

St. Thomas' Spirituality: Third Talk: Praying

Because prayer was so important to Thomas, he dealt with it in several places. We have selected a few ideas from his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, and from the *Summa Theologiae*. We would have to work very hard to exhaust his treasury on prayer, and nothing could better express his spirituality than praying. As he points out, the greatest prayer is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Thomas learned this by theological reflection, but most intensely by personal practice. Every morning he went to confession and then said Mass. As he became more united with Jesus Who offers Himself in the Mass, he became lost in ecstasy. Often his Brothers had to shake him to bring him back when a long pause indicated that he had become ecstatic. These episodes characterized his latter years, so it was no wonder that Pope Urban IV entrusted the composition of the Office for Corpus Christi to Thomas. "It is fitting that a theologian whose piety was so dominated by the Eucharist should have been the author of the liturgy for such a feast." 264

Thomas gave us so many good reasons for focusing upon God that we tend to forget his focus upon Jesus, especially in the Eucharist. "His awareness of the impossibility of attaining to any direct vision of God except by way of the revelation He has made of Himself in Christ" 264 was Thomas' reason for devoting himself to Jesus entirely. Because Jesus is present in the Eucharist body, blood, soul and divinity, Thomas revered the visible bread Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus told us clearly: "This is my body; this is my blood", Mt 26: 26-27, Mk 14: 22-24, Lk 22: 19-20. Thomas realized that Jesus is revelation in the flesh. Jesus is the fullness of revelation that God started with Abraham, and finished in the resurrection. Thomas elaborated this thumbnail sketch of spirituality in magnificent detail.

Perfect prayer here below is praying along with Jesus as He renews His Redemption and Resurrection in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. It is a foretaste of heaven. Thomas prayed along with Jesus every day, and grew in holiness by receiving Holiness Himself. When he lay dying, he professed his profound faith in the Eucharistic presence of Jesus. It was the inspired all his theology. An eyewitness reported that right before he died "he addressed the Blessed Sacrament in these terms: 'I receive You, price of my soul's redemption, I receive you viaticum for my pilgrimage, for whose love I have studied, kept watch and labored, and preached and taught.'" 265 Thomas seldom referred to himself, so this statement opens his heart to us, to show that the love of Jesus urged his every act. In Latin the phrase is *Caritas Christi urget me*.

This event fits well with several other observations, especially that of the sacristan at the Dominican priory of Naples. He saw Thomas in ecstasy rising above the floor toward the crucifix, which addressed him: "'Thomas, you have written well of me; what reward will you take from me for your labors?' Thomas replied: 'Lord, nothing except you.'" 265 Great saints interact with Jesus in these intense ways, but we ordinary souls grow close to Him by prayer, particularly the perfect prayer of the Mass.

During this perfect prayer, December 6, 1273, Thomas experienced Jesus with such clarity and loving union that he could not go back to ordinary human activities. He obediently did what his leaders told him, but he was so united with God by this event in Mass that he could not concentrate on details. In his own words: "Everything that I have written seems like straw in comparison with what I have seen and what has been revealed to me." 266 Up until then, he had been strong, even vigorous, but thereafter he weakened, and soon died. His mind was clear, as eyewitnesses attest, but he was totally absorbed in the close experience he had of Christ in the Eucharist. He had just finished the part of his *Summa Theologiae* on Jesus in the Mass, and was in the section of the sacrament of confession. But the clarity of his recent vision drove away all interest in further written expressions. He seemed to be united with Christ in a transcendent way.

Perhaps, in Tugwell's words, "Thomas had, in some way, peered beyond faith, and glimpsed something of the reality to which the words of faith point." 267 No wonder that words drop away. We have lived out similar events. The experience stuns us. We cannot speak because what happened transcends words. There is no way to say what we have lived. Thomas wanted to communicate this epitome of prayer. He wanted to share his expe-

rience, but no words would work. “He told Reginald (his secretary) that he wanted to die, now that he could no longer write. He was evidently frustrated and confused.” 267

