

St. Thomas' Spirituality: Fifth Talk: Praying to God and to Others

Naturally, we pray to our Creator, God. So, we naturally extend that to mean that we should pray to God alone, and no other. It follows from the very definition of prayer: the ascent of the intellect to God, 399. Since prayer is worship, and we worship God alone, we should pray to God alone. Our internal conditions, especially our true sentiments or deepest feelings are known to God alone. Since these emotions go along with our prayer, we should pray to God alone.

But Thomas notes that even Job 5:1 refers to praying to others besides God: "Call and see if there is anyone who will answer you, turn to one of the saints." 400. Because prayer is asking for something, we can ask many saints who are God's friends. We suppose that they pass this request on to God, and present a better case than we can. However, since God knows everything, we can't pray to St. Joseph without God knowing. So Thomas concludes that we can address saints who are in heaven. He even provides reasons why we could pray to saints who are not yet in heaven. Since saints here on earth are nearer to God than we, they can mediate for us, thereby facilitating our prayers. All too often, we know that our sins separate us from God, so we imagine that God is angry with us for this separation, and would respond to our requests if someone more loving ask in our stead. So everything that Thomas considers coordinates to extend prayers from God to intermediaries.

A century ago, William James, at Harvard no less, expressed prayer rather neatly: "We and God have business with each other. ... and in opening ourselves to His influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled. The universe ... takes a turn genuinely for the worse or for the better in proportion as each one of us fulfills or evades God's demands". This quote is from his Gifford lecture. The great philosopher/psychologist, author of *Varieties of Religious Experience*, puts his conclusions in memorable terms. His reasons are more prosaic than Thomas's, but they include two important results of prayer. The most obvious is that we obtain what we pray for on many occasions. The less obvious is that prayer improves our human condition. When we pray for something, we see it more clearly, and often realize that we need to shift our request to something more realistic. Our realizing that we need to pray is good for us, and helps us attain the proper relationship with all things, starting with our Creator, and extending to all creatures. These reasons are in the *Varieties*...

In this extension to all creatures, Thomas expands upon James' analysis to show that Jesus led the way to helping others. His cures of many illnesses, and His saving death are the prime examples of interceding for others. As we become more like Him, we realize that He invites us to intercede by prayer and offering our little sufferings in union with His great suffering for us. This is a business that God and we have together. God's work is sufficient, and we can't add anything significant to it. But God wants us to second His motion, amplify His saving work by adding our free-will offering to His. God made us free, and respects our freedom, so He invites instead of demanding that we pray.

In that context, Thomas distinguishes parts of prayer, and organizes them. "We must say that what we ask for in prayer is the life of blessedness, as Augustine points out, because everything else that we ask for we desire simply in view of blessedness. And it is only God who directly gives us blessedness. But the saints help us to obtain it. And so prayer goes directly and properly to God, because He gives us what we are asking for when we pray. But we turn to the saints when we pray, because it is by their help that we obtain what we are hoping for. This is why Cassiodorus says that prayer properly speaking, is addressed to God, while we beseech the saints." 402

Thomas shows that our main objective in prayer is heaven, or the condition of blessedness that is union with God. So getting to God is the point of all our efforts. Along the way, saints encourage us by their heroic efforts, and we can beseech them to help us. We know that they want to help us because they are completely united with God. Their wills are one with God's will in love of us. So there is no division between their love for us and God's. Naturally, God's is much more complete, both in extension and intensity, but each desire the same thing in the same general way. Their business with God is perfected, while ours is partial. So they are good intercessors for us. We can also ask them for help to do things that they were famous for. St. Joseph was a cham-

pion follower of God's will. He was perfectly obedient. So when we have troubles obeying legitimate authority, especially in our families, he is a good model and guide.

