bodija Journal
Vol. 14 (2024): 77-96

Francis 'Kunle Adedara
Institute of Theology
Ss. Peter and Paul Major Seminary
Bodija, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria
fradedara@ssppibadan.edu.ng

Abstract

On whether Christ was the cause of his own Resurrection, Thomas Aquinas says, "Christ's Godhead was not separated from His soul, nor from His flesh. Consequently, both the soul and the flesh of the dead Christ can be considered in two respects: first, in respect of His Godhead; secondly, in respect of His created nature. Therefore, according to the virtue of the Godhead united to it, the body took back again the soul which it had laid aside, and the soul took back again the body which it had abandoned: and thus, Christ rose by His own power" (*ST* III, q. 53, a. 4). The conclusion Thomas draws here is premised on what he said earlier in *ST* III, q. 50, aa. 2, 3 that, when Christ died, the Godhead was not separated from his flesh, and there was not a severance between His Godhead and His soul. Thus, he rose again by his power as God. This essay makes the case that since we are united with Christ by virtue of the human nature that he took to himself, we shall also rise with him. Christ's Godhead is the principal efficient cause of his own resurrection and our resurrection; and his humanity is the instrumental efficient cause of our resurrection, because we are united with him on account of the flesh that he took to himself. It is in this sense that this essay proposes that Christ's resurrection sheds light on the mystery of human death, since the human body also rises again as did the body of Christ.

1. Introduction

In his Epistle to the Romans, and within the specific context of his teaching on the themes of “Righteousness” and “Justification”, St. Paul highlights what is profoundly significant in Adam and in Christ, the second Adam. In this epistle, Paul speaks about the universal consequences of their actions for the whole human race. In reference to the first Adam, he says: “sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned.”¹ Death reigned from Adam and extended to many. “But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.”² Consequently, “as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all. For as by one man’s disobedience many

¹ Cf. Romans 5:15. At this point it is important to quickly note the implication of the death that Adam’s sin has brought on humanity. Was physical death the consequence of Adam’s sin? In the tradition of the Christian faith, physical death is indeed considered a consequence of Adam’s sin. A context for drawing such conclusion is found in the very first words of God to Adam on death as the consequence of disobedience and aversion to God: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:16-17). Adam did die because of his disobedience; and, indeed, all humanity goes through the experience of death. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “death is a consequence of sin” (CCC. 1008), emphasizing that bodily death was not part of God’s original plan for humanity. Instead, it was introduced because of man’s disobedience to God. The Catechism further explains that “bodily death, from which man would have been immune had he not sinned” (CCC. 1018), is described as “the last enemy” that must be conquered. Paul articulates this doctrine when he writes, “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin; and so, death spread to all men because all sinned” (Rom 5:12). This passage underscored the belief that Adam’s transgression not only brought about spiritual death but also physical death, which has since affected all humanity.

² Romans 5:15. The meaning of what Paul alludes to in this text is significantly captured in the *felix culpa* in the *Exsultet* at the Easter Vigil. The sin of Adam had devastating consequences for the whole of humanity – it brought about death; but even much more have grace and justification come through Christ – it brought about deeper communion with God.

were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous."³ These words of Paul show a contrast between the universality of sin and death and the universality of salvation in Christ. They make clear the universality of sin, because all men are contained in Adam, in a collective sense as mankind, and by reason of the common human nature. Therefore, when Adam sinned, all mankind sinned in him. Concerning the question of how the sin of Adam became the sin of all his descendants, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, "The whole human race is in Adam "as one body of one man."⁴ By this "unity of the human race" all men are implicated in Adam's sin, as all are implicated in Christ's justice."⁵ Thus, as all men are contained in Adam's sin, in the same way, when Christ took on the human nature, he united to himself what is common to all humanity; and in that union, all are contained in Christ. This is the sense in which the words of Paul point to the universality of salvation in Christ. When Christ united the human nature to himself, he took on flesh that was not corrupted by sin. Thus, when he united human nature to himself, he healed and renewed it, so that all who are united to him are new creation. Consequently, Christ's humanity is the instrument by which he accomplishes the redemption of all.

The Christ event is central to healing and renewing the human nature. In this way all who have new life in him share in his passion, death and resurrection. On dying and rising with Christ, Paul says, "if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also rise with him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So, you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:8, 10-11). In Christ's passion, death and resurrection, his humanity and divinity were at work. He died as man and rose by his power as God. Those who are united to him also die and rise with him. On whether Christ was the cause of his own Resurrection, Thomas says:

³ Romans 5:18.

⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo* 4, 1.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 404.

Christ's Godhead was not separated from His soul, nor from His flesh. Consequently, both the soul and the flesh of the dead Christ can be considered in two respects: first, in respect of His Godhead; secondly, in respect of His created nature. Therefore, according to the virtue of the Godhead united to it, the body took back again the soul which it had laid aside, and the soul took back again the body which it had abandoned: and thus, Christ rose by His own power.⁶

The conclusion Thomas draws here is premised on what he said earlier in *ST* III, q. 50, aa. 2, 3 that, when Christ died, the Godhead was not separated from his flesh, and there was not a severance between His Godhead and His soul. Though Christ's soul was separated from His flesh when he died, it was because there was no severance between His Godhead and His flesh, and between His Godhead and His soul, that Christ rose again. He rose again by his power as God. Therefore, the position of this essay is that since all mankind is united with Christ by virtue of the human nature that he took to himself – the nature which once assumed was not separated from the Godhead – all men will also rise with him. Thus, Christ's Godhead is the principal efficient cause of his own resurrection and the resurrection of all; and his humanity is the instrumental efficient cause of the resurrection of all men. His humanity is the instrumental cause of the resurrection of all because all human race is united with him by virtue of the flesh that he took to himself. It is in this sense that this essay proposes that Christ's resurrection sheds light on the mystery of death, since the human body also rises again as did the body of Christ.⁷

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 53, a. 4.

⁷ The "resurrection of the flesh", which is the literal formulation of the "resurrection of the body" of the Apostles' Creed, means not only that the immortal soul will live on after death, but that even the human mortal body will come to life again (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 990, cf. Romans 8:11). Recapitulating its teaching on Christian death, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that "The flesh is the hinge of salvation." (Tertullian, *De res.* 8, 2: PL 2, 852). We believe in God who is creator of the flesh; we believe in the Word made flesh in order to redeem the flesh; we believe in the resurrection of the flesh, the fulfilment of both the creation and the redemption of the flesh (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1015).

In the Nigerian socio-religious milieu, like in many cultures and religions on the African continent, death always constitute a mystery. It constitutes a mystery for the reason of the uncertainties that surround life after death. So, these different cultures also ask the questions: "Is there life after death?" "What happens after death?" "Where do the dead go?" "What form of life do they live?" These, and many similar questions constitute the uncertainties about death, and, therefore, shrouds it in mystery. The attempts in the Nigerian socio-religious milieu to answer these questions, and to respond to the mystery of death, unfolds in the narrative of the 'spirit world'. The spirit world is the non-physical realm in which disembodied spirits have their existence. Although independent from the natural world, both the spirit world and the natural world are in constant interaction. Yet, such interaction with the spirit world evokes fear. And because the spirit world is the world or realm inhabited by spirits, both good and evil, the fear is greater when the spirits are construed as maleficent. To respond to this mystery of death, we must interrogate how an understanding of the Christian teaching on the resurrection of the body can allay the fears created by the dichotomy between the natural world and the spirit world. We must also interrogate how the dead are not merely construed as spirits but persons who have transitioned to a different realm of existence. The question this essay therefore seeks to answer is how the teaching of Thomas Aquinas on the death and resurrection of Christ help to shed light on these interrogations and respond to the mystery of death. At the centre of the discussion is that the dead will rise again because Christ rose from the dead.

2. On the Human Nature of Christ

If, as this essay argues, the humanity of Christ is instrumental efficient cause of the resurrection of the dead, then it is important to examine what Thomas says on the human nature of Christ, to raise certain theological questions concerning the mode of union of the Incarnate Word on the part of the nature assumed. Such questions necessarily include: whether the Son of God assumed the

human nature, and how it is assumed?⁸ Whether what is assumed is the same as the original human nature, in other words, whether what the Son of God assumed was the human nature of the stock of Adam?⁹ Whether the Son of God assumed true human body and soul¹⁰, so that what is assumed could be properly said to be healed? The thesis that the humanity of Christ is the instrumental efficient cause of the resurrection of the dead would be expounded from whether one is able to sufficiently argue that Christ, the second Adam, assumed, healed and renewed the human nature of the stock of the first Adam. Concerning these questions, and so that the thesis that this essay proposes may be carefully treated, two things must be considered about the Saviour, which Thomas extensively treated in the *tertia pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*. The first is about the mystery of the Incarnation itself, whereby God was made man for our salvation; and the second is about such things as were done and suffered by the Saviour, that is, God Incarnate.