He always preferred spirit, or mental act, to matter, or body act. Writing enabled him to express these more important mental acts, and thus get out of himself. “Now that he could no longer write and teach, he was almost unable to come out of himself. He had, as a theologian, argued that rapture is the highest level of contemplation, and one of the ways in which it can come about is that ‘one’s desire is so violently drawn to something that one becomes estranged from everything else’. Did not something like this happen to Thomas? This curiously calm, seemingly dispassionate man suddenly found that his lifelong love of Christ became too much for him. All his life, he had been studying, writing, preaching and teaching for love of Christ; now that same love became momentarily so intense that it crippled him, leaving him a stranger in the world. There was indeed nothing left for him to do except to die, and to enjoy forever the friendship of God.” 267

For so private a man, this glimpse of his heart is a major opening to his soul. As we follow along with Thomas, we see that saints reflect God, or Love, exceptionally clearly. They are the best friends to have. Their love of Jesus, initiated by His love for them, invites us all to the great love feast. If we participate, especially in the Eucharistic feast, Love Himself draws us ever more close. Whether Pope Benedict XVI tells us this in his first encyclical, or whether we learn it from Thomas, the message is the same. Like the disciples near Emmaus, “We knew Him in the breaking of the bread”, Lk 24: 35.

This is where prayer goes, to Love, in the way that Love has come to us. We will save the love feast of the Mass for later because it is the climax of prayer. For now, we will consider the starting points of prayer. From the beginning, Thomas realized that we have only one teacher, Christ. So the basic reason for prayer is to be like Christ. “Thomas, conscious of the high role of the teacher as in instrument of divine providence, says: it is only by God’s gift that anyone could be adequate for the task, so he needs to ask God to make him adequate.” 269 Remember that prayer and truth were the main spiritual dynamos of Thomas’ life. Here they fit together clearly. This is the saint’s secret: he integrated the parts of his live ever more completely.

Thomas, like any saint, starts all fragmented, and becomes increasingly one. He gets his act together. He becomes united in the One. Prayer is just that kind of being real by being more together. As we consider Unity Himself, we become more unified. All of us know that we are made in God’s image and likeness, but something we call Original Sin shatters our integrity. So we “work out our salvation in fear and trembling” as we strive to regain unity. Thomas did this in a relatively short time: 48 years. He did it by increasingly effective prayer. Since we experience difficulties with prayer, we can learn from simpler prayer experiences, and work our way up to the ultimate experience. Our reflections introduce us to prayer, and we can read at our leisure what Thomas communicated. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas organized thought about prayer in greater simplicity and clarity than other authors. Prayer is so vast, and has so many fascinating features, that everyone who considers it gets lost in one or another important facet of the overall process. For further study, Tugwell recommends these original sources: *Commentary on Lombard’s Sentences*, IV, 15, 4; *On Truth*, q 6, q 6; *Summary Against Gentiles*, III, chapters 95-96; *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 14: 13-15; *Commentary on 1 Timothy* 2:1; *Commentary on John* 16:23; *Commentary on Matthew* 6: 5-15; *Summary of Theology* II.II, q83, and *Commentary on Romans* 8; 26-27. 271-273

To reassure us, Thomas hardly ever refers to ecstatic prayer, the kind that overcame him now and then as he developed, and that seemed to absorb him during his final months. The reason for this is that ecstatic prayer is so rare. Moreover, it occurs to people who are well prepared to deal with it. Most of us live without ecstasy. So Thomas deals with our common experience. He notes that we pray often with prepared, even memorized prayers, usually recited. If we advance from these fine prayers to silent prayers, we often do not know what to say. But, with practice, we find a way to develop fresh prayers to interact with God. Then we can advance to of listening to God so intently that we contemplate him. A priest asked a farmer how he prayed in church for an

hour after work. This farmer said: “I look at Him, and He looks at me”. This look of love is a fine way to express contemplation. Thomas shows us the steps from vocal to mental prayer to contemplation.

In his own words: “The different kinds of prayer appear not to be clearly distinguished.” 387 He gives a set of examples that we can skip because we personally experience the confusion of various types of prayers. In the couple pages of examples that Thomas gives, he finds two obvious sources of confusion. Some of the differences are due to inside distinctions, and some to outside applications. Internal distinctions of prayer-kinds are much more important than the many applications we can make. For example, we don’t want to say that a prayer for Sue to get well is a different kind from a prayer for Sal to get well. They are the same kind, applied to different people. But such petitions are quite different from thanksgiving prayers, when each gets well.