A fine example of praying along with St. Joseph is to pray to God, Who is always the primary object of prayer, and to ask St. Joseph to help us obey. Quite clearly, God has never had a problem obeying, but St. Joseph did, and he solved that problem quite well. So we appreciate what St. Joseph achieved, and admire his success. Therefore, it's easier to relate to St. Joseph in this particular difficulty. Similarly, if we need more courage, it's easier to ask a martyr for the courage to face death for Jesus. We may pray to St. Peter in the sense that we pray to God with St. Peter's help. We have no trouble approaching St. Peter because before his sanctification he lost courage and betrayed Jesus. His cowardly claim that he did not even know Christ, Jn 18:15-28, shows us that St. Peter had to struggle as we do. His eventual success encourages us, and enables us to converse with him about our weakness, and desire to be courageous.

These examples show that prayer goes to God "in its proper and unqualified sense". 402 "Prayer is an act of worship. But when we pray to the saints, we are not offering worship to them, but to Him from whom we hope for the fulfillment of our petition. The saints know, in the Word, everything that pertains to their own glory. And it is greatly to their glory that they are able to help others, as a kind of fellow-worker with God. Therefore they immediately see in the Word the desires of those who call upon them." Here Thomas refers to the way that blessedness occurs for saints. Their spiritual union with God is utterly simple. So words are too complicated to get that simple unity across. When we speak, we divide unities into aspects that we can consider clearly. So we divide the One Which God is into His knowledge. We do this because knowledge is important to us, and the basis for our advance toward God. We express this divine knowledge as the Word of God. In our simple consideration of the Trinity, this perfect knowledge is so perfect that it duplicates the person of the Father as the person of the Son. We call the Son the Word of God by analogy to our words expressing knowledge. So the Word is the perfect knowledge of God. Saints are perfectly united to God, so they have obtained their glories, or their blessednesses, to the best of their created abilities. This union of their human knowledge with God's divine knowledge is as perfect as they can be. Since God knows everything, and the saint knows God in proportion to the saint's combination of efforts and ability, our prayer to God gets to the saint.

It's like telling a person who is a friend of another person. Before long, each knows. There is no difference between friends in spiritual knowledge. Our experience of two profound friends illustrates the way that God's friendship works with saints. We are more familiar with two human friends relating in defective ways than we are with God relating to saints in perfect ways, but we make the connection. When I worship God by offering a prayer for courage, all the saints know that I have asked for more strength. If I also invoke St. Peter, all the saints know that as well. St. Peter's life consoles me, and offers hope that I can overcome my trials in a way similar to St. Peter.

In another place, Thomas reminds us that we run our comparisons from creatures to God. This is a great way to learn about God. Every good aspect of creatures comes from God. He cannot give what He doesn't have. But the perfect comparison actually runs in the other direction, from God to creature. God is the perfect source of all the good we observe in creatures. Creatures interfere with each other, so that one good is often pitted against another. The good cow eats the good grass in order to produce the good milk and beef which sustain the good humans who use them for food. God has no such conflict of goods. He is perfectly good, with no divisions at all. So when we worship Him, our minds relax into perfect goodness. Since we are partial creatures, we divide God's goodness from His truth. But when we worship Him, we recognize that His goodness is His truth. In some way God is One. This mystery can't be expressed completely, but our words point toward God, and show how worthy of worship He is. Prayer acts out this worship of the most worthy being.

Within this context, saints are united with God more completely than we are, so it makes sense to pray along with them, and even "to" them in the sense that we address them. But we never worship them. As creatures, they are beneath worship. Worship belongs to God alone. Only He is worthy of complete devotion. Only He is worth our total self-donation. Only He deserves that complete giving which we call worship. But, since

saints are further along in this process of worship, they are good models for us. We can follow their halting steps with our own. There is much less difference between saints and us than between God and us. To extend William James' fine phrase: since we and God have business, we and the saints and God have business among us. As Thomas mentioned earlier, God has no need of us, so His interacting with us is completely free. It's an excess of His love for us that He cares about us, asks us to interact freely with Him, and helps us along as we stumble. St. Peter is a fine example of His care, forgiveness, and merciful interaction.

