

## QUESTION 45

### Christ's Transfiguration

Next we have to consider Christ's transfiguration. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Was it fitting for Christ to be transfigured? (2) Was the brightness of the transfiguration the brightness of [the state of] glory (*claritas gloriosa*)? (3) What about the witnesses of the transfiguration? (4) What about the testimony of the Father's voice?

#### Article 1

##### Was it fitting for Christ to be transfigured?

It seems that it was not fitting for Christ to be transfigured (*non fuerit conveniens Christum transfigurari*):

**Objection 1:** It belongs to an imaginary body, and not to a real body, to be changed into diverse shapes (*in diversas figuras*). But as was established above (q. 5, a. 1), Christ's body was a real body and not an imaginary body. Therefore, it seems that Christ should not have been transfigured.

**Objection 2:** *Shape (figura)* is in the fourth species of *quality*, whereas *brightness* is in the third species. Therefore, Christ's taking on brightness should not be called a *transfiguration*.

**Objection 3:** As will be explained below (*Supplement*, q. 82), a glorified body (*corpus gloriosus*) has four gifts (*dotēs*), viz., impassibility (*impassibilitas*), agility (*agilitas*), subtlety (*subtilitas*), and brightness (*claritas*). Therefore, Christ's body should not have been transfigured with respect to His taking on brightness rather than with respect to His taking on the other gifts.

**But contrary to this:** Matthew 17:2 says that "Jesus was transfigured" in front of three of His disciples.

**I respond:** After having foretold His passion to His disciples, our Lord had encouraged them to follow Him in His passion (Matthew 16:21-24). But in order for an individual to proceed directly along a path (*in via*), he must in some sense have a prior understanding of the destination (*finem aliquo modo praecognoscat*), just as an archer will not correctly launch an arrow if he has not previously seen the target (*signum*) at which it is to be launched. Hence, in John 14:5 Thomas says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, and how can we know the way?" And this is especially necessary when the way is difficult and harsh, and the road laborious, whereas the end is delightful.

Now through His passion Christ arrived at the point of attaining the glory not only of His soul, a glory that He had possessed from the beginning of His conception, but also of His body—this according to Luke 24:26 ("It was necessary for the Christ to suffer in order to enter into His glory"). He likewise brings to this glory those who follow in the footsteps of His passion—this according to Acts 14:21 ("It is through many tribulations that we enter into the kingdom of heaven"). And so it was fitting for Him to show His disciples (and this is what it is for Him to be transfigured) the glory of His brightness, to which He was going to configure those who are His own—this according to Philippians 3:21 ("He will re-form the body of our lowliness, now configured to the body of His glory"). Hence, in *Super Marcum* Bede says, "Because of His holy foresight it happened that by enjoying the contemplation of His permanent joy for a short time, they were to bear adversities more courageously."

**Reply to objection 1:** As Jerome says in *Super Matthaëum*, "No one thinks that Christ is said to be transfigured because He lost His pristine form and face, or because He lost the genuineness of His body and took on a spiritual or 'airy' body. Instead, the evangelist shows how He was transformed when he says, 'His face shined like the sun, and His clothes became as white as snow.' Here the brightness of His face is shown, and the whiteness of His clothes is described. His substance is not taken away, but instead

His glory is altered.”

**Reply to objection 2:** *Shape* has to do with the extremities of the body; for a shape is what is included within a limit or limits. And so all the things that have to do with the extremities of the body are in some way relevant to shape. And like its color, so, too, the brightness of a non-transparent body has to do with its surface. And this is the sense in which the taking on of brightness is called a *transfiguration*.

**Reply to objection 3:** Among the four gifts mentioned, only brightness is a quality of the very person in himself, whereas the other three gifts are perceived only in an act or a movement, or in an instance of being acted upon (*in aliquo actu vel motu, seu passio*).

Thus, Christ showed within Himself indications of one of the three gifts, viz., *agility*, when He walked on the waves of the sea; He showed indications of *subtlety* when He exited the closed womb of the virgin; and He showed indications of *impassibility* when He escaped injury at the hands of the Jews who wanted to throw Him over a cliff or to stone Him. And yet He is not said to have been *transfigured* because of these gifts; instead, He is said to have been transfigured only because of *brightness*, which had to do with how His person looked (*quae pertinet ad aspectum personae ipsius*).

## Article 2

### Was the brightness [of the transfiguration] the brightness of [the state of] glory?

It seems that the brightness [of the transfiguration] was not the brightness of [the state of] glory (*illa claritas non fuit claritas gloriosa*):

**Objection 1:** A Gloss of Bede’s, commenting on Matthew 17:2 (“He was transfigured before them”), says, “In His mortal body He showed them not immortality, but a brightness similar to future immortality.” But the brightness of glory is the brightness of immortality. Therefore, it is not the case that the brightness that Christ showed to His disciples was the brightness of glory.

