

# Spirituality of St. Thomas Aquinas: Introduction

## Background

Fr. Simon Tugwell, OP wrote an excellent book about St. Thomas, showing profound understanding of his spirituality. This Classics of Western Spirituality volume is *Albert & Thomas*, selected writings, 1988. Much of the information in my presentation came from that book. But more of what I provide came from studying with Dominicans as an undergraduate here in Santa Fe, a graduate in Chicago, and a graduate in Rome.

Born to a noble family in the castle of Roccasecca, near Naples, in 1226, Thomas d'Aquino lived in the midst of political conflict. The two greatest powers of the time fought to control Europe. The Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II contended with the Pope, Gregory IX to determine who would rule Christendom. Their armies battled each other, and their diplomats struggled verbally. During this violent conflict, Thomas' father served the emperor as a baron in the Kingdom of Naples.

Many people lived just a step up from barbarian invasions, 26 of which had swept through Italy since 410 AD. As the only educator in Europe, the Church strove to spread the Gospel. This was the most effective way to overcome barbaric lawlessness. People lived quite different lives, from the most violent to the most holy. The Aquino family hoped that Thomas would become holy. They wanted him to be the abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino. They sent him there, aged 5, to learn his abc's. A studious child, he flourished in school. He loved silent prayer, and sought God above all.

In 1239, this studious and prayerful development stopped suddenly because Emperor Frederick Barbarossa expelled the Benedictine monks, and turned the monastery into a fort. When the monks sent Thomas home, he was thirteen, and ready for the university of Naples. His fellow freshmen were only a few years older than he. Thomas loved logic because he realized that it enabled him to advance from what might be to what is. Aristotle systematized logic, so Thomas followed Aristotle, especially in recent translations of commentaries by the Arabic philosopher Averroes. At that time, only Aristotle's logic books were well known in universities. Most of Aristotle's other works were known only in part. St. Augustine, with his Platonic foundation, was the best known theologian, and had great influence upon spirituality. Benedictine spirituality was more popular because his monks were more numerous. Spirituality was much more important to Europeans then than it is to Americans now. Public expressions of spirituality were so common that people expected them from everyone, even the Emperor. When Frederick repented, he walked barefoot in the snow to ask the Pope's forgiveness.

At the university of Naples, Thomas found Dominicans teaching and preaching. This practical application of contemplative prayer struck him as the perfect life. John of St. Giuliano encouraged Thomas to join this apostolic life, flowing from profound prayer. St. Dominic had died only 18 years previously, and the group glowed with holy fervor. Though his parents objected, Thomas joined the Dominicans, at about the age of 16. His family pursued him, hoping to move him from Dominican poverty to Benedictine prosperity. His mother visited him frequently, and tried to convince him to switch to Monte Cassino. So the Dominicans moved Thomas from Naples to Rome. His mother persisted, and got powerful support from the Pope. So the Dominican authorities decided to move Thomas to Paris. On the way there in 1244, his brothers, soldiers of the Emperor, kidnapped him.

Various family members tried to dissuade Thomas from being a Dominican, but he resisted them. He wanted to live poverty and service through learning and preaching. His brothers tested him in the most convincing way they could imagine. They put a prostitute into his room. Thomas drove her out with a blazing branch from the winter fire. He prayed for perfect chastity, which the Lord gave him. This gift kept his mind clear so that he could advance in spirituality without sensory hindrance.

His family kept him captive for about two years. His mother let him escape through a window, and Thomas went off to study with the Dominicans in Paris and Cologne. But his family made one final attempt to derail him by getting the Pope to offer him the abbacy of Monte Cassino, even if he remained a Dominican. Re-

fusing again, Thomas finally settled into studying theology with St. Albert the Great. All his life, Thomas had struggled to devote himself to prayer and study. Now he was free to pursue these objectives in peace.

But Europe was not at peace. The Council of Lyons, in 1245, excommunicated and deposed emperor Frederick II, extending excommunication to all who obeyed him. Sometime soon thereafter, the d'Aquino family transferred allegiance to the Pope. Frederick responded by banishing the d'Aquinos from the kingdom of Naples, and killing one of Thomas' brothers.

