



# WHAT IS GOD'S IMAGE AND LIKENESS?

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*"The internal counsels of the Blessed Trinity when He deigned to create man have been mercifully revealed to us in the book of Genesis: "Let us make man to our image and likeness" (1:26).*

This passage, frequently cited, is not widely understood. In what way may it be said that man is in God's image and likeness? Is this likeness to God natural or supernatural? What is the purpose of man being so made?

The questions are worth pondering because they touch directly upon man's origins, his nature, and his ultimate purpose.

In [Question 93 of Part I of the Summa Theologiae](#), Saint Thomas Aquinas considers "the end or term of the production of man" in nine articles. What I propose to do in this Ad Rem is, first, to give a truncated summary of all nine articles, with the help of [Father Paul Glenn](#), whose work I have used with my own embellishments; second, I purpose to dwell in more detail on some select points Saint Thomas makes regarding the nature and purpose of the divine image in man.

Here are each of the articles as Saint Thomas posits them, with a summary of what he says under each heading:

1. Whether the image of God is in man? YES. An image is a kind of copy of its prototype. Unless the image is in every way perfect, it is not the equal of its prototype. Finite man cannot be a perfect image of the infinite God. Man is therefore an imperfect image of God.
2. Whether the image of God is to be found in irrational creatures? NO. Of earthly creatures, only man has a true likeness to God; other creatures have a trace or vestige of God rather than an image.
3. Whether the angels are more to the image of God than man is? The angels are more perfect in their intellectual nature than man is, and, therefore bear a more perfect image of God than man does. In some respects, however, man is more like to God than angels are. For man proceeds from man, as God (in the mysterious proceeding of the divine Persons) proceeds from God; whereas angels do not proceed from angels. Also, the manner of the human soul's presence in the body has a likeness to God's presence in the universe. But these human resemblances lacking in angels are only accidental

qualities. Substantially, angels bear a more perfect image of God than man does.

4. Whether the image of God is found in every man? YES. There are three ways that man is in the image of God (which will be considered below).

5. Whether the image of God is in man according to the Trinity of Persons? YES. The divine image in man reflects God in Unity and also in Trinity. In creating man, God said (Gen. 1:26): "Let us make man to our own image and likeness."

6. Whether the image of God is in man as regards the mind only? YES. The image of God in Trinity appears in man's intellect and will and their interaction. In God, the Father begets the Word; the Father and the Word spirate the Holy Ghost. In man, the intellect begets the word or concept; the intellect with its word wins the recognition or love of the will. God's image is not in the body, where there are only to be found "traces" or "vestiges" of God (just as in brute creation), by virtue of God's being the cause of man's body.

7. Whether the image of God is to be found in the acts of the soul? YES. The image of the Trinity is found in the acts of the soul. In a secondary way, this image is found in the faculties of the soul, and in the habits which render the faculties apt and facile in operation.

8. Whether the image of the Divine Trinity is in the soul only by comparison with God as its object? YES. The image of God is in the soul, not simply because the soul can know and love itself or other created things, but because it can know and love God. And the divine image is found in the soul because the soul turns to God, or, at any rate, has a nature that enables it to turn to God. (More on this below.)

9. Whether "likeness" is properly distinguished from "image"? YES. The image of God is discerned in the acts and faculties and habits of the soul. The likeness of God is either a quality of this image, or it is the state of the soul as spiritual, not subject to decay or dissolution.

Essential to the notion of an image is "that it is copied from something else." Every image is a likeness, but not every likeness is an image. Saint Thomas gives the example of two eggs being like each other, but the one is not the image of the other, because it is not copied from it.

For a copy to be an image of the original, it need not be equal to it; for instance, the reflection of a man in a glass, which is an image, is not equal to the man himself. Because the only-begotten Son of God — “who is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) — is the only image that actually equals God, He is a perfect image of God, whereas each man is an imperfect image of God. Of the only-begotten Son of God, it may be said that he **is** the image of God simply; of man it may be said that he was made “**to** the image of God,” says Saint Thomas, because, “‘to’ signifies a certain approach, as of something at a distance.”

Saint Thomas follows Augustine in saying that “image” and “likeness” are not identical. Certain passages in the writings of [Saint Irenaeus of Lyons](#), of [Saint John Damascene](#), and of [Peter Lombard](#) could lead us to interpret the word “image” to mean man’s nature as a rational, free-willed creature, and “likeness” as a closer resemblance to God by grace. This is not exactly how Saint Thomas views the question.

