

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

by Steven Baldner¹

SAIN'T THOMAS AQUINAS wrote full commentaries on many books of the Bible: Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Matthew, John, the Letters of Paul, and the Letter to the Hebrew. He also compiled, from patristic sources, a magnificent gloss on the four Gospels, which usually goes by the name, *catena aurea* (“the Golden Chain”). Since Pope Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris*, which just over a hundred years ago gave the fullest possible ecclesiastical approbation to the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, there has been a great resurgence of interest in the study of his philosophy and systematic theology, but scholars have shown relatively little interest in his fine scriptural commentaries.

Some say that his scriptural commentaries are outmoded because he lacked the tools biblical scholars have today. Saint Thomas did not know Hebrew or Greek, he did not have the vast historical scholarship about biblical sources that has been amassed since the nineteenth century, and he was ignorant of our modern techniques of comparative literary studies. Thomas read the Bible the way most of us do: in translation and without German scholarship. This criticism amounts to the criticism that he did not see the Bible in its full historical context. There is some justice in this claim. On the other hand, he never wrenched the Bible from another very important context: the context of the living Tradition and the magisterium of the Church. Thomas’s scriptural expositions are always built upon a careful consideration of the Fathers, the Doctors, and the magisterium of the Church. He never confused the authority of the Scripture with the authority of a merely human author, such as Saint Augustine, but neither did he read the Bible apart from the traditional interpretations of the Church.

It has been argued, as well, that his method of scriptural commentary is too rigid or too narrow. Thomas, after all, divided the text of Scripture into short passages—some not even complete verses—and wrote detailed commentaries, or lectures, on these short passages. It seems to moderns that, in focusing on such short passages for his detailed lectures, Thomas had no sense of the literary flow of the entire work. Again there is some justice in

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this criticism, but it loses much of its force if we see Thomas's commentaries in their entirety, for he was always careful to show the precise relation of the part to the whole. His commentaries always begin with prologues that show the general purpose of the work under discussion and how the text for each of his short lectures relates to the whole. In effect, whenever the comments on any work, whether it is Aristotle or the Bible, his commentary becomes an elaborate outline of the work he is commenting upon. And the outline always shows how all the small parts are related to the whole.

In the passage that will be provided in next week's IDEAS, Thomas is commenting on chapter one of the Saint John's Gospel. In commenting on part of verse twelve, "he gave them power to become the sons of God," Thomas explains what Father Weisheipl calls the fundamental principle of Thomistic spirituality: grace does not destroy nature but brings it to perfection. This part of verse twelve, Thomas explains, refers to God's giving grace to man. The gift of grace confers a power on man that enables him to do good things and to enjoy a foretaste of heavenly beatitude. But the very act of giving, or infusing, the grace raises a difficulty: the act of giving grace to man would seem to take away human freedom if God were so to overwhelm man with infinite gifts and infinite love that nothing is left for man to do. Man would then be unable to do anything. To this Thomas responds that the free, adult, human will must consent to the giving or the infusion of grace; man freely co-operates with the power of God's grace. Thus, grace does not destroy man's free human nature. But in order for man to be able to even to co-operate with God's gifts, Thomas explains that the grace needed in three ways: God must prepare man for the reception of grace; God must move the free will to accept it; and God must maintain man in a state of grace. Thus grace brings nature, man's free human nature, into a state of perfection.

By this doctrine Saint Thomas avoids two opposing errors. On the one hand, he avoids the error of Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism, which holds that man's will without an infusion of any supernatural reality is sufficient to attain salvation. Pelagianism amounts to the notion that there is no grace that is really different from nature. On the other hand, he avoids the error of a determinism which holds that God's grace is all and that free human nature is nothing. Both Pelagianism and determinism deny the distinction between grace and nature: Pelagianism by holding that all is nature; determinism by holding all that is grace. Saint Thomas Aquinas holds firmly to the position that grace and nature are distinct but perfectly complementary. Grace does not destroy nature but brings it to perfection. ❧