

QUESTION 58

Christ's Sitting at the Right Hand of the Father

Next we have to consider Christ's sitting at the right hand of the Father (*de sessione Christi ad dexteram Patris*). And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Does Christ sit at the right hand of the Father? (2) Is this fitting for Him with respect to His divine nature? (3) Is it fitting for Him with respect to His human nature? (4) Is it peculiar (*proprium*) to Christ?

Article 1

Is it fitting for Christ to sit at the right hand of God the Father?

It seems that it is not fitting for Christ to sit at the right hand of God the Father (*Christo non conveniat sedere ad dexteram Dei patris*):

Objection 1: *Left* and *right* are differences among bodily positions. But nothing corporeal befits God, since, as John 4:24 says, "God is a spirit." Therefore, it seems that Christ does not sit at the right hand of the Father.

Objection 2: If an individual is sitting at someone's right hand, the latter is sitting at his left hand. Therefore, if Christ is sitting at the right hand of the Father, it follows that the Father is sitting to the left hand of His Son—which is absurd.

Objection 3: *Sitting* and *standing* seem to be opposites. But in Acts 7:55 Stephen says, "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Therefore, it seems that Christ is not sitting at the right hand of the Father.

But contrary to this: Mark 16:19 says, "So then the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sits at the right hand of God."

I respond: Two things can be understood in the name 'sitting' (*sessio*), viz., (a) rest (*quies*)—this according to Luke 24:49 ("Stay (*sedete*) here in the city ...")—and also (b) the power to govern or to judge (*regiam vel iudiciariam potestatem*)—this according to Proverbs 20:8 ("The king who sits on the throne of judgment dissipates every evil with his look"). Therefore, it is fitting in both of these senses for Christ to sit at the right hand of the Father.

In the one sense, insofar as He remains eternally incorruptible in the Father's beatitude, which is called the Father's right hand—this according to Psalm 15:11 ("At Your right hand are delights forever more"). Hence, in *De Symbolo* Augustine says, "'He sits at the right hand of the Father': To sit means to dwell, just as we say of a man, 'He stayed (*sedet*) in that country for three years'. Believe, then, that Christ dwells in this way at the right hand of God the Father. For He is beatified, and 'the Father's right hand' is the name of that beatitude."

In the second sense, Christ is said to sit at the right hand of the Father insofar as He governs along with the Father and derives His power to judge from the Father, just as an individual who sits with the king at his right hand assists him in governing and judging. Hence, in another sermon from *De Symbolo* Augustine says, "Understand 'the right hand' as the power which this Man takes on, received from God, in order that He who had come in the past to be judged might come in the future to render judgment Himself."

Reply to objection 1: As Damascene says in *De Fide Orthodoxa* 4, "We are not talking about a place to the right of the Father. For how would He who cannot be circumscribed acquire a place to His right? After all, *right* and *left* belong to things that are circumscribed. Instead, we are speaking of the right hand of the Father as the glory and honor of the divine nature."

Reply to objection 2: This argument goes through insofar as 'sitting at the right hand' is

understood in a corporeal sense. Hence, in one of the sermons in *De Symbolo* Augustine says, “If we take Christ’s sitting at the right hand in a corporeal sense, then the Father will be to Christ’s left. Here, however, i.e., in the state of eternal beatitude, everything is to the right, because there is no sadness there.”

Reply to objection 3: In a homily on the ascension Gregory says, “Sitting belongs to who is passing judgment, whereas standing belongs to one who is fighting or assisting. Thus, Stephen, placed in the toil of combat, saw as standing the one whom he had as his helper. On the other hand, Mark describes Him as sitting after the ascension, because after the glory of His ascension He will in the end be seen as the judge.”

Article 2

Is it fitting for Christ as God to sit at the right hand of the Father?

It seems that it is not fitting for Christ as God to sit at the right hand of the Father (*sedere ad dexteram Dei patris non conveniat Christo secundum quod Deus*):

Objection 1: Insofar as He is God, Christ is the right hand of the Father. But *being* someone’s right hand does not seem to be the same as *sitting at* his right hand. Therefore, it is not as God that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father.