In question 1 of the *tertia pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, where Thomas deals with the question of the fitness of the Incarnation, he argues for the necessity of the Incarnation. Upon such conclusions that he draws on this matter, the foundation for the thesis of this essay is built, since the Word became incarnate for the restoration of the human race. So, on whether it was necessary for restoration of the human race that the Word of God should become incarnate, Thomas says: "A thing is said to be necessary for a certain end in two ways. First, when the end cannot be without it; as food is necessary for the preservation of human life. Secondly, when the end is attained better and more conveniently, as a horse is necessary for a journey."¹¹ According to him, it was not necessary that God should be incarnate in the first way, because God could have restored the human nature in many other ways. But in the second way, it was necessary that God should become incarnate for the restoration of human nature. What this means is that even

⁸ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* III, qq. 1 & 2.

⁹ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 4, a. 6

¹⁰ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 5

¹¹ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 1, a. 2

though God could have restored the human nature in many other ways, there was not a more fitting way than the Son of God assuming the human nature. In this regard, the teaching of Augustine is echoed when he also says: "but we must also show that other possible means were not lacking on God's part, to whose power all things are equally subordinate, and yet that there was no other way more fitting, and no other needed for healing our misery."¹² If this is viewed with regard to the full participation of the Divinity, which is the true bliss of man and end of human life, and which is bestowed upon man by Christ's humanity, then Augustine is right to conclude that "God was made man, that man might be made God."¹³

Furthermore, it was necessary that the Word should become incarnate so as to free man from the thralldom of sin which, as Augustine says, ought to be done in such in way that the devil should be overcome by the justice of the man Jesus Christ, and this was done by Christ satisfying for humanity.¹⁴ Thomas builds on this thought when he says that "a mere man could not have satisfied for the whole human race, and God was not bound to satisfy; hence it behooved Jesus Christ to be both God and man."¹⁵ One finds a concise summary of the thoughts of Augustine and Thomas in a sermon on the Nativity by Pope Leo, where he says: "Weakness is assumed by strength, lowliness by majesty, mortality by eternity, in order that one and the same Mediator of God and men might die in one and rise in the other – for this was our fitting remedy. Unless He was God, He would not have brought a remedy; and unless He was man, He would not have set an example."¹⁶ Therefore, not only is it necessary that the Son of God should become incarnate for the restoration of the human race, but that he assumed the human nature in order to heal, renew and elevate it.

¹² Augustine, *De Trinitate*, xiii, 13.

¹³ Augustine, *Sermon* xiii.

¹⁴ See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, xiii, 17 and 18.

¹⁵ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 1, a. 2.

¹⁶ Pope Leo, *Sermon on the Nativity*, xxi.

For Christ to assume the human nature and heal it in the manner that has just been discussed, it requires taking up another question that Thomas raises: Whether in Christ there is any union of soul and body, in other words, is he truly man? From what has been discussed, if Christ were not truly man, that is, having a body and a human soul, then he did not heal what he did not assume.¹⁷ Man is a composite of body and soul. In this regard he cannot be said to be only body or only soul. According to Thomas, “Christ is called a man univocally with other men, as being of the same species.”¹⁸ It therefore also means that since Christ is man, there is also in him the union of soul and body. There is a noticeable objection to the proposition “whether there is union of soul and body in Christ.” It is argued that from the union of soul and body in humans a person or a human hypostasis is caused. Hence if the soul and body were united in Christ, it follows that a hypostasis resulted from their union. And since such hypostasis cannot be said to be of God the Word, that is, the divine hypostasis, then there is no union of soul and body in Christ.¹⁹ In responding to this objection, Thomas alludes to the teaching that when he became incarnate, Christ united to himself the human nature in such a way that the union of soul and body in him did not result in a person. “But in Christ they are united together, so as to be united to something higher, which subsists in the nature composed of them. And hence from the union of the soul and body in Christ a new

¹⁷ This teaching is originally attributed to Gregory Nazianzus who said, “What is not assumed is not redeemed” (Gregory Nazianzus, *Epistle* 101). Gregory made the statement during the great fourth century debate on the nature of Jesus Christ in an effort to stop the budding Apollinarian heresy. Apollinarism came about as a way of explaining the Council of Nicene’s (325 AD) decision that Jesus was of “one essence with the Father.” In effect, this heresy stated that Jesus had a human body and soul, but a divine mind. As a response, Gregory coined the phrase “what is not assumed is not redeemed” as a way of saying that Jesus had to have been fully human in order for Him to redeem humanity. If Jesus was somehow less than fully human, then the parts that were not “assumed” were not “redeemed” – whether those parts be the mind, soul, body or spirit.

