

Athens and Jerusalem

The Spirituality of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Part 1

by James Weisheipl, O.P.¹

MOST OF US are not unfamiliar with the name of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). Some of us may know about his theology as it is found in the *Summa theologiae* or in his popular *Summa contra gentiles*. But few know much about his numerous commentaries on Sacred Scripture or on Aristotle. Fewer still could speak on the spirituality of this unique Doctor of the Church. Nevertheless, I suspect most people already know the fundamental principles of his spirituality without realizing it. He was, after all, a theologian of sound common sense and solid Catholic faith. My purpose is to bring into focus the fundamental principles which underlie his spiritual doctrine and animated his spiritual life.

Spiritual Doctrine

Let me begin by clearing away some of the obstacles. First of all, Saint Thomas wrote no treatise that would be recognized as a textbook on spirituality or a manual for mystical contemplation. He did not write a book that would be classified with the works of Saint John of the Cross, Saint Teresa of Avila, or Saint Catherine of Siena—all Doctors of the Church in matters of spirituality. Probably none of Thomas's writings would even be on the reference shelf for courses on mysticism or the spiritual life. In other words, the whole idea of a special category called "mystical theology" is a modern creation that could easily be a barrier against our understanding the spirituality of Saint Thomas.

Today, however, when most people talk about mysticism or mystical experience, they make two blunders that could also be obstacles to understanding the reality that Saint Thomas was talking about. The first blunder is to concentrate on unusual phenomena such as "visions" or "ecstasies," prophecies, levitations, miracles, stigmata, and the like. Concerning such phenomena one must keep in mind that they are secondary, often distracting, phenomena that are not the essence of sanctity. Not all the

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saints in heaven or even all the canonized saints in the calendar experienced such phenomena. The main objection to Saint Thomas's canonization in 1323 was that he had performed no miracles while he lived, or only two very doubtful ones. Jean Gerson's reply to this was that Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome, the two most respected Latin fathers in the Middle Ages, didn't perform any at all, even after their death; Pope John XXII's reply was that every article in the *Summa* is a miracle. If our sanctity and eternal salvation depended on these accidental phenomena, I'm afraid most of us would not be saved, since these are usually described as "graces freely given" for the good of the Church, i.e., for others. Saint Teresa of Avila herself considered ecstasies and levitations disconcerting and even distracting.

More important, concern on what is secondary can often displace what is essential and so lead to a false conclusion. Pharaoh's magicians worked miracles in front of Moses and the Pharaoh, not by the power of God but by the black arts (Exod 7.8-13). And Caiaphas prophesied that it was better one man die than that a whole nation perish; he said this not because he was a holy man, but because he was high priest that year (Jn 11.51). The point is that these para-mystical phenomena are not necessarily connected with sanctity. They may exist without sanctity, and often drastically mislead. Therefore such para-mystical phenomena should not be confused with the true essence of sanctity, which consists in sanctifying grace and charity.

The second blunder is to think of "mystical" theology as a separate department of theology as though it were distinct from dogmatic or moral theology. This cordoning off of mysticism or spirituality from all the other branches of theology came relatively recently, at the end of four centuries of specialization and creation of professional chairs in universities and seminaries. In the fifteenth century the course in scholastic or "rational" theology became more and more detached from its scriptural foundation in biblical theology. Then toward the end of the sixteenth century Jesuit theologians created a "moral" theology supposedly distinct from "dogmatic" theology. The first work ever published to have the name and content of what is commonly called moral theology was the *Theologiae moralis summa* of Henrique Henriquez, S.J., in three volumes between 1588 and 1593. Chairs of moral theology became endemic in Catholic universities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Saint Alphonsus Liguori was declared their patron in 1871. This development was soon followed by a chair of "spiritual" theology for the professor who specialized in ascetical and mystical phenomena. "Ascetical" theology was defined as a science that dealt with the active purification of the soul by means such as extraordinary fasts, extreme mortifications, while "mystical" theology restricted itself to

the “dark night of the soul,” infused contemplation, mystical marriages, ecstasies, and the like. The point here is that the notion of “spiritual” theology as distinct and cut off from the whole of theology is a dangerous creation of modern “experts.” This false conception can be an obstacle to our understanding the spirituality of Saint Thomas.