**Objection 2:** A Gloss of Bede’s, commenting on Luke 9:27 (“[They] will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God”), says, “That is, until they see, represented in their imagination (*in imaginaria representatione*), the glorification of the body in the beatitude to come.” But the image of a thing is not the thing itself. Therefore the brightness in question was not the brightness of beatitude.

**Objection 3:** The brightness of glory exists only in a human body. But the brightness that belonged to the transfiguration appeared not only in Christ’s body but in His clothes as well, and in the bright cloud that overshadowed the disciples. Therefore, it seems that the brightness in question was not the brightness of glory.

**But contrary to this:** In commenting on Matthew 17:2 (“He was transfigured before them”), Jerome says, “He appeared to the apostles in the way in which He is going to be at the time of judgment.” And in commenting on Matthew 16:28 (“... until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom”), Chrysostom says, “Wanting to show the kind of glory in which He was to come in the future, He revealed it to them in their present life—to the extent that it was possible for them to grasp it—in order that they might not grieve even at the time of our Lord’s death.”

**I respond:** The brightness that Christ took on in the transfiguration was the brightness of glory (*claritas gloriae*) with respect to its *essence* (*quantum ad essentiam*), but not with respect to its *mode or manner of existing* (*non tamen quantum ad modum essendi*).

For, as Augustine explains in *Epistola ad Dioscorum*, the brightness of a glorified body is derived from the brightness of its soul. Similarly, as Damascene points out, the brightness of Christ’s body in the transfiguration was derived from His divine nature and from the brightness of His soul. But as was

explained above (q. 14, a. 1, ad 2), the fact that, from the beginning of Christ's conception, the glory of the soul did not overflow into the body was effected by a sort of divine dispensation, in order that Christ might fulfill the mysteries of our redemption in a passible body. This did not, however, deprive Christ of the power to pour out the glory of His soul into His body.

And He did this, with respect to brightness, in the transfiguration, though in a way different from the way in which brightness exists in a glorified body. For brightness flows from the soul into a glorified body as a *permanent quality* that affects the body. Hence, to shine corporeally is not miraculous in the case of a glorified body. By contrast, in the case of the transfiguration, the brightness flowed from Christ's divinity and from His soul into His body not in the manner of a quality that was immanent and affecting the body itself, but rather in the manner of a *transient passion*, in the way that the air is illuminated by the sun. Hence, the brightness that appeared during that time in Christ's body was miraculous, just as was the fact that He walked on the waves of the sea. Hence, in *Epistola 4 ad Caium* Dionysius says, "Christ surpassed men in doing things that are proper to a man. This is shown by the virgin conceiving Him supernaturally, and by the unstable waters bearing the weight of His material and earthly feet."

Hence, one should not claim, as Hugo of St. Victor did, that Christ took on the gifts of brightness in the transfiguration, agility in walking on the sea, and subtlety in exiting the closed womb of the virgin. For 'gift' (*dos*) names a certain quality that is immanent to a glorified body, whereas Christ possessed miraculously certain features that belong to the gifts. And there is a similarity here, as regards the soul, to the vision by which Paul saw God in his rapture; this was explained in the Second Part (*ST 2-2*, q. 175, a. 3, ad 2).

**Reply to objection 1:** This passage shows not that Christ's brightness was not the brightness of *glory*, but that it was not the brightness of a *glorified body*, because Christ's body was not yet immortal. For just as it was brought about by a dispensation that in Christ the glory of His soul did not flow over into His body, so, too, it was able to be brought about by a dispensation that it flowed over with respect to the gift of brightness, but not with respect to the gift of impassibility.

**Reply to objection 2:** The brightness is being claimed to belong to the imagination not in the sense that it was not true brightness, but in the sense it was a sort of image representing that perfection of glory according to which the body will be glorious in the future.

**Reply to objection 3:** Just as the brightness that existed in the body of Christ represented the future brightness of His body, so the brightness of His clothes signified the future brightness of the saints, which will be exceeded by the brightness of Christ in the way that the brightness of snow is exceeded by the brightness of the sun. Hence, in *Moralia 32* Gregory explains that Christ's clothes became resplendent "because at the height of heavenly brightness, all the saints, refulgent in the light of righteousness, will cling to Him. For the name 'garment' signifies the righteous whom He will join to Himself—this according to Isaiah 49:18 ('You will be clothed with all these as with an ornament')."

On the other hand, the bright cloud signifies the glory of the Holy Spirit (or "the power of the Father," as Origen claims,) by which the saints will be protected in their future glory—though the bright cloud could also fittingly signify the brightness of the renewed world, which will be the dwelling place (*tabernaculum*) of the saints. Hence, when Peter proposed to set up tents (*tabernacula*), "a bright cloud overshadowed" the disciples.