¹⁸ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 2, a. 5.

¹⁹ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 2, a. 5, see objection 1.

hypostasis or person does not result, but what is composed of them is united to the already existing hypostasis or Person.”²⁰ This, however, does not mean that the union of the soul and body in Christ is of less effect than in us, for its union with something nobler does not lessen but increases its virtue and worth.²¹ Consequently, because there is union of soul and body in Christ, he is true man; and because his soul and body are united to the divine Word, he is also true God. This explains the unity of Christ's Being. His incarnation did not result in a new hypostasis, a human hypostasis, for he was already a hypostasis of the Divine Nature, that is, a Divine Person (Being), before his Incarnation. Thus, He who is God unites to himself the human nature, and so, he is also true man.

Another question that is related to this discussion could be stated as to whether anything is created in Christ since he is called man univocally with other men. Thomas takes up this issue by asking whether in Christ the union of the Divine nature and the human is anything created, in other words, is the humanity of Christ created? Thomas begins to address this question by saying: “Whatever has a beginning in time is created. Now this union was not from eternity. Therefore, the union is something created.”²² This union is a relation between the Divine and the human natures, because they come together in one Person of the Son of God. Since the union of the Divine nature and the human nature is in the Divine Person, it does not constitute any change in God. Thomas had earlier established that names which import relation

²⁰ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 2, a. 5, ad 1.

²¹ His full explanation is captured in these words: “Nor does it therefore follow that the union of the soul and body in Christ is of less effect than in us, for its union with something nobler does not lessen but increases its virtue and worth; just as the sensitive soul in animals constitutes the species, as being considered the ultimate form, yet it does not do so in man, although it is of greater effect and dignity, and this because of its union with a further and nobler perfection, viz. the rational soul” (*Summa Theologiae* III, q. 2, a. 5, ad 1).

²² *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 2, a. 7.

to creatures are applied to God temporally, and not from eternity.²³ So, he states here:

... every relation which we consider between God and the creature is really in the creature, by whose change the relation is brought into being; whereas it is not really in God, but only in our way of thinking, since it does not arise from any change in God. And hence we must say that the union of which we are speaking is not really in God, except only in our way of thinking; but in the human nature, which is a creature, it is really. Therefore, we must say it is something created.²⁴

The conclusion that Thomas reaches here establishes that the humanity of Christ is something created. Consequently, his created humanity is the reason he is called man univocally with other men; and, moreover, it is the foundation of man's union with Christ in life, and it is also the reason Christ's humanity is the instrumental cause of the resurrection from the dead of all men.

3. On Christ's Death and Resurrection and His Godhead and Humanity

Thomas devotes Question 50 of the *tertia pars* of his *Summa Theologiae* to the discussion of the Death of Christ. He begins by examining whether it was fitting that Christ should die. He adduces five reasons for why it was fitting that Christ should die. In the first place, he says that it was fitting for Christ to die "to satisfy for the whole human race, which was sentenced to die on account of sin."²⁵ For him Christ died for this reason because it is a

²³ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 7. He concludes the discussion on this subject saying, "Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him. Thus, there is nothing to prevent these names which import relation to the creature from being predicated of God temporally, not by reason of any change in Him, but by reason of the change of the creature; as a column is on the right of an animal, without change in itself, but change in the animal."

²⁴ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 2, a. 7.