For him, “likeness” signifies two distinct things, one lower, the other higher. First, a likeness is a “preamble” to image inasmuch as it is “more general than image”; but, in a higher way, a likeness is a “perfection” of the image. (It is to get ahead of ourselves, but “likeness” in this higher sense as a perfection of the image admits of degrees:

Mary is more like God than the great Saints; those higher in heaven are more “God-like” than those lower; and on earth, the members of the Church Militant in a higher degree of grace and charity are more divinized or “like God” than their less perfect brethren.)

There are three ways that man is in God’s image. Saint Thomas’ explanation of this is clear and easy to understand:

*“Since man is said to be the image of God by reason of his intellectual nature, he is the most perfectly like God according to that in which he can best imitate God in his intellectual nature. Now the intellectual nature imitates God chiefly in this, that God understands and loves Himself. Wherefore we see that the image of God is in man in three ways.*

*“First, inasmuch as man possesses a natural aptitude for understanding and loving God; and this aptitude consists in the very nature of the mind, which is common to all men.*

*"Secondly, inasmuch as man actually and habitually knows and loves God, though imperfectly; and this image consists in the conformity of grace.*

*Thirdly, inasmuch as man knows and loves God perfectly; and this image consists in the likeness of glory. Wherefore on the words, "The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us" (Psalm 4:7), the gloss distinguishes a threefold image of "creation," of "re-creation," and of "likeness." The first is found in all men, the second only in the just, the third only in the blessed."*

The image of God in man is not merely the image of the divine nature or the image of one or other of the divine Persons, but it is specifically the image of the Trinity. The proofs for this that Saint Thomas offers are a very theological and would take too much space even to summarize here. But Thomas' explanation of how man images the Trinity is within our grasp. He bases himself on the doctrine of the Trinitarian processions he has already developed:

*"As the uncreated Trinity is distinguished by the procession of the Word from the Speaker [the Father], and of Love [the Holy Ghost] from both of these, as we have seen...; so we may say that in rational creatures wherein we find a procession of the word in the intellect, and a procession of the love in the will, there exists an image of the uncreated Trinity...."*

The question Saint Thomas asks in article eight ("Whether the image of the Divine Trinity is in the soul only by comparison with God as its object?") is difficult to grasp, but worth considering for its richness and how it perfectly corresponds to Saint Thomas' teaching on grace. Indeed, it is a prelude to that beautiful doctrine.

I will try to simplify the article.

God knows Himself and loves Himself, and thence originate the Trinity of Persons. Is man in God's image because he can, like God, know himself and love himself, or is he is God's image because he can know and love God? The ability to know and love himself would make man *like* God in some way, as he would resemble God's abilities to know and love.

But, this would not make man attain a "representation of the [species](#)," i.e., a resemblance to the form or

mental idea of God, which is required for man to be in the "image" of God. "Wherefore we need to seek in the image of the Divine Trinity in the soul some kind of representation of species [i.e., mental concept, form, or ideal of the Divine Persons, so far as this is possible to a creature. ... Thus the image of God is found in the soul according as the soul turns to God, or possesses a nature that enables it to turn to God."

Hard to understand, I know, especially if the reader is not familiar with the scholastic concept of "[species](#)." The argument is Saint Thomas' attempt at explaining why Saint Augustine said, "The image of God exists in the mind, not because it has a remembrance of itself, loves itself, and understands itself; but because it can also remember, understand, and love God by Whom it was made."

What this implies is that, even in God's *very creation* of man in His own (Trinitarian) image and likeness, God orients man toward Himself as the end of our knowledge and love.

By nature, we have the capacity to know and love God as He is naturally knowable, but, with grace and the infused theological virtues, we can know and love God *supernaturally*, as He has revealed Himself. We can thereby merit, and the reward of that merit is the consummation of our knowledge and love of God in Heaven.

Thus man's final cause, or purpose – of which the philosophers say that it is "the first [cause] in intention and the last in execution" – was placed in him when he was created, being made to God's own image and likeness.

*Brother André Marie is Prior of St. Benedict Center, an apostolate of the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Richmond New Hampshire. He does a weekly Internet Radio show, [Reconquest](#), which airs on the [Veritas Radio Network's Crusade Channel](#).*

*The [photo](#) shows, "God the Father on a throne, with Virgin Mary and Jesus," ca. 15th-century, anonymous.*