“The integral parts are identified by the different things needed to make up a complete prayer. The things that fall within the scope of prayer are identified by the different things we ask for, or to different ways of asking for them.” 390 That’s a clear way to differentiate integral parts from applications. Integral parts start with the honor we give God for allowing us to pray. Thomas starts at the beginning. As Creator, God gives us the power to cause something to happen by prayer. So glorifying God’s generosity to provide us with gifts through prayer establishes prayer. More specifically, this is “a commemoration of the holy things in virtue of which we obtain difficult requests, and this is what ‘entreaty’ is all about.” 390 We usually say that Jesus has merited gifts for us. His sacrifice on the Cross, redeems and sanctifies us. Then He gives us the task of praying for more gifts. We usually call these gifts grace, as in Amazing Grace.

This is the foundation for prayer, a *conditio sine qua non*. The next essential piece is the petition, itself, “and that either means asking for things we want in view of our primary petition, and this is ‘prayer’ or petition for the good things we need in this life, or it means asking for the things we are primarily concerned to obtain, such as the good things of heaven, and this kind of petition is called ‘pleading’.” 390 The goods of heaven are so different from the goods of earth, that we don’t ask for them when we’re children. We need some time to mature enough to ask for them. The older we get, the more we are likely to ask for heavenly goods.

The Mass, or Eucharistic Sacrifice includes all these components, as Thomas notes: “The words that precede the consecration are ‘entreaty’ because they commemorate Christ and His teaching and that of His saints. The words spoken at the consecration are ‘prayer’ because the sacrament which they effect is a help for us on our way in this life, which is why it is called ‘viaticum’ (go with). What comes after the consecration is ‘pleading’ because there we plead for eternal goods on behalf of the living and the dead. And the words that follow communion are ‘thanksgiving.’” 391

Thomas then organizes various details that were important to people in his time. Our time has its urgent details that are somewhat different. But we can use each of these details as they come up. The foundation of prayer is always there, so we enjoy his description of praising God for allowing us to participate in prayer. Today we seldom hear of how different God is from creatures. But Thomas reminds us by saying that “God is not to be referred to anything beyond Himself”. 393 God is the complete being, acting fully, without limitation, so His pure act transcends all creatures. Creatures are so different from God that there is no genuine relation of any creature to God. However, God is so generous that He arranges creatures to reflect His glory. In this sense “praise does apply to him”. 393 Thomas develops this theme in his book *On the Trinity*.

If we dig into this simple statement, we see that God is all existence, needing nothing, missing nothing. He is perfect Being all by Himself. Since He is perfect, He can do any good thing. From this excess of Being, He creates other beings. He makes them to be, though they were nothing before creation. They can neither add to nor subtract from His being, so they do not relate to God in the way that creatures relate to each other. Bodily creatures are severely restricted to the space they occupy. They relate to all other space occupiers by being on the right or left, above or below, and on and on. Spiritual creatures relate to all other creatures in many ways, especially knowing, loving, arranging. Spiritual creatures arrange most spiritually when they establish or improve harmony among creatures. The ultimate harmonious arrangement is unifying with God, the Perfect Spirit.

God didn't need to create, and is too simple to need relations with creatures. But He established relations by loving creatures into existence, and by helping humans harmonize with everything. What a marvelous arrangement for us. God gets nothing out of this, since He cannot improve upon His perfection. But we benefit beyond estimation. As we notice by eating a good meal, harmonizing with creatures is very good. Harmonizing with everything and with its Source, is immeasurably better. It's what we call heaven. We start this harmony by prayer, and extend it ever more completely until we are at one with the One.