For us, as for Saint Thomas, it is sufficient to note that there is only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4.5), meaning that there is only one *sacra doctrina* (sacred teaching) revealed by God to man. For Saint Thomas (ST 1.1) *sacra doctrina* is a distinct and holy teaching that God conveyed to mankind, first to the Jews and then to all, about eternal salvation. On the supposition that God had chosen to give mankind a new, heavenly beatitude beyond his comprehension, God had to reveal this to man and explain what he has to do, even though man can come to know some of these things by reason. This revealed instruction therefore is knowable, though incomprehensible, to man, unified entirely as “coming from him”; it is the highest instruction, speculatively and practically, a supreme Wisdom teaching us all about God and our union with him. In other words, God gives us this holy instruction in order that we might know him, love him, and serve him in this life and be happy with him in the next. The essentials of this instruction have been written down carefully by inspired men, but they must be accepted personally by each and every one of us by faith, lived in hope, and embraced in love. In this notion we have the whole spirituality of Saint Thomas in its simplest terms, his whole doctrine of the spiritual life.

As I said, we should not confuse the accidental with what is essential to the spiritual life: sanctifying grace and charity. Nor should we cut theology up and concentrate on what some like to think of as “spiritual” or “mystical” theology. All of this has to do with the negative side of the coin. Now let us see how Saint Thomas views the life of sanctity.

The basic principle running through all of Saint Thomas’s teaching on the spiritual life is frequently stated: grace does not destroy nature, but brings it to perfection (e.g., ST 1.1.8 ad 2). To bolster this claim Saint Thomas used the words of the Scripture and the example of the saints, while he in his own life has given us an example of how to put this principle into practice. Saint Paul speaks of “bringing into captivity every understanding so as to be brought into obedience to Christ” (2 Cor 10.5). And Saint Paul used the authority of the pagan poet Aratus when he argued “As some of your poets have said, ‘we are the race of God’” (Acts 17.28). Therefore in his own life Saint Thomas left nothing out that could be brought into service for God, not only the philosopher Aristotle, but whatever is good and true no matter by whom it is said or done.

Let us consider what Saint Thomas means by his principle, that grace does not destroy nature but brings it to perfection.

The first point is that grace is a *supernatural reality*, given *freely* by God over and above the first creation (“nature”), that we might *know* him, *love* him, and *serve* him in this life and be happy with him forever in the next. By “supernatural reality” Thomas means ontologically real and above nature. And by “ontological reality” we mean a truly existing entity that is added to human nature. Like Augustine, Thomas here intends to deny the error of the British monk Pelagius who claimed that “grace” is only another name for “nature,” as if we could choose on our own to imitate Christ instead of Adam. Thus good human acts would be called “graced” by Pelagius because they imitate the obedience of Christ; and evil human acts would be called “sinful” because they imitate the disobedience of Adam. Pelagianism, then, is the heresy that denies an ontological reality over and above human nature and the natural activities of man. In Saint Thomas’s terminology “grace” is a reality that is to the soul what health is to an organism. The best way to describe grace is the way Christ did, as “life”: “I have come so that they may have life, and have it to the full” (Jn 10.10; cf. Jn 3.16; 6.53). One need only read Saint John’s Gospel and Saint Thomas’s moving commentary on it to see what Saint Thomas meant by the ontological entity he called “grace.”² For Thomas this whole order of God’s revelation to man is different, not simply in degree but in kind from the physical natures that God has created.

For Saint Thomas this “divine life” as a supernatural reality in the soul comes about directly as a result of God’s love. That is to say grace is a free gift and in no way a debt due to nature. The whole meaning of “gift” is that it is given freely. As Saint Paul puts it, “If the choice [by God] is by grace, it is not because of their works—otherwise grace would not be grace” (Rom 11.6). On this score Saint Thomas, in union with Saint Augustine and the whole Church, rejects even semi-Pelagianism, which claims that if man does what he can by his own nature, God will do the rest. For Thomas and the Church, even the very beginnings of justification, that is, the first inklings of belief, sorrow, hope, and love come from God alone, although God may and usually does use secondary causes, such as good example, kindness of others, a sound instruction, or nature itself as an occasion of grace. When we said that grace is “freely given by God over and above the first creation

² See, in this regard, last week’s IDEAS: “A Selection from the Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John by Saint Thomas Aquinas.”