Objection 2: Mark 16:19 says, “The Lord Jesus was taken up into heaven and sits at the right hand of God.” But it was not insofar as He is God that Christ was taken up into heaven. Therefore, it is likewise not as God that He sits at the right hand of God.

Objection 3: As God, Christ is equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if it is as God that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father, then, by parity of reasoning, the Holy Spirit will likewise sit at the right hand of the Father the Son, and the Father Himself will likewise sit at the right hand of the Son. But this is nowhere to be found.

But contrary to this: Damascene says, “We are speaking of the right hand of the Father as the glory and honor of the divine nature, in which the Son of God existed before all ages as God and as consubstantial with the Father.”

I respond: As is clear from what has been said (a. 1), three things can be understood by the name ‘right hand’ (*nomine dexteræ*): (a) the *glory* of the divine nature, according to Damascene; (b) the Father’s *beatitude*, according to Augustine; and (c) the *power of judging*, according to the selfsame Augustine. On the other hand, as has been explained (a. 1), ‘sitting’ designates either (a) *habitation* or (b) the *dignity* of either *governing* or *rendering judgment*.

Hence, to sit at the right hand of the Father is nothing other than to have, along with the Father, the glory and beatitude and judicial power of the divine nature—and this unchangeably and regally. But this belongs to the Son as God. Hence, it is clear that it is as God that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father (*ad dexteram Patris*), yet in such a way that the preposition ‘at’ (*ad*), which is transitive, implies only a distinction among the persons and within the order of origin, and not different degrees of nature or of dignity; for as was established in the First Part (*ST* 1, q. 42, aa. 3-4), there are no such different degrees [of nature or dignity] among the divine persons.

Reply to objection 1: The Son is called the right hand of the Father by appropriation (*appropriate*), in the way in which He is also called the power of the Father (*virtus Patris*). However, ‘right hand of the Father’, taken according to the three significations explained above, is something common to the three persons.

Reply to objection 2: It is as a man that Christ was taken up to the divine honor that is designated as the *sitting* explained above. And yet that divine honor itself is fitting for Christ insofar as He is God—not because of His being taken up, but because of His eternal origin.

Reply to objection 3: There is no way in which one can say that the Father sits at the right hand of the Son or the Holy Spirit. The reason is that the Son and the Holy Spirit draw their origin from the Father, and not vice versa. However, the Holy Spirit can properly be said to sit at the right hand of the Father, or at the right hand of the Son, in the sense explained above, even though this is attributed, by a sort of appropriation (*secundum quandam appropriationem*), to the Son, to whom equality is appropriated in the way that Augustine explains: “In the Father there is unity, in the Son equality, and in the Holy Spirit the connection between unity and equality” (*De Doctrina Christiana* 1).

Article 3

Is it fitting for Christ as a man to sit at the right hand of the Father?

It seems that it is not fitting for Christ as a man to sit at the right hand of the Father (*sedere ad dexteram patris non conveniat Christo secundum quod homo*):

Objection 1: Damascene says, “We are speaking of the right hand of the Father as the glory and honor of the divine nature.” But the honor and glory of the divine nature do not befit Christ insofar as He is a man. Therefore, it seems that it is not as a man that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father.

Objection 2: Sitting at the right hand of the ruler seems to exclude being subject to the ruler (*subiectionem excludere videtur*), since one who sits at the right hand of the ruler in some sense rules along with him (*quodammodo illi conregnant*). But as a man, Christ is indeed “subject to the Father,” as 1 Corinthians 15:28 says. Therefore, it is seems that it is not as a man that Christ is at the right hand of the Father.

Objection 3: A Gloss on Romans 8:34 (“... He who is at the right hand of God”) explains, “That is, equal to the Father in the honor by which God is the Father; or, alternatively, ‘at the right hand of the Father’, that is, in the mightier goods of God.” And a Gloss on Hebrews 1:3 (“He takes His seat at the right hand of God on high”) says, “That is, in equality with the Father, above all things in both standing and dignity (*super omnia et loco et dignitate*).” But being equal with God does not befit Christ as a man; for in John 14:28 He Himself says, “The Father is greater than I.” Therefore, it seems that it is not as a man that it is fitting for Christ to sit at the right hand of the Father.