Thomas quotes St. Augustine summarizing the application process clearly: "First, we need health to give us the energy to walk. 'Ask and you will receive' refers to this. Then we need knowledge to guide us, otherwise we will not know our way. "Seek and you will find" refers to this. Third, we need it to be possible for us to arrive. 'Knock and the door will be opened to you' refers to this. 395 Our Lord gave us a prayer that applies to all the important parts of prayer, interior and exterior. Notice that it begins by acknowledging that God is in heaven, a way to say that He is perfect Being, and can grant our requests. He does that because He loves us as "our Father". So we "hallow His name" to provide appropriate honor and praise. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" shows us that the harmony of doing His will extends throughout creation into heaven. Doing God's will is the key to harmony. Then Jesus mentions petitions. "Give us this day our daily bread" shows us that we should ask for particular good things. Bread represents all earthly goods. "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us" extends harmony to spiritual acts, particularly healing spiritual wounds that mar life on earth. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, amen" tells us that we request help to overcome temptations. The applications of prayer are well covered. The only thing missing is thanksgiving. Our interpretation of amen is usually just "the end". But it stands for "let it be, and thanks for letting it be". So thanks rings out in the joyful amen.

Thomas notes that asking for specific things "helps us focus our attention while we pray. This is very necessary in prayer. Secondly, it makes us aware of our own desire, and how we are progressing in it. Thirdly, it makes us pray more fervently, because the more precisely we concentrate our attention on particular good things, the more earnestly we desire them, as the philosopher remarks in connection with bodily delights in the *Ethics*." 397 The philosopher is Aristotle, whose synthesis of speculation Thomas synthesized with revelation. To wrap it up, Thomas quotes Augustine: "'The reason why we also pray to God in certain intervals in specific words is in order to give ourselves a reminder by means of these signals.' This expresses the first point. 'To become aware of how we are progressing in our desire' states the second point. 'To stir up ourselves to a more eager desire' is the third point." 397 This emphasizes prayer's dynamic, or inner act.

Thomas shows us the depth of his integration of truth by relating what we know about prayer from Jesus to the development of virtue in Aristotle's *Ethics*, and to St. Augustine. One paragraph expresses all this unity. No wonder people admired his teaching so much. Thomas shows clearly how prayer fits into all these activities. Some people complain that there is no end to what Thomas teaches. This is true because Thomas sees the real world and expresses it as it really is. It is dynamic, ever-flowing on from the Source to our Destiny, Who is the same perfect Being. Overwhelming changes of infinite things come together in harmony. It's too much for most people to admit, but it's there for us all to enjoy.

With all this light and warmth, what about doubt? What does Thomas say to help people who are confused, and who doubt that their prayers have any effect? Thomas provides an inspiring answer. "In doubtful cases, we have to cast our cares upon God in the sense that if what we are asking for is not in line with what is good for us, the matter is left in God's hands. The Lord gave us a model for this way of praying when he said 'Not as I will, but as You will', Matt 26: 39." 398

Here Thomas provides us a striking example. Jesus knows that the Jewish leaders hate Him, want Him dead, and have perverted Judas, one of the twelve. In just a few hours, the mob will come to take Him, beat Him, mock Him, try Him in kangaroo court, then force Pilate to crucify Him. Yes, this terrifying set of events is what Jesus came to do, and He knew that for all eternity. That's true of His Person, the Second Person of the

Blessed Trinity. What about His human nature? His person was calm, but every fiber of His body trembled. It's why He sweat blood. We humans deserve to die because of our sins. "The wage of sin is death", xxx. But Jesus, the Person, is God the Son, incapable of sin, and His human nature was undefiled in any way, not even by Original Sin. So death was totally inappropriate for Jesus. Nothing about death applied to Jesus. Even to die in His sleep was unjust. But to die in agony on the cross did not make sense in any way.

So of all the trials that Jesus overcame, this was the greatest. He knew that He was taking upon Himself all the sins of all mankind, but it did not make sense. It made Love. Only infinite Love would allow the Sinless to pay the debt of all sins. Only Love would carry out this plan that made no human sense. No innocent person can endure suffering without thinking that something has gone drastically wrong. Jesus suffered an agony in the garden of Gethsemane because justice was not served by His decision to die for us. But Love was served, and infinite reparation made for our infinite offense because infinite God died for our sins.

By comparison to this trial, ours are minor, hardly worth mentioning. However, we often struggle with our little trials, and often fail to resolve them. Instead, we frequently fall into sin, and despair of uniting with God. So we need Christ's good example of suffering in that garden, and accepting God's will when His human will would have refused to die. The decision was hard because of the price that Jesus had to pay, but He made that decision to redeem us, and gives us the good example to follow. We improve our following by praying. In this effort, we take the small steps that add up to eventual harmony with God.

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