²⁵ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 50, a. 1.

fitting way of satisfying for another to submit oneself to the penalty deserved by that other. And so, Christ resolved to die, that by dying he might atone for all men. The second reason he gives for why it was fitting for Christ to die is “in order to show the reality of the flesh assumed.”²⁶ In taking the human nature to himself, Jesus Christ, the divine Person, is the proper subject of the properties of both the human and divine natures. Death is a property of the human nature. In other words, because the divine Person is the proper subject of every property of the human nature, death can be attributed to him. Therefore, the reason Thomas gives, with respect to showing the reality of the flesh assumed, means that it was fitting for Christ to die in order to show that he is truly man, capable of dying. Thirdly, it was fitting for Christ to die so “that by dying He might deliver us from fearing death.”²⁷ Fear is one of the reasons death is shrouded in mystery for us. By dying, Christ passes through the gate of death and rises triumphant. He goes before us, and he shows us that beyond the dark mystery of death, there is life. In the fourth reason, Thomas says “that by dying in the body to the likeness of sin – that is, to its penalty – he might set us the example of dying to sin spiritually.”²⁸ And finally, it was fitting for Christ to die, so “that by rising from the dead, and manifesting His power whereby He overthrew death, He might instill into us the hope of rising from the dead.” This is significant because it shows that death is not the last word. Christ, who is in union with us in our humanity, by dying and rising from the dead, carries us beyond the darkness of death to the glory of life eternal.

Having discussed why it was fitting for Christ to die, Thomas next examines what the death of Christ consists of. In death, there is the separation of the soul from the body. And since Christ is true

²⁶ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 50, a. 1.

²⁷ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 50, a. 1. It is for this reason that the Letter to the Hebrews states: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (Heb. 2:14-15).

²⁸ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 50, a. 1.

man, his death also meant separation of his soul from his body. The question is, what then can be said of the Godhead of Christ which was united to his body and to his soul, the body and soul which now have been separated by death? Concerning this, Thomas discusses the question, "Whether the Godhead was separated from the flesh when Christ died?" He begins by saying: "What is bestowed through God's grace is never withdrawn except through fault."²⁹ On this note, he compares the grace of union, whereby the Godhead was united to the flesh in Christ's Person, and the grace of adoption, whereby others are sanctified. For him, the former is greater than the latter, and that it is also more enduring of itself, "because this grace is ordained for personal union, whereas the grace of adoption is referred to a certain affective union. And yet we see that the grace of adoption is never lost without fault."³⁰ It is therefore concluded that since "there was no sin in Christ, it was impossible for the union of the Godhead with the flesh to be dissolved. Consequently, as before death Christ's flesh was united personally and hypostatically with the Word of God, it remained so after His death, so that the hypostasis of the Word of God was not different from that of Christ's flesh after death."³¹

But can we also say that there was no severance between Christ's Godhead and his soul in his death? We must first say here, as Thomas himself lays it out, that the "Word of God is said to be united with the flesh through the medium of the soul, inasmuch as it is through the soul that the flesh belongs to human nature, which the Son of God intended to assume; but not as though the soul were the medium linking them together."³² Because the Godhead is united to the flesh through the medium of the soul, then it is accurate to say that the soul is united with the Word of God more immediately and more primarily than the flesh is, because it is through the soul that the body is united with the

²⁹ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 50, a. 2.

³⁰ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 50, a. 2.

³¹ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 50, a. 2.

³² *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 50, a. 2, ad 2.

Word of God.³³ Concerning the question of whether the Godhead was united with the body and soul of Christ after his death, the body and soul having been separated by his death, it is concluded that Christ's Godhead was not separated from the flesh when Christ died. The attributes of human nature are predicated of the Son of God only by reason of the union (cf. *ST* III, q. 16, aa. 4, 5). But what belongs to the body of Christ after death is predicated of the Son of God – namely, being buried. Therefore, Christ's Godhead was not separated from the flesh when he died. And “since the Word of God was not separated from the body at Christ's death, much less was He separated from the soul.”³⁴

On the resurrection of Christ, Thomas says that it behooved Christ to rise again. Among the reason he adduces is “for the raising of our hope, since through seeing Christ, who is our head, rise again, we hope that we likewise shall rise again.”³⁵ Such hope that the rising from the dead inspires removes fears and uncovers the mystery of death. It is, however, important to ask at this point whether Christ rose from the dead by his own power. On this matter Thomas examines whether Christ was the cause of his own resurrection. As it has been discussed in this section of this essay, in consequence of death, Christ's Godhead was not separated from his soul, nor from his flesh. Since death is the separation of the soul from the body, resurrection must imply the union of soul and body. It was also established that the Godhead was not severed from both the soul and body of Christ in his death. This therefore implies that the power to reunite the soul and the body lies with the Godhead that is not severed from both. It is for this reason that Thomas says that both the soul and the flesh of the dead Christ can be considered in two respects: first, in respect of his Godhead; and secondly, in respect of his created nature, that is, his humanity. Therefore, according to the virtue of the Godhead united to it, the body took back again the soul which it had laid aside, and the soul took back again the body which it had abandoned. Thus, Christ rose again by his own power as God. However, if the body and soul

³³ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 6, a. 1.