In spite of these distractions, Thomas became an accomplished student. Because he was so quiet, and so large, his fellow-students called him "the dumb ox". But he was so intelligent and organized that St. Albert the Great said: "We call him the dumb ox, but one day he will bellow his teaching so loud that he will be heard throughout the world." And so it happened. He achieved the greatest feat of thinking in philosophy and theology. He synthesized them, showing that the core of Aristotle's philosophy was Pure Act. The core of theology is Christ's teaching that God is love. Integrated thought in these previously separate fields flows from these apparently different sources. Thomas demonstrated that Pure Act is God, Who is Love. So the source for each unified field is the same, and they synthesize. This is the foundation of western civilization. We have lived on that achievement for 750 years.

The reason for his grand success is that he finds the reasons why something is as it is. Often he finds more important reasons why something can't be otherwise than as it is. These reasons endure across the centuries, while opinions come and go rapidly. You have lived to see many opinions rage through exciting moments, and then disappear entirely. Opinions are throw-aways, while reasons are keepers. Though reasons are not as romantic as images, they are more stable, more reliable, and more useful in the long run. They endure with a freshness that contrasts vividly with "what everybody says". So they are well worth your effort to attain. Thomas relied upon reasons to win his debates.

In those days, scholars did theology in disputes, or public debates. Each person confronted his adversary in public. In the midst of these personal controversies, how did Thomas focus on truth? Prayer was his secret. He put it this way: "I learned more at the foot of the Cross than from books." But he blended prayer with study so that he understood all the claims of the contending thinkers. He could then express all the pros and cons in the simplest and clearest way. That won debates. His writing style crystallizes this public debate. He takes up all the competing claims in an order that emphasizes the strengths of each claim. His opponents said that he stated their case more clearly and forcefully than they could. Once he stated their contending claims, he would give his reasons for an alternative conclusion, then demolish all the counter-claims. This destruction of other claims followed the claim's own logic to its intrinsic contradiction, and expressed it so clearly that everyone could see that it was false.

This led Bartholomew of Capua to express what thousands of people have experienced: "people of all sorts can easily benefit from his (Thomas') writings according to whatever little intellectual capacity they have, and that is why even the laity and people who are not very bright look for his writings, and desire to have them". p 236

After an introduction to orient you, we shall identify what Thomas did in general, enjoy his poetry as an excellent expression of his spirituality, and get into his spirituality. Down the ages, thinkers consistently refer to Thomas as the Angelic Doctor, for the angelic clarity of his teaching. We will not review all that clarity, but we can read some of his statements to show how angelic he was. It's hard to imagine a better guide to spiritual enlightenment.

As a quick example, Thomas realized that we wonder about things in several ways. Most of us wonder about how to use things. We say: "What will I do with that new chair?" "How will I profit from it?" "Why will it make life easier?" This is practical knowledge. We can't do without it. But it's just a start. Once we solve practical problems, we can wonder about what the chair is. Sure, few people do that, but it's the next step away from material limits into spirituality. If we come to know what a chair is, we increase our spiritual understanding.

Sometimes this knowledge is so spiritual that we know the inner act of chairs. Once we know the deep spiritual act of chairs, we can make one out of almost anything. Early chairs were made out of wood. They worked, but not as wooden chairs with cushions, so people who knew the “what” of chairs moved on to more efficient combinations of comfortable support. Some people swear by “bean-bag” chairs as utterly comfortable. On the way to more spiritual wonder, we are amazed that chairs exist. Then we have arrived at spirituality that satisfies. But chairs are not very important. They come and go. We are much more interested in things that last. Human beings last for all eternity. Satisfying spirituality is about what we will do with our eternal existence.

