

Athens and Jerusalem

The Spirituality of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Part 2

by James Weisheipl, O.P.

THE FIRST TEST of Thomas's spiritual life was a severe challenge to his vocation when he was nineteen years old. Although Thomas had been born in the mountain castle of Roccasecca and nurtured in the Abbey of Monte Casino, it was in the port city Naples that Thomas first saw the mendicant Preachers in their white habits and black cloaks living in common, chanting office, studying Scripture and begging for sustenance. Thomas was the youngest son of a large family, and he was slated to be a Benedictine monk at Monte Cassino with expectation of one day becoming abbot. This territory was in the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily ruled over by Frederick II who was in periodic war with Pope Gregory IX. At one point in the struggle the students Monte Cassino were herded off to safety in Naples, at the young university which had been founded there by Frederick. Thomas became particularly friendly with the Dominican John of San Giuliano, who "loved him dearly" and "encouraged him along the way." Even before finishing his university course, Thomas had decided to become a mendicant friar dedicated to preaching. Toward the end of April 1224 Thomas was clothed in the white habit of Saint Dominic at the priory in Naples. He certainly was old enough to make up his own mind, and he had not yet become a Benedictine monk—although his parents fully intended that he should. His Dominican superiors, knowing the difficulties that could be raised by a powerful, wealthy family, decided to send Thomas to Bologna for his novitiate. It so happened that the Master General of the Dominicans, John of Wildeshausen, was going to Bologna with some companions for the annual General Chapter of Order, opening in May.

On learning of Thomas's reckless action his mother, Theodora, who had become head of the family on the death of her husband, sent an urgent message to her son Rinaldo to bring Thomas home at any cost. Rinaldo and his escort intercepted the group of Dominicans not far from Rome. Thomas naturally refused to return or to take off his new Dominican habit. Rinaldo then "violently separated his brother from the Master General and, forcing him to mount a horse, sent him off with a strong guard to one of the family

castles.” Thomas’s patience was finally exhausted when Rinaldo procured a harlot, “a very beautiful girl seductively dressed to incite him to sin.” Feeling that this indignity was worse than the first, Thomas drove the girl from his room with a firebrand, charred a cross on the door, broke into tears, and fell exhausted into sleep. All the biographers, relying on Reginald of Piperno, Thomas’ later companion who claims to have heard it from Thomas himself, are unanimous in saying that Thomas never again experienced the least movement of lust. Legend expresses this by saying that two angels girded Thomas with a cord of angelic purity.

On the following day the little group arrived at Roccasecca with their hostage. For a whole year Theodora tried to convince her son to give up mendicancy and return to the original plan, so advantageous to the family. One sister, Marotta, tried to convince Thomas to obey his mother; instead Thomas convinced her to become a Benedictine nun. Thomas had the consolation of periodic visits from his friend, Friar John, who supplied a change of habit. The least one can say is that it was a trying year. Finally, when the Council of Lyons deposed the emperor on 17 June 1245, Thomas was allowed to throw in his lot with the mendicants. This time his superiors sent him all the way to Paris for study.

The second crisis of his life came when Thomas was already in his early forties, a Master in Theology from Paris, a successful teacher of theology at Santa Sabina in Rome, author of the first part of a *Summa* (“summary”) of theology and many other works (including the *Summa contra gentiles*). When Thomas had been working for his degree in Paris fifteen years earlier, a terrible row between secular masters and the mendicants at the university had gone all the way to the Pope, Clement IV, who happened to be favourable to the Dominicans and Franciscans. But after the death of the Pope in November 1268 and a prolonged vacancy in the Holy See, the situation in Paris became so serious that Saint Bonaventure, Minister General of the Franciscans, moved his headquarters to Paris; and Blessed John of Vercelli, Master General of the Dominicans, ordered both Thomas Aquinas and Peter of Tarantaise (the future Pope Innocent V) to return to Paris and resume their former chairs. This was a drastic move, but the situation was desperate.

In unquestioning obedience, Thomas and his companion Reginald arrived in Paris early in the year 1269, well after the academic year had begun. It was not that Thomas was in any way hesitant or indifferent. It was simply that the situation was far more complex than he could have imagined; there was a three-sided battle going on within the university. Secular professors of theology were attacking the rights of all mendicant orders,

especially the Dominicans and Franciscans, who had chairs in the university. The Franciscans and seculars were attacking the use of Aristotle in theology, which meant primarily Thomas and Albert the Great. And all the theologians—secular, Franciscan, and Dominican—were deeply disturbed by the heterodox Aristotelianism coming from the Faculty of Arts, particularly from Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia. Thomas could have drawn back from his earlier Aristotelian stance and joined forces with Bonaventure and all the other theologians. But, of course, he did not.

During five hectic years in Paris, Thomas worked with incredible zeal and energy. Yet he retained a serenity and inner absorption that amazed everyone. Even in the heat of controversy, Thomas never lost his temper or abandoned his logic against the angriest of opponents. There were many things that went into Thomas's spiritual transformation at this time, but all we have are hints and indications in his actual writings. The late Ignatius Eschmann, O.P., used to be amazed at the qualitative difference between the first part of the *Summa* and the rest. The earlier is more rationalistic, metaphysical, and abstract; the latter, more sensitive, realistic, and personal. Father Gauthier, discussing a significant change in Thomas's doctrine of continence—his placing it in the will, instead of the intellect as he had done previously—claimed that Thomas was induced “to mitigate the excessive intellectualism that he had earlier displayed.” Dom Odo Lottin saw a similar change in Thomas's doctrine of free will and the fear of semi-Pelagianism. Santiago Ramirez, studying the problem of faith and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, attributed an overall development in thought to “the growing influence of Saint Augustine.”