³⁴ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 50, a. 3.

³⁵ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 53, a. 1.

of the dead Christ are considered according to the power of created nature, they could not thus be reunited, but it was necessary for Christ to be raised up by God.³⁶ It must be concluded, then, that Christ's Godhead is the cause of his resurrection.

Christ rose by his power as God. For this reason, it must be said that his Godhead is the cause of his resurrection. How is Christ's resurrection the cause of the resurrection of all men? This must be considered in two respects: in the first place, in respect of Christ's Godhead; secondly, in respect of his humanity. Concerning his Godhead, Christ rose by his power as God. And since the resurrection of the dead is always in union with Christ, because the dead rise with him, then Christ's Godhead is the principal efficient cause of the resurrection of the dead. And in respect of his humanity, it is the instrumental efficient cause of the resurrection of the dead. According to Thomas, an efficient cause is twofold, principal and instrumental. "The principal cause works by the power of its form, to which form the effect is likened; just as fire by its own heat makes something hot."³⁷ In this way, God is the efficient cause of the resurrection of the dead. "But the instrumental cause works not by the power of its form, but only by the motion whereby it is moved by the principal agent: so that the effect is not likened to the instrument but to the principal agent."³⁸ Thus, since the humanity of Christ is the instrument of the divinity,³⁹ and since his Godhead was not separated from his body and soul at death, then his divinity is the cause of his resurrection, and his divinity is the principal efficient cause of the resurrection of the dead, while his humanity is the instrumental efficient cause of the resurrection of the dead. Christ is raised up from the dead by his power as God. It is also by his power as God that Christ raises all men from the dead. However, because all men are united with him in his humanity, rising with him implies that his humanity is the instrumental efficient cause of their resurrection. Yet, it must be emphasized that as an instrumental cause, the humanity of

³⁶ See *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 53, a. 4.

³⁷ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 62, a. 1.

³⁸ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 62, a. 1.

³⁹ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 43, a. 2.

Christ effects the resurrection of the dead by the Godhead. Thus, as the integration of the human being (body and soul) requires divine activity, so would the reintegration of the resurrection.⁴⁰ The principal efficient cause of man's salvation is God. But since Christ's humanity is the instrument of the divinity, all Christ's actions and sufferings operate instrumentally in virtue of His divinity for the salvation of men. Consequently, then, the one redemptive act of Christ, that is, his death and resurrection, is the efficient cause of men's salvation, that is, their resurrection from the dead.⁴¹

In discussing the causality of Christ's resurrection, Thomas examines the specific ways in which Christ's resurrection is the cause of the resurrection of men's bodies and their souls. According to Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics*, "What is first in any order, is the cause of all that come after it."⁴² Thomas applies this principle to the discussion of whether the resurrection of Christ is the cause of the resurrection of men's bodies. He says that Christ's resurrection was the first in the order of resurrection, that he was the first to rise from the dead.⁴³ Hence Christ's resurrection must be the cause of all men's resurrection. Moreover, Thomas says that "the divinely established natural order is that every cause operates first upon what is nearest to it, and through it upon others which are more remote; just as fire first heats the nearest air, and through it heats bodies that are further off: and God Himself first enlightens those substances which are closer to Him, and through them others that are more remote."⁴⁴ Therefore, the Word of God first bestows immortal life upon that body which is naturally united with himself, and through it works the resurrection in all other bodies. Consequently, Christ's resurrection is the cause of the resurrection of men's bodies. In respect of the resurrection of men's souls, it is stated that resurrection works in virtue of the Godhead. This virtue

⁴⁰ For this reason, Thomas speaks of the resurrection as miraculous. See IV *Sententia*, Dist. 43, a. 1, q. 3.

⁴¹ See *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 48, a. 6.

⁴² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, ii, 4.

⁴³ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 53, a. 3.

⁴⁴ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 56, a. 1.

extends not only to the resurrection of bodies, but also to that of the souls: for it comes of God that the soul lives by grace, and that the body lives by the soul. Therefore, Christ's resurrection has instrumentally an effective power not only with regard to the resurrection of bodies, but also with respect to the resurrection of souls.