Thomas guides us along this path. We all notice existence. But we usually focus on the existence of the rat race. Then we devote ourselves to material goals, and material means to them. Granted, we need to do some of that. But we don’t get much satisfaction from rat-racing. Our competitors bite us frequently, and we get so frustrated that we often fly into rage. Road-rage expresses this rather clearly. But if we focus upon the difference between existing and failing to exist, we realize that road rage, or any other part of the rat race, does not satisfy us. So we look beyond the rat race. There we find that God loves us, and died to redeem us from rage and other sins. Then we realize that Jesus came to provide peace. From peace, we can progress to God. That progress satisfies.

As we review life, we see that the satisfying moments in life have been about more important things than the rat race. These more important things exist. In a sense, our struggle is to overcome illusions of things that may exist, so that we can attain things that really exist. Our many ideas let us down so often that we distrust them. But the existence of even the most insignificant thing inspires us. The speck of dust that shines in the ray of light exists. As such, it is far superior to winning the rat race.

We have millions of ideas about possible beings which never come to exist. That shows us how useless they are to us. Meanwhile, millions of things exist around us, and lead us to peace in their reality. Moreover, they lead us beyond their momentary existence to eternal existence. Thomas anchored his spirituality in this basic experience, which is right there, available to us all. The mote of dust sparkling in the ray of light exists. So do many more important beings. Each passing existence expresses its inadequacy by passing away, out of existence. By that very fact, passing existence shows us the source, or existence that must exist. Take a moment to consider that simple connection between passing and lasting existence.

Fr. Tugwell’s expression is, p 213: “The fact that things exist and act in their own right is the most telling indication that God is existing and acting in them.” That things exist for a while then cease to exist, shows their dependence upon a being which is stable. Fortunately, this being, God, loves creatures into existence, as Thomas shows. We shall examine his reasons for loving things into existence later. For now, it is enough to notice that existence is amazing. “Why is there something, rather than nothing?”

Existence is the basis of Thomas’ spirituality. He expresses our spiritual quest as existing beings seeking the most existing being. Would we attempt to find God if we did not exist? We couldn’t get started. Similarly, the most existing being must also exist. He’s the source of all the partially existing beings that we find around us. Our ordinary conversation doesn’t say much about existence, but it’s the foundation for all serious activity. Every important religious celebration is based upon the existence of an event, like the birth of Jesus, or His death and resurrection. These existing events support Christmas and Easter, which balance our year of remembering what was, is and will be.

So we are off to a fine start as we pursue Thomistic spirituality. It’s all about existing beings with existing goals and existing acts toward the ultimate goal, God. This distinguishes spirituality from fiction, which is all about mere possibilities. It’s fun to pursue fiction, as in Dan Brown’s books (*Angels & Demons*; *daVinci Code*). But these imaginary pursuits end soon, leaving us disappointed. The existing activity of genuine spirituality is real, so it remains interesting. As we become more involved in it, it relates to more of what exists, and remains fresh, intriguing, and supporting. As we expand prayer and study, we extend our contact with reality. In a simple way, prayer is being real. We will examine that Monday morning when we follow Thomas into prayer.

Meanwhile, we are sure that he concentrated upon existence. The most existing part of every creature is its act. This act overcomes the creature's limitations, or matter, so that the creature does something. The rose blooms, the hummingbird collects nectar, and human beings understand the rose and the bird. We also love to understand them, so that love completes our act of knowing. We get beyond our limits by noticing the rose, get further beyond by finding the "rose-ing" of the rose, or what it does that roses do, and lilies do not. We quickly move beyond any individual rose to rose in general, or the act of rose-ing. This is rose as rose. We do this so quickly that we pay no attention to our understanding. Thomas slowed down, paid attention, and came to understand our process of understanding. That helped him reconstruct Aristotle's synthesis of Greek thought. This is a great spiritual achievement all by itself, and would have made Thomas's reputation as a world-class thinker.