About saints who are not yet in heaven, Thomas affirms: "we must say that we ask for something only from someone who has it. So, since the life of blessedness is what we ask for when we pray, prayer in the strict sense goes only to those who possess the life of blessedness, and not to those who are in this world, or in purgatory, although we can address supplications or other kinds of petition to those who are in this world. The saints who are in this world are in a higher state than we are, and they can pray for us, but they have not yet reached such a level of superiority as to possess that beatitude which we do not possess. Although people in purgatory are in a state of greater certainty than we are, they are in greater distress. They are not in a position to merit anything. So rather than praying for us, they need us to pray for them." 403

Thomas reminds us that we are all seeking the same goal: union with God. This blessedness is the ultimate purpose for each human. In order to attain this objective, we pray, and every detail fits into this overall goal. So the best help we can attain is from saints who are blessed because of this union with God. Second best is help from people here on earth who are well on their way to God. They run the risk of falling away from God, and going in the other direction by sin. Souls in purgatory no longer run this risk, so they are certain of salvation and eventual union with God. In that sense, they are better off than people whose life is open to rejecting God. But they are suffering to pay off the temporal punishment due to sin. This is their distress, and the focus of their attention. It is unlikely that they would be able to pray for us, or to forward our prayers. Instead, they need our prayers, as the *Book of Macabees* pointed out so long ago: "It is good to pray for the dead", 2 Mc 12:39-46. 403

The dead in Purgatory are making satisfaction for the inevitable punishment of sin. Jesus took all sins upon Himself, and made up for them. But He invites us to pay for the tangle of troubles that sins cause in this world. Christ saved us from sins themselves by paying the infinite price due to God. But He asks us to pay for some for the worldly complications flowing from sin. In the case of the alcoholic, Jesus removes the sins themselves, but the alcoholic must suffer the neural damage, the organ disruption, and the bodily dysfunctions that necessarily follow alcohol abuse. Christ does not take these residual effects away, so they are our little share of payment for sin. Nor does Jesus take away the ultimate wage of sin: death.

We recognize that some people commit very few sins, which are minor, while others commit many horrendous sins. The damage totals are quite different. Moreover, some people willingly begin to make up for their sins by service to others, acts of penance, or suffering offered in reparation, while others pay no attention, or spend all their time adding to their collection of sins. At the end of life, different amounts of temporal punishment due to sins remain for people. Add to this consideration that union with God cannot occur if any effect of sin remains in the soul, and you realize why it's good to pray for the dead. As the book of *Macabees* says, we need to make up for sins during life. These are reasons why purgation, or cleaning, is necessary for those souls which are not clean enough to unite with God at the moment of death.

Thomas goes to the heart of this cleansing, translated as satisfaction: "we must say that satisfaction relates both to past guilt, offering compensation for the offense it caused, and to future guilt, against which it is a protection. And in both ways it falls within the scope of prayer. 'The beginning and root of sin is pride', Eccl 10:15. Therefore by subjecting our spirit humbly to God in prayer, we both offer compensation for the pride involved in our previous offenses, and remove the opportunity for future guilt by cutting it off at the root. So prayer is fully in line with the definition of satisfaction (cleansing, purification, reparation).

When we unpack this treasure, we see that satisfaction is reparation for sin. Though we may not be able to identify sin, we feel guilt. That's usually our wake-up call to sin. As Thomas develops in other parts of his work, all sin aims at good. When the alcoholic drinks, he focuses upon the good taste of the martini, the good

food that accompanies it (even just the olive), the good feeling that comes upon him after two of them, the social advantages of a cocktail party. The list goes on for goods, real and imagined, that come or could come with alcohol. Somehow, the desired good escapes the alcoholic. Instead, he feels the hangover, and the guilt that goes with abusing alcohol again. All sin misses the good it aims at. The ancients referred to sin as “missing the mark or the goal intended”. This is a fine way to identify sin. The good aimed at is missing. All evil is the absence of the good that should be there. Thomas develops this in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Ethics*.

Jesus takes the sin itself away when he redeems us from all sin. We get rid of the sin when we confess it in the sacrament of reconciliation. Confession is our cooperation with Jesus, our admission that He is the savior, and that we need to be saved from quite a few sins. When we collaborate with the sacrament that He instituted, we apply His redemption, purchased by His blood on the cross. “Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven”, Mt 16:19. Thomas, in his commentary upon St. Matthew’s Gospel, notes that this is full judicial power. The followers of Christ apply it as Jesus would if He were to do all the personal interaction Himself. He would express His mercy, and so must His followers. Forgiving sins is the most merciful act that Jesus performed, and we participate in it by the sacrament of Confession (Penance, Reconciliation).