4. Responding to the Mystery of Death

The Bible tells us that when Jesus returns to earth, he will raise all those who have died, giving them back the bodies they lost at death. These will be the same bodies people had in earthly life. But the resurrected bodies will not die and, for the righteous, they will be transformed into a glorified state, freed from suffering and pain, and enabled to do many of the amazing things Jesus could do with his glorified body (see 1 Cor. 15:35-44, 1 John 3:2). The glorified state is a familiar Christian teaching on the resurrection of the body. In this regard, according to Montague Brown, Thomas Aquinas thinks that the resurrection of the body is a better philosophical answer to what happens after death than any of those offered by philosophers.⁴⁵ Brown is of the opinion that "the essence of the human being is rational animal, not just rational nor just animal. This is what we find ourselves to be. Physical death is not annihilation, for the soul has operations that transcend materiality and so is not subject to the material dissolution of the

⁴⁵ See Montague Brown, "Philosophical and Theological Perspectives on the Resurrection of the Body in Aquinas," *The Saint Anselm Journal* 12.2 (Spring 2017):2. In fact, Thomas argues in his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, that it is hard if not impossible to prove the immortality of the soul without the resurrection of the body (see *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, 15.2.924). Brown's essay has good insights and perspectives on Thomas Aquinas' discussion of the resurrection of the body. His essay focuses on three main points: first, the philosophical reason for holding that there will be a resurrection of the body; second, the philosophical reasons which force us to consider something beyond what philosophy can provide; and third, what revelation has to say and why this is so essential to our understanding the human person. See also Montague Brown, "Aquinas on the Resurrection of the Body" in *The Thomist* 56.2 (April 1992): 165-207.

body.”⁴⁶ However, Thomas says that this state is unnatural and that an unnatural state cannot last forever. Therefore, there will be a resurrection of the body.⁴⁷

This essay set out with the objective to respond to the mystery of death. It must be reiterated that to respond to this mystery, there must be an interrogation of how an understanding of the Christian teaching on the resurrection of the body can allay the fears created by the dichotomy between the natural world and the spirit world; and that there must be an interrogation of how the dead are not merely construed as spirits but persons who have transitioned to a different realm of existence. It examined how the teachings of Thomas Aquinas on the death and resurrection of Christ help to shed light on these interrogations and also help to respond to the mystery of death. The key to unravelling the mystery of death is in the proper theological understanding of the death and resurrection of Christ, in the context of his real and created humanity. The teachings of Thomas Aquinas on the death and resurrection of Christ, in relation to his humanity and divinity, offer this understanding.

Death is shrouded in mystery mostly because of the uncertainties of what happens after death. However, the Christian faith and hope in the resurrection remove these uncertainties. For Christians, resurrection from the dead is guaranteed by the fact of Christ's death and resurrection. This is well articulated by St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our former man was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to

⁴⁶ Montague Brown, “Philosophical and Theological Perspectives”, 4.

⁴⁷ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book IV. According to Montague Brown, Thomas invokes final causality to make his case. There are three basic arguments: one about nature in general, and the other two more specific to human nature. The first focuses on a basic metaphysical theme, the other two on the individual human being's desire for happiness and his or her knowledge of moral obligation. See Montague Brown, “Philosophical and Theological Perspectives on the Resurrection of the Body in Aquinas”, 5-6 for a more detailed articulation of the arguments.

sin. For he who has died is free from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.⁴⁸

The uncertainties of what happens after death is removed because Christ, who is the first born from the dead, conquered death (cf. Colossians 1:8). And “if we have died with him, we shall also live with him.”⁴⁹ However, in the Nigerian socio-religious milieu, like in many other cultures and religions in Africa, the narrative of the “spirit world” does not help to remove the fears and uncertainties of death. The abode of the dead is construed as the “spirit world”, and where the spirits of the dead are considered as maleficent, the fear is greater. The “spirit world” narrative is premised on the understanding that the dead are spirits, devoid of the bodies they had in their earthly existence. Such understanding is contrasted with the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. And because there is no doctrine and belief in the resurrection of the body in the African religions, the mystery of death remains even more puzzling. This essay does not contest that there is belief in afterlife in African Traditional Religions. Rather, what it proposes is that the absence of teaching or belief in the resurrection of the body constitutes much puzzle about the mystery of death in ATR that the Christian teaching and belief in the resurrection of the body help to unravel.