I would be inclined to agree with all of those suggestions and even add one of my own. I would express it in terms of a new apostolate to Aristotelians in the Arts faculty. It was at this time that Thomas undertook to expound the text of Aristotle, in effect saving the real Aristotle from Aristotelians such as the Averroists. All of his expositions of Aristotle's text seem to have been written in the last five years of Thomas's life. The purpose was not to save Aristotle, but to save the young men who had to study him and teach him in the Arts Faculty. Like the young Macedonian in Saint Paul's vision (Acts 16.9), young students, both Dominican and non-Dominican, beckoned Thomas to come into their world and help them. It was not only the *Summa theologiae* that was written for beginners; the commentaries on Aristotle were also written for young men in the university who had to study and teach the very text of “the Philosopher,” as Aristotle came to be called.

It is most probable that Saint Thomas enjoyed moments of infused

contemplation from early in his second Parisian professorship onwards. In Saint Thomas's own theology, infused contemplation is associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit called wisdom. Since it is produced in the intellect by the heroic charity, it belongs to the virtue of charity. For Thomas all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are nothing more than dispositions in us within faith, hope, and charity *to be used* by the Holy Spirit. They are not higher than the virtues (ST 1-2.68-70); they are modalities in those virtues with respect to the Holy Spirit operating in the soul of the just. Thus, infused contemplation is an intellectual "seeing" (still through faith) of the spiritual scorching produced in the human soul by the burning of divine love. These moments of infused contemplation can vary in intensity and duration. In the case of Saint Thomas, these moments never obstructed his logic, careful scholarship, or balance of expression. It was at Naples that the crucified Christ spoke from the Cross, "You have written well of me, Thomas; what reward will you have?" He replied, "None but yourself, O Lord." This was typical of his whole apostolate as a teacher, writer, preacher, and saint. It was thoroughly Pauline and, I might add, thoroughly Dominican.

But something special happened at Mass on the morning of 6 December 1273. Up until then Thomas was in the best of health, robust and vigorous, expending all of his intellectual and spiritual abilities in an apostolate that was heroic in its determination and superhuman in its production. He was only forty-nine years old. While celebrating a private Mass in honour of Saint Nicholas at a side altar in the priory of San Domenico in Naples, he was suddenly seized by something that radically affected him physically and transformed him entirely. He suffered, in fact, a physical breakdown of nerves and muscles throughout his entire body. "After his Mass," Friar Reginald said, "he never wrote or dictated anything." This must have been the hardest cross of all to bear. When Reginald realized that Thomas had altered his routine of more than fifteen years, he asked him, "Father, why have you put aside such great work which you began for the praise of God and the enlightenment of the world?" Thomas simply answered, "Reginald, I cannot." But Reginald, afraid that Thomas was mentally unbalanced from so much study, insisted that it would be better for him to continue his writing and return to his former routine but at a slower pace. The more Reginald insisted, the more impatient Thomas became until he replied, "Reginald, I cannot because all that I have written seems to me like straw." Reginald, of course, was mystified. The fact was that Thomas was physically and emotionally unable to continue. The only recourse he had was to pray for himself and to accept his inability to work. Acceptance of an inability to do anything for so worthy an apostolate constitutes the

greatest cross an intellectual can have to bear.

I shall not attempt here to show that this experience was both a physical breakdown and a mystical experience that continued until his death three months later. God invariably works through ordinary secondary causes. Mystical experiences, in Thomas's own theology, do not incapacitate an individual physically; normally they drive him to even greater tasks. The breakdown Thomas suffered can be in way called a nervous breakdown. There can be no doubt, however, that it was strictly physical in origin brought on by overwork, "little food and less sleep." This physical collapse rendered creative intellectual work impossible and speculative effort painful and unmanageable. Suddenly he was an intellectual who found thinking as difficult as straw is worthless, an effort more that even grace could bear, since grace can only perfect nature, not replace it.

Thomas's death three months later on 7 March occurred when he was on his laborious journey to Lyons for the Ecumenical Council that was to open on 7 May, 1274. The cause of his death was not the breakdown of 6 December but an accident he had on the road north, before reaching Rome. Thomas hit his head against an overhanging branch which, apparently, caused subdural haematoma, becoming worse everyday until he asked to be taken to the nearby Cistercian monastery of Fossanova, just south of Rome. Then in the second-floor guestroom of the abbey, he died peacefully, not yet fifty years old.

Thomas would be the first to see divine providence in his spiritual life. He would be the first to see grace bringing it to completion and eventually absorbing his intellectual nature into the fullness of seeing God "face to face" in life eternal. The sacrifice of the last three months of Thomas's life was perhaps more than any intellectual had ever experienced, but it brought to completion his life's search for knowledge of the triune God. Now he is enjoying nature's fulfilment in the beatific vision of the triune unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. ❧