

What is meant by "an act of God"?

By "an act of God" is meant either: (1) something immediately and directly done by God, whether as Creator-Emancipator of all things or as Consummator-Redeemer thereof; or (2) something mediately and indirectly done by God through, or in cooperation with, one or more creatures, whereby either the intention of God's immediate and direct act as Creator-Emancipator and/or Consummator-Redeemer is carried out by the corresponding act of a creature or else one creature is so experienced by yet another understanding creature as to re-present God's immediate and direct act as gift and demand to that other creature.

This may now be further unpacked as follows:

1. As Creator-Emancipator of all things, God immediately and directly acts to establish the fundamental rules or "laws" of natural order, in the sense of the optimal limits of creaturely action. This means that an essential prior decision in the past of every creaturely choice is the immediate past decision of God whereby the optimal limits of all creaturely choice are reestablished. This implies, of course, that the creature's creation, involving, as it does, its own choice, is, in part, *self*-creation. Even so, God's part as *the* Other in the self-creation of every creature is decisive and is God's act alone; for that there is always some world, and that this world always has an order in which the ratio of opportunities for good to risks of evil through creaturely choices is always favorable, is due utterly and completely to the creative-emancipative act of God. On the other hand, as Consummator-Redeemer of all things, God immediately and directly acts to include all other action in God's own self-creation as God. Thus all that comes to be through creaturely choice is a prior decision to which God responds in God's present consummative-redemptive choice to create Godself.

2. But now, in both respects, both as Creator-Emancipator and as Consummator-Redeemer, the intention of God's immediate and direct act depends on the acts of God's creatures if it is to be fully carried out. In acting as Creator-Emancipator so as to establish optimal limits of creaturely freedom, God intends that good shall be actualized instead of evil. But whether, or to

what extent, good instead of evil in fact is actualized is a function of creaturely action, as well as of the act of God. However, because, or insofar as, a creature so acts in response to God's creative-emancipative act as to actualize good instead of evil, its act, being the carrying out of God's intention, is indirectly and mediately God's act. In a somewhat different way, God acts as Consummator-Redeemer with the intention that any creature who is capable of doing so should so respond to God's consummative-redemptive act as to participate already in the present in God's future consummation of all things. Moreover, God's consummative-redemptive act itself has the power to bring about the faithful acceptance of it by which such participation takes place. So, at any rate, do those confess whose faith in God's consummation-redemption is experienced to be grounded in that very consummation-redemption—somewhat as those confess whose trust in a human person is experienced to be grounded in the trustworthiness of that person her- or himself. In this sense, and for this reason, the faith which is the creaturely act of accepting God's own immediate and direct act as Consummator-Redeemer is itself an act of God, albeit through or in cooperation with, the free act of an understanding creature capable of such an act of faith. But if faith is God's act, so is the *witness* of faith, insofar as it gives expression to the faith that corresponds to God's act as Consummator-Redeemer. Through, or in cooperation with, the free act of an understanding creature capable of bearing witness to God's immediate and direct act as Consummator-Redeemer, God also acts mediately or indirectly.

3. Beyond these several ways in which God may be said to act mediately and indirectly as Creator-Emancipator and/or Consummator-Redeemer, there is another way. In this way, the point of reference is not a creaturely act corresponding to God's act, but rather a creaturely experience of a distinctive sort—namely, an *understanding* experience for which some other creature is experienced as re-presenting God's own immediate and direct act as gift and demand. If, for whatever reason, one creature is so experienced by another understanding creature that this other creature thereby experiences God's gift and demand as Creator-Emancipator and/or Consummator-Redeemer, then the creature so experienced, like the experience itself, is properly said to be God's act, albeit, again, God's mediate and indirect act through God's creature.

4. Obviously, it is this last way in which God acts mediately and indirectly that is most significant for christology, although not only for christology. The point of reference so far as the christological assertion is concerned is not a creaturely act corresponding to God's act either as Creator-Emancipator or as Consummator-Redeemer, i.e., as the actualization either of good or of faith, or even as the re-presentation of the possibility of faith, but rather an understanding experience on the part of one creature for which another creature is experienced as the decisive re-presentation of God's gift and demand. In other words, the Jesus who is the subject term of the christological assertion is not "the so-called historical Jesus," viewed in some way or other in terms of *his* actualization of good or of faith or *his* re-presentation of the possibility thereof, but rather "the historic, biblical [*sc.* apostolic] Christ," viewed in terms of *our* actualization of faith and *our* re-presentation of it as a possibility through him. For whatever reasons, the earliest Christians so experienced Jesus that through him they experienced the real presence, the gift and demand, of God Godself. But this is sufficient to explain, then, why this last way in which God acts mediately or indirectly is also significant for ecclesiology and sacramentology and for the doctrine of the means of salvation generally. Experiencing an act as a sacrament—whether or not it is intentionally performed as such—is a matter of one creature so experiencing another as thereby to experience the gift and demand of God as Creator-Emancipator and Consummator-Redeemer.

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