The emptiness, or vacuum, of sin bothers us until we ask Jesus to apply His salvation to it. At that moment, Christ fills in the empty spot. With this vacuum filled, we can get on with life, though we have some temporal punishment due to sin built into our lives. Bodily spirits that we are, this punishment has its corporeal and its spiritual side. The alcoholic has tissue damage and has diminished spiritual functions. His knowing is more confused from the truth, his deciding more displaced from the good, and his emotions more disconnected from order. That’s a lot of damage. It remains after the sin itself is forgiven, and washed away in the blood of Christ. But this damage remains, and piles up as sin follows sin. Cleansing of the sin is done by Jesus, but washing up this residual damage is our job. We can develop replacement strength and order, or we can unite our sufferings to those of Christ, so that we fulfill our responsibilities for our sins.

As Thomas noted, prayer reduces all these effects, while attacking pride, the root of all sin. He continues with some details: “Both mental and vocal prayer count as works of satisfaction, provided they are made in charity. Vocal prayer is a work of satisfaction because it involves an outward labor and so does have an element of painfulness about it. And inasmuch as the force of the original intention with which someone begins praying persists, it also counts as a meritorious good work. And these are the two things required for a work of satisfaction. So we can see how we can respond to the text cited from Isidore: ‘it is not the sound of our voice as such that reconciles us to God, but only insofar as the effect of a pure purpose persists in our prayer’”. 413

Here Thomas distinguishes between external human acts which can be performed for many motives, and the satisfaction which follows from the right intention, or charity. Unless we unite with God’s love, expressed so fully in Christ’s dying for us, we are not even in the correct ball park. If we do what we do out of love, then we can hit the homerun, so to speak. This reminds us that there are people who act for show, or appeal to the pit, or “grandstand”. These expressions remind us that doing what we do to show off, as the Pharisees did in Christ’s time, misses the mark. In fact, such hypocrisy, because it misses the good that should be there, is a sin. If our prayer is an act of love, and is vocal, it is bodily, or corporeal. As such, as it requires some effort, which can be painful, it makes up for temporal punishment due to sin. It is a form of penance, and pays back some of the remainder from sin that we freely provide. The quote from Isidore of Seville provides a good reason from one of the great theologians of the past (560-636 AD).

Thomas turns to mental prayer next. “similarly, mental prayer is also a work of satisfaction. Although it is enjoyable, there is a certain painfulness attached to it also. As Gregory says: ‘To pray is to utter bitter groans in a state of compunction’, either because of one’s sins or because of one’s delay in reaching heaven. Furthermore, the raising of the mind is itself an affliction to the flesh, as we have already noted, and any affliction of the flesh affects the mind too, inasmuch as they are united with one another, and it also affects the proud spirit, whose wound is healed by prayer. Prayer cannot be humble without a certain element of pain.” 414

So we provide satisfaction by several forms of depriving ourselves of pleasure, and even producing some pain. As Thomas notes, it is painful to be disunited from God. So delay in reaching heaven is painful. Making up for misdirected pleasure-seeking by offering our pain helps repair the side-effects of sin. It is impossible to separate the body from the soul while we are alive. What affects one affects the other, as Thomas notes because the two are united. In his commentary on Aristotle's study of man (*de Anima*), Thomas gives many reasons to show that we are spirited flesh, or en fleshed spirit. Perhaps the simplest reason is that pain effects both body and soul. We do not escape pain due to body damage. Even a hangnail can be painful. The pain does not stay in the finger. Instead, we experience it throughout our acting soul. This is direct evidence of our unity. In light of that unity, pains endured to make up for sin heal the wound of pride at core of the soul. Given how proud we are, being real enough to admit that God is better, and deserves worship, attacks pride, and causes us pain. From these simple reasons, we can see that prayer satisfies for the punishment due to sin that remains for us to remit, after Jesus has suffered to remove our sins.

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