(nature)” we meant to signify that it is a supernatural reality in no way due to human nature or to human activities as such. This supernatural reality in the depths of the soul is usually called “sanctifying grace.” It is the life of the triune God within the soul, the union of the soul God himself.

This intimate union, however, cannot be experienced except through the activities of mind and heart (the intellect and will). Therefore these two faculties of the intellective soul must be raised to a higher order in order to perform supernatural actions of knowing God, loving him, and serving him as he is in himself. This means that the intellect and will must be infused with the supernatural habits of faith, hope, and love (charity) in order to experience the truth and goodness of God within us. For Saint Thomas there are only two spiritual faculties of the human soul: intellect and will. Faith, for Saint Thomas, is in the intellect whereby we accept God’s word; hope is in the will whereby we function in our milieu with grace; and love is in the will whereby we surrender completely to God the beloved.

After a long and memorable disquisition on love in 1 Cor 13, Saint Paul says, “In short, there are three things that last: faith, hope, and love (charity); and the greatest of these is love.” But Paul himself explains that in this life we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror, but hereafter we shall be seeing God face to face. Faith will give way to the vision of God “face to face”; hope will give way to actual possession of our home in the promised land; love alone remains the same as it was when we terminated our earthly journey. Hence, by the grace of God our love for God has an infinite potential for growth in intensity; the intensity of this love enflames not only the will, but also the intellect so that faith sees ever more clearly the mysterious grandeur of the trinitarian life of God, and hope surrenders ever more confidently to the mercy and power of God. In the normal development of the supernatural life, baptismal faith enflamed by love ordinarily tends toward Christian contemplation and perfection. Similarly baptismal hope enflamed by the surrender of love ordinarily leads to total trust in God’s will in the affairs of everyday life. All sanctity and contemplation, for Saint Thomas, hinge on the intensity of supernatural love of God above all things and love of neighbour as ourselves. Everything depends upon the intensity of this supernatural love of God. This love overwhelms the intellect in the contemplation of wisdom; it lifts up the soul to complete detachment in this life; and it consumes affections like a fire. With considerable reason, then, Saint Thomas speaks of grace as a sort of commencement of glory in us (ST 2-2.24.3 ad 2). For this very reason faith is a sort of commencement of divine wisdom, just as the gift of hope is a sort of tasting of the hoped for beatitude (ST 2-2.5.1; cf. 24.3 ad 2). It is love,

and love alone, that constitutes sanctity for Saint Thomas in this life and in the life to come, for it is by love that we are adopted sons of God and heirs of heaven.

If there is anything unique in the spiritual doctrine of Saint Thomas, it must surely be this: that the least measure of grace, requiring as it does supernatural love in the will, is already a sort of commencement of glory in us. Theologians such as Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange were quick to see the ramifications of this profound truth. It clearly means that sanctity, mystical contemplation, and heroic virtue are not reserved for a few isolated souls. No; they are the normal foretaste of heaven for all validly baptized Christians in the state of grace. If it is true that God wills the salvation of all men, it is equally true that he wills all men to be saints and contemplatives even in this life. “You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5.48).