### Article 3

#### Were the witnesses of the transfiguration fittingly brought in?

It seems that the witnesses of the transfiguration were not fittingly brought in (*non convenienter inducti fuerint testes transfigurationis*):

**Objection 1:** Each individual can present testimony best of all about what is known to him. But at the time of Christ's transfiguration, it was not known to any man by experience—but only to the angels—what future glory would be like. Therefore, the witnesses of the transfiguration should have been angels instead of men.

**Objection 2:** It is truth, and not fiction, that befits witnesses to the truth. But Moses and Elijah were not really there but were only imaginary; for a certain Gloss on Luke 9:30 (“Moses and Elijah were there”) says, “It should be noted that neither the body nor the soul of Moses or Elijah appeared there, but that the bodies in question had been formed out of some creaturely matter (*in subiecta creatura*). One might even believe that the ministry of angels brought it about that angels took on the persons of those bodies.” Therefore, it does not seem that there were appropriate witnesses.

**Objection 3:** Acts 10:43 says that “all the prophets give witness” to the Christ. Therefore, it is not just Moses and Elijah who should have been present as witnesses, but indeed *all* the prophets.

**Objection 4:** Christ's glory is promised to all the faithful, whom He wanted to enkindle by His transfiguration with a desire for that glory. Therefore, He should have taken not just Peter, James, and John as witnesses of His transfiguration, but all the disciples.

**But contrary to this** is the authority of the evangelical Scriptures.

**I respond:** As was explained above (a. 1), Christ wanted to be transfigured in order to show His glory to men and to call men forth to desire that glory. Now men are brought to the glory of eternal beatitude by Christ—not only those who lived after Him, but also those who preceded Him. Hence, when He was approaching His passion, both the multitude that followed Him and the multitude that went before Him cried out, “Hosanna!” (Matthew 21:9), as if seeking salvation from Him. And so it was fitting for witnesses to be present from among those who preceded Him, viz., Moses and Elijah, and from those who followed, viz., Peter, James, and John, in order that “this word might be confirmed in the mouth of two or three witnesses” (2 Corinthians 13:1).

**Reply to objection 1:** Through His transfiguration Christ made manifest to His disciples the glory of the body, which pertains to men alone. And this is why men, and not angels, are brought in as witnesses to it.

**Reply to objection 2:** This Gloss is thought to be taken from a book entitled *De Mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae*, which is not an authentic book but is instead falsely ascribed to Augustine. And so this Gloss has no standing. For in *Super Matthaenum* Jerome says, “Notice that when the scribes and Pharisees demanded signs from heaven, He refused to give any, whereas here, in order to increase the faith of the apostles, He gives a sign from heaven, with Elijah coming down from where he had ascended and Moses arising from the nether world.” This should not be understood to mean that the soul of Moses re-assumed its own body, but that his soul appeared through an assumed body, in the same way that angels make appearances. By contrast, Elijah appeared in his own body—brought down not from the empyrean heaven, but from some place on high where he had been taken up in the fiery chariot.

**Reply to objection 3:** As Chrysostom explains in *Super Matthaenum*, “Moses and Elijah are put at the center for many reasons.”

The first is this: “Since the crowds were saying that [Jesus] was Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets, He brought the leaders of the prophets with Him, in order that, at least from then on, the

difference between our Lord and His servants might be apparent.”

The second reason is this: “Moses gave the Law, Elijah was the zealous imitator of the Lord.” Hence, by the fact that they appear along with Christ, what is excluded is the calumny of the Jews, “who accused Christ of being a transgressor of the Law, along with the blasphemy that He was usurping God’s glory for Himself.”

The third reason is this: “In order to show that He has power over death and life, and that He is the judge of the living and the dead, He brings with Him Moses, who is now dead, and Elijah, who is still living.”

The fourth reason is that, as Luke reports (Luke 9:31), “They were talking with Him about His departure (*de excessu*), which He was going to fulfill in Jerusalem’, i.e., about His passion and death.” And so “in order to strengthen the minds of the disciples,” He brings into their midst those who had exposed themselves to death for the sake of God; for facing the danger of death, Moses presented himself before Pharaoh (Exodus 5) and Elijah presented himself before king Ahab (3 Kings 18).

The fifth reason is this: “He wanted His disciples to emulate the mildness of Moses and the zeal of Elijah.”

Hilary adds a sixth reason, viz., “in order to show that He had been foretold by the Law He had given to Moses and by the prophets, among whom Elijah was the main one.”