But contrary to this: In a sermon from *De Symbolo* Augustine says, “Understand ‘the right hand’ as the power which this Man takes on, received from God, in order that He who had come in the past to be judged might come in the future to render judgment Himself.”

I respond: As has been explained (a. 2), the name ‘the right hand of the Father’ means either (a) the very glory of the divine nature itself, or (b) its eternal beatitude, or (c) its power of judging and ruling.

On the other hand, the preposition ‘at’ (*ad*) [in ‘at the right hand’ (*ad dexteram*)] designates a sort of access to the right hand, in which, as was explained above (a. 2 and *ST* 1, q. 93, a. 1), what is designated is *fittingness*, along with a *certain distinction*. Now there are three possible ways to combine these things (*quod quidem potest esse tripliciter*):

In one way, there is a *fittingness* with respect to the *nature* and a *distinction* among the *persons*. And on this score Christ, as the Son of God, sits at the right hand of the Father because He has the same nature as the Father. Hence, the three things mentioned above, [viz., glory, beatitude, and the power to

rule and to judge], are, because of His essence or nature (*essentialiter*), fitting for the Son, just as they are fitting for the Father.

In the second way, in accord with the *grace of union*, which implies, conversely, the *distinction* between the *natures* and the oneness of the *person*. And on this score Christ as a man is the Son of God and, as a result, sits at the right hand of the Father—though in such a way that ‘as [a man]’ (*secundum quod [homo]*) designates, in the way explained above (q. 16, aa. 10-11), the oneness of the suppositum and not the condition of the [human] nature.

In the third way, access [to the Father’s right hand] (*praedictus accessus*) can be understood as having to do with *habitual grace*, which is more abundant in Christ beyond all other creatures, to the extent that the human nature itself in Christ is more blessed than all the rest of the creatures and has the power to govern, and to render judgment upon, all other creatures (*et super omnes alias creaturas habens regiam et iudiciariam potestatem*).

So then, if ‘as’ (*secundum quod*) designates the *condition of the nature*, then Christ *as God* sits at the right hand of the Father in the sense of existing in equality with the Father, but *as a man* He sits at the right hand of the Father in the sense of existing in the more mighty goods of the Father beyond other creatures, i.e., in greater beatitude and having the power to render judgment.

By contrast, if ‘as’ designates the oneness of the suppositum, then *even as a man* Christ sits at the right hand of the Father with an equality of honor; that is, we venerate with the same honor the Son of God Himself *along with* that same assumed nature—and this in the way explained above (q. 25, a. 1).

Reply to objection 1: Christ’s human nature, taken according to the conditions of its own nature, does not have the glory or honor of the divine nature, and yet it does have that glory and honor by reason of the person to whom it is united. Hence, Damascene adds in the same place, “... in which”—i.e., in the glory of the divine nature—“the Son of God, existing before all ages as God and consubstantial with the Father, sits with His co-glorified flesh. For the one *hypostasis* is adored, along with His flesh, by every creature through one act of adoration.”

Reply to objection 2: Christ as a man is subject to the Father as long as ‘as [a man]’ designates the condition of His [human] nature. And on this score it does not belong to Him as a man to sit at the right hand of the Father as equal to Him (*secundum rationem aequalitatis*).

However, it *does* belong to Him to sit at the right hand of the Father insofar as what is designated by this is an excellence of beatitude and the power to render judgment upon every [other] creature.

Reply to objection 3: To exist in equality with the Father belongs not to Christ’s human nature itself, but only to the person who assumed that human nature.

On the other hand, to exist in the mightier goods of God, insofar as this implies exceeding other creatures, does belong even to the assumed nature itself.

Article 4

Is sitting at the right hand of the Father peculiar to Christ?