5. Conclusion

In the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body, there is a proper response to the mystery of death. Christ died and rose from the dead, and he is now seated at the right hand of the Father as true God and true man. If he is seated at the right hand of the Father as true man, then it means his body and soul resurrected, not just his soul. Thus, Christ is not in the “spirit world” but he is in heaven, where he is in his full humanity, body and soul. Those who rise with Christ also live the full reality of their humanity with him. They too are not just spirits but brothers and sisters of Christ

⁴⁸ Romans 6:5-9.

⁴⁹ 2 Timothy 2:11.

who are united with him in the glory of God's kingdom. The hope of the dead rising with Christ in their full humanity is the Christian response to the mystery of death. The resurrection of the body is a key doctrine of Christianity. According to Montague Brown, it is intimately tied up with the mission of Jesus to redeem humanity. For him, "As Jesus is fully human and fully divine, our redemption must also be fully human, that is personal; and that would seem to include the redemption of our bodily life as well as our souls."⁵⁰ Therefore, the death and resurrection of Christ, in the proper context of his humanity, remove the uncertainties of what happens after death, since the dead will rise body and soul. In his earthly life, the human person who is composite of body and soul lives, because the soul is the "principle of life" in the living, and the form of the body.⁵¹ Thus, the French Thomistic Philosopher Etienne Gilson expresses, "the human body truly deserves to be called such only while the soul animates and imparts life to it."⁵² When the dead therefore rise from the dead, it is in virtue of body and soul, not soul alone nor body alone.⁵³ Consequently, the teachings of Thomas Aquinas on the death and resurrection of Christ that this essay examined serve as good theological responses to the mystery of death. As was discussed in this work, one of the reasons that Thomas Aquinas adduces for whether it was necessary for Christ to rise again is "for the raising of our hope, since through seeing Christ, who is our head, rise again, we hope that we likewise shall rise again."⁵⁴ Moreover, this Christian hope is based on the understanding that the dead will rise body and soul, and it helps to unravel the fears and uncertainties surrounding the mystery of death.

⁵⁰ Montague Brown, "Philosophical and Theological Perspectives", 1.

⁵¹ Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 209.

⁵² Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: W. Heffer and Sons Ltd., 1924), 168.

⁵³ Although the soul can subsist after death, it is not a natural way as the form and the principle of life. That is why Aquinas regards the final resurrection and reunion of the body and soul as "the necessity" for reward and punishment.

⁵⁴ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 53, a. 1.

Christ rose up by his power as God. His soul was separated from his body at death, but the Godhead was severed neither from his soul nor from his body. At the resurrection of Christ, the body took back again the soul which it had laid aside, and the soul took back again the body which it had abandoned. Therefore, the Godhead is the cause of his resurrection. And since the power to reunite the soul and the body lies with the Godhead that is not severed from both his soul and body, the power to unite the soul and body of the dead also lies with the Godhead. Furthermore, since Christ is univocally called man with other men on account of the human nature that he took to himself, and his resurrection united his soul and body, the resurrection of the dead is mediated by Christ's humanity, whereby they too are united with Christ in heaven in the full reality of their humanity with him. Consequently, the Godhead is the principal efficient cause of the resurrection of the dead, and Christ's humanity is the instrumental efficient cause of their resurrection. What the study of Thomas Aquinas shows is that the dead are not just spirits living in the "spirit world". Their faith in Jesus Christ in their earthly existence guarantees that the dead transit to another realm of existence, where they are in union with Christ in the resurrection of the body. This essay makes the point that Christ's humanity is the instrumental efficient cause of the resurrection of the dead, yet it argues that the power to effect the resurrection of the dead is from the Godhead of Christ. Christ rose from the dead by his power as God. The resurrection of the dead is also by his power as God and through the instrumentality of his humanity. One would then agree with Montague Brown when he asserts: "If the fullness of our redemption includes the resurrection of the body, then that is dependent on God's activity. Our resurrection is an effect of Christ's resurrection."⁵⁵ The theological study of Thomas Aquinas on the death and resurrection of Christ, in the proper context of his divinity and humanity, constitutes a profound response to the mystery of death since the dead rise with Christ body and soul.

⁵⁵ Montague Brown, "Philosophical and Theological Perspectives," 11.