**Reply to objection 4:** Deep mysteries are not to be explained to everyone immediately, but instead they ought to come down to the others at the right time through those who are the leaders (*per maiores*). And so, as Chrysostom explains, “He took the three as the more important ones. For Peter excelled in the love” which he had for Christ and, again, in the power that had been committed to him, whereas John excelled in the privilege of the love by which he was loved by Christ because of his virginity and, again, because of the prerogative for evangelical teaching, and James because of the prerogative of martyrdom.

And yet He did not want them to report what they had seen to the others prior to the resurrection, lest, as Jerome puts it, “it might be incredible because of the magnitude of the matter, and because, after such great glory, the ensuing cross might create a scandal” or even “be totally put to a stop by the people,” and “in order that when they had been filled with the Holy Spirit, they might at that time be witnesses to spiritual things.”

#### Article 4

##### Was it fitting for the testimony of the Father’s voice to be added, saying, “This is my beloved Son”?

It seems that it was not fitting for the testimony of the Father’s voice to be added, saying, “This is my beloved Son” (*inconvenienter additum fuerit testimonium paternae vocis dicentis, hic est filius meus dilectus*):

**Objection 1:** As Job 33:14 says, “God spoke once and did not repeat the same thing a second time.” But at the baptism the Father’s voice had uttered this very thing. Therefore, it was not fitting for it to be uttered again at the transfiguration.

**Objection 2:** At the baptism, along with the Father’s voice, the Holy Spirit was present under the appearance of a dove. But this did not happen at the transfiguration. Therefore, the Father’s utterance [at the transfiguration] does not seem to have been fitting.

**Objection 3:** Christ began to teach after His baptism. And yet at the baptism the Father’s voice did not implore men to listen to Him. Therefore, it should not have so implored them at the transfiguration, either.

**Objection 4:** Individuals should not be told things that they cannot bear—this according to John 16:12 (“There are still many things I have to say to you which you are unable to bear now”). But [at the time of the transfiguration] the disciples were unable to bear the voice of the Father; for Matthew 17:6 says, “As they listened, the disciples fell on their faces and were very much afraid.” Therefore, it was not fitting for the Father’s voice to be addressed to them.

**But contrary to this** is the authority of the evangelical Scriptures.

**I respond:** The adoption of the sons of God is through a sort of conformity in image to the natural Son of God. There are two ways in which this comes about: first, *through the grace of this life (per gratiam viae)*, which is an incomplete conformity (*conformitas imperfecta*); second, *through glory*, which is a complete conformity (*conformitas perfecta*)—this according to 1 John 3:2 (“Now we are the children of God, and it is has not yet appeared what we shall be. We do know that when He appears, we shall be like to Him, for we shall see Him just as He is”).

Therefore, since we receive grace through the baptism, whereas in the transfiguration we are shown ahead of time the brightness of future glory, it follows that both in the baptism and in the transfiguration it was fitting to make Christ’s natural sonship (*naturalem Christi filiationem*) manifest through the Father’s testimony. For He alone, together with the Son and the Holy Spirit, is completely aware of the perfect generation in question.

**Reply to objection 1:** This passage should be taken to refer to God’s eternal speaking by which God the Father utters the unique Word that is coeternal with Him.

Yet one can also reply that God uttered the same thing twice by His corporeal voice—though not in the same respect, but instead to show the different ways in which men can participate in the likeness of eternal Sonship.

**Reply to objection 2:** Just as in the case of the *baptism*, where the mystery of the first re-generation was declared, the operation of the whole Trinity was shown by the fact that (a) the Son was there incarnated, (b) the Holy Spirit was visible under the appearance of a dove, and (c) the Father was made clear there in the voice, so, too, in the case of the *transfiguration* the whole Trinity appeared, (a) the Father in the voice, (b) the Son in the man, and (c) the Holy Spirit in the bright cloud. For just as in the baptism the Holy Spirit gives innocence, which is signified by the simplicity of the dove, so at the resurrection He will give to His elect the brightness of glory and a respite (*refrigerium*) from all evil—and these are signified by the bright cloud.

**Reply to objection 3:** Christ had come to give grace in actuality and to promise glory by His words. Therefore, at the time of the transfiguration it was fitting for people to be implored to listen to Him, but not at the time of the baptism.

**Reply to objection 4:** It was fitting for the disciples to be fearful and prostrated, in order that it might be shown that the excellence of the glory that was being demonstrated at that time exceeds all the understanding and capability of men—this according to Exodus 33:20 (“No man will see me and live”). And this is the point Jerome is making in *Super Matthaëum* when he says, “Human frailty does not have a tolerance for bearing the sight of such great glory.” But men are cured of this frailty by Christ’s leading them into glory. This is signified by the fact that He said to them, “Arise, and do not be afraid.”