But Thomas was just warming up. He followed the patterns of act back to their source in complete act, or Pure Act, or God. There he realized that God is so completely active that He has no limit. This is why thinkers never tire of considering God: He's infinite act, beyond all restriction. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle got to this wonderful contemplation, and noted that man is headed into this eternal activity. We act along with Pure Act. That's where satisfaction is. In life, we get distracted, so life is a struggle. Completion of our contemplation improves with age, heading for perfection on the other side of death. No wonder Socrates was not afraid to die. No wonder that Plato extolled our eternal contemplation of the Good. No wonder Aristotle showed that our destiny was to enjoy the action of contemplating Pure Act. All the great philosophers followed existence through to the same existing activity. Aristotle was the clearest thinker, and left us the most coherent account of this process. So Thomas thought the world as Aristotle did, and could thereby recreate Aristotle's great works.

By thinking back from incomplete acts that creatures perform, to the Pure Act, Aristotle found the core of existence. That enabled him to synthesize the whole of Greek thought. Thomas replicated this thought, and comprehended creatures in the act of the Creator. We do the same with the evidence we have. So we have a partial picture of the world. We know it changes. It's dynamic. It acts. Once we have this central process, we know the universe as it is. The Pure Act Source sets partial acts going. We are partial acts that can complete our activity by knowing and loving. These are the most spiritual acts we can accomplish. We rejoice in them when we do them, and thus gain a foretaste of our destiny. Our destiny is to become increasingly spiritual. Ultimately, we become so spiritual that we can act without the restrictions that plague us today.

Once Thomas had traced existing activity that far, he had found the basic pattern of human development. How wonderful it would be if more people would find this pattern, and pass it on to those striving to learn it. The world would be a different place. We could go from the rose to the Creator quickly, easily and joyfully. You see the way, so you can do it. Thomas passed this knowledge on to us. We all have the desire, so once we find the path, we're off and running. Everything in creation fits together by its activity. We do not know all created activity, so there's room for improvement. But we know the basics, and these are enough to get us to our destiny. Thank you Aristotle. Thank you Thomas.

Among the existing activities that Thomas explored, the Christian experience was most important. As it is rooted in the Jewish experience, we could call this set of activities the Judaeo-Christian dynamic. It has a superficial observable part because anyone could have watched Abraham wander around the Middle East. We could have seen Moses lead the Chosen People out of Egypt. All these adventures were visible, audible, and tangible. But their basic pattern was response to God. God communicated to Abraham. God called Moses. This different process opens new activity to us. This new activity is God's message, freely given. We call it revelation. It is massive, with many parts to confuse us. But it has a core. It has a source. It's the same source as creation: God.

But because it God speaks to us in this activity, and God creates in the other activity, we distinguish these different activities. Revelation is God speaking to us. Speculation is us studying creatures. Thomas clarifies this difference. He penetrates the tangle of revealed events, sets various interpretations aside, and arrives at the core of theology. It is God, expressed most completely by Jesus showing that God is love. God comes to us

in human form, as Jesus Christ. He fulfills the prophecies, completing the Old Covenant, and beginning a New Covenant. This New relationship is based upon God Himself redeeming us from our sins. He makes infinite reparation for our offense against God. His act of dying for us is the greatest love any being can do for another. "Greater love no man has than to die for his beloved." God teaches us in Jesus that God is Love. This is also the highest act, integrating knowledge and all lesser acts.

So Thomas realizes that the core of revelation is the same as the core of philosophy. He sees how they synthesize. From this core identity, Thomas shows actions that fit together from each formerly separate study. As Aristotle showed, man's destiny is God. As Abraham and Jesus showed, man's destiny is God. Aristotle noted that man acts toward God by developing power, or virtue, to act more in tune with Pure Act. Jesus showed that if we follow Him, act like Him, then we act more in tune with Love. The difference is that hardly any people followed Aristotle to Pure Act, but millions of people followed Jesus to Love. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He provides grace to accomplish what Aristotle recommends.

But the two processes, revelation and speculation, have the same core dynamic. However different some superficial activities may be in each, the central process is the same. This is the great Thomistic synthesis, the basis for Western Civilization, which has sustained us for 750 years. Consider it carefully. It is the dynamic of Thomistic spirituality.

All numbers of text refer to pages in: Tugwell, Simon; *Albert & Thomas: selected writings*; Paulist Press, 1988