It seems that sitting at the right hand of the Father is not peculiar to Christ (*sedere ad dexteram patris non sit proprium Christi*):

Objection 1: In Ephesians 2:6 the Apostle says, “[God] has raised us up and seated us together in heaven in Christ Jesus.” But it is not peculiar to Christ to be raised up. Therefore, by parity of reasoning, it is likewise not peculiar to Him to sit at the right hand of the Father on high.

Objection 2: In *De Symbolo* Augustine says, “... Christ’s sitting at the right hand of the Father,

i.e., His living in [the Father's] beatitude." But the latter belongs to many others. Therefore, it seems that sitting at the right hand of the Father is not peculiar to Christ.

Objection 3: In Apocalypse 3:21 Christ Himself says, "He who overcomes, I will permit him to sit with me upon my throne, just as I myself have overcome and have sat with my Father on His throne." But Christ sits at the right hand of the Father by sitting on the Father's throne. Therefore, the others who have overcome are likewise seated at the right hand of the Father.

Objection 4: In Matthew 20:23 our Lord says, "... as for sitting at my right hand or my left hand, that is not mine to give you, but it belongs to those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." But it would have been useless for Him to say this unless it has been prepared for some individuals. Therefore, sitting at the right hand [of the Father] does not belong to Christ alone.

But contrary to this: Hebrews 1:13 says, "Now to which of the angels has He ever said, 'Sit at my right hand'?"—i.e., "in my more mighty goods, or as equal to me in divinity?" As if to answer: "To none of them." But the angels are superior to other creatures. Therefore, *a fortiori*, it is not fitting for anyone other than Christ to sit at the right hand of the Father.

I respond: As has been explained (aa. 2-3), Christ is said to sit at the right hand of the Father insofar as (a) with respect to His divine nature, He exists in equality with the Father, whereas (b) with respect to His human nature, He is in possession of the divine goods in the most excellent way, surpassing all other creatures. But both of these things belong to Christ alone. Therefore, it is not fitting for anyone else other than Christ, whether an angel or a man, to sit at the right hand of the Father.

Reply to objection 1: Since Christ is our head, what is conferred upon Christ is likewise conferred upon us in Him. For this reason, because He has already been raised up, the Apostle says that God has in a sense raised us up with Him, even though we have not yet been raised up in our very selves and still have to be raised up—this according to Romans 8:11 ("... He who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will also bring to life your mortal bodies"). And, in this same manner of speaking, the Apostle adds that God "has seated us together with Him in heaven," i.e., in the very fact that our head, who is Christ, is sitting there.

Reply to objection 2: Given that the right hand is God's beatitude, to sit at the right hand signifies not just existing in beatitude, but having beatitude along with a certain dominating power—and as something proper and natural. This belongs to Christ alone and not to any other creature.

Still, it can be said that every saint who exists in beatitude is placed "at the right hand of God." Hence, Matthew 25:33 says, "He will set the sheep on His right hand (*a dextris*)."

Reply to objection 3: The throne signifies the power to judge, which Christ has from the Father. And, accordingly, He is said to sit on the *Father's* throne.

By contrast, the other saints have this power from Christ and, accordingly, they are said to sit on *Christ's* throne—this according to Matthew 19:28 ("... you also will sit on twelve seats, judging the twelve tribes of Israel").

Reply to objection 4: As Chrysostom says in *Super Matthaem*, "That place"—that is, sitting at the right hand [of the Father]—"is closed not only to all men, but even to angels. For Paul claims it to be the prerogative of the Only-begotten when he says, 'To which of the angels has He ever said, "'Sit at my right hand?'" (Hebrews 1:13). Our Lord, therefore, "replied not as if" to certain individuals who were going to sit there one day, but instead by condescending to the request of the questioners. For they wanted this one thing only, to stand near Him in preference to the others."

Still, one could claim that the sons of Zebedee were seeking to have preeminence over the others in participating in Christ's power to judge. Hence, they were seeking not to sit at the right or left hand of *the Father*, but to sit at the right or left hand of *Christ*.