Faith

The solid foundation of Christian sanctity is faith. Without faith there is nothing on which to build: “He gave the power to become children of God to all who believe in his name” (Jn 1.12). The habit of dead faith can exist in the mind even without charity or, what is worse, without hope. At least the poor wretch knows what ought to be done. But without faith, without the surrender of the mind to the Word of God, there is nothing but human reason to guide our search for truth. Most of the truths we accept by faith are totally beyond comprehension and proof: the Trinity of three persons in one God, the Incarnation of the Son of God, redemption from sin, life everlasting in the vision of God, the Mystical Body of Christ, his sacraments for our salvation, resurrection of the body, heaven and hell. Besides these, however, God thought it good to reveal certain essential truths that the human mind can discover with some difficulty on its own, such as the existence of God who is the creator and ruler of all things. Tension comes when the hard truths of faith meet the demands of human reason. Here we enter the perennial debate between pagan wisdom symbolized by Athens and the folly of the cross symbolized by Jerusalem. In a famous invective against Greek philosophy Tertullian asked, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” He saw them as mutually exclusive. But Saint Thomas, echoing Saint Paul and all the great Fathers of the Church—Basil, Gregory, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Damascene—insisted that there can be no contradiction between reason and revelation. It is the same God who built Athens and Jerusalem, and he cannot contradict himself.

For those who assume an incompatibility between faith and reason

there are only two alternatives, both of which are disastrous for humanity. On the one hand, some, like Tertullian, opt for blind faith: I believe because it is absurd; they are left with an irrational faith. On the other, there are those who, like Averroes and Leo Strauss, opt for pure reason: I will not believe; they are left with an unregenerate reason. They assume a fundamental opposition between Athens and Jerusalem; then, from a long way off, they see distortions and contradictions in Jerusalem. From this they conclude that Jerusalem is suitable for the masses while they reserve Athens for themselves who are superior.

In the spirituality of Saint Thomas there is harmony between the Athens of Aristotle and the Jerusalem of Christ. This does not mean that there cannot be apparent conflicts between the philosophers of reason and the prophets of revelation, but their resolution lies in recognizing that Jerusalem is built on a high mountain, actually protecting Athens below from attack on two fronts: bad logic and insufficient evidence. This is particularly important for the spiritual life of university professors and students who are prone to hasty conclusions and an arrogance that provokes conflicts of all kinds. A sound spiritual and intellectual life at the universities and seats of government is our best hope for peace.

Hope

Hope, the neglected theological virtue, has to do specifically with eternal happiness in the next life for ourselves and mankind. But happiness in the next can be attained only through the present, with the grace of God. Since theological hope is rooted in the will, it has to do with concrete actions in the present. God who created us without us, Saint Augustine says, will not save us without us. "I can do all things in him who strengthens me," says Saint Paul. The point is that as wayfarers we must act in the concrete present where we have no abiding city (Heb 13.15) with full confidence that God is faithful to his promises. The two main obstacles to supernatural hope are to trust in anything or anyone except God and to seek heaven on earth. Both are folly. The message of all the prophets was to trust solely in the Lord, not in arms or wealth or in princes. "A curse on the man who puts his trust in man, who relies on things of flesh, whose heart turns from the Lord. . . . A blessing on the man who puts his trust in the Lord, with the Lord for his hope" (Jer 17.5-7). In Saint Luke's listing of the beatitudes (6.20-26) a man is blessed if he does not put his trust in riches, fine foods, the pleasures of this life, or praise of men, but rather seeks God with detachment. That surely is the meaning of "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5.8). The point is that each person on earth has only his immediate milieu

through which to co-operate with God's grace. If that milieu is not used as a means to salvation, it will be a means to damnation. The importance of hope in the spiritual life is that it drives us to do something to lead all men to heaven. To do nothing and expect God to do everything is presumption; to imagine God to be unfaithful to his word is despair. Thomas was definitely an optimist because he put all his hope in God, but he was a man of action because he used all the means at his disposal to bring all men to know and love God.

Love

The unique character of supernatural love is that it is one and the same virtue by which we love God above all things and our neighbour as ourself. Saint Thomas calls it the "formal cause" of the spiritual life because it is the bond and perfection of all virtues. "Anyone who says 'I love God' and hates his brother is a liar since a man who does not love brother that he can see cannot love God whom he has never seen" (1 Jn 4.20). The love that Saint Thomas lived permeated not only his personal and community life, but also his apostolate, which was that of a teacher-writer. This can be seen throughout his career, but one should notice in particular the purifications Thomas had personally to endure.

The concluding section of this article will be posted next week.