

## St. Thomas' Spirituality: Sixth Talk: Charity, the Source of all Good

Because God has loved the world into existence, Charity is the basic dynamic of the world. The universe is charity acting through the limits that each creature endures. We are very powerful creatures compared to all the visible ones we find around us. Angels are much more powerful because they have no matter to limit them at all. However, they were created, so they have that limit. They depend for their existence upon God's love for them. Only God is totally unlimited, perfectly infinite. He is Love. This is why: "charity makes all our works meritorious." 414 Thomas remains true to the basic facts of life: 1. existence is the key to knowing; 2. existence shows the less-obvious source of God's love for every existing being.

When we look for what exists, we find really interesting activity. Flimsy concepts fall away, freeing us to deal with the real. Existence is so clear that we prefer it to suppositions. We have to strain to memorize popular ideas. Then we have to stretch to apply them. Then we find that they have dropped out of the picture. They are no longer popular, and people who once promoted them now avoid them like the plague. An example is smoking. Remember how popular it used to be. All the movie stars did it. It was the "in" thing to do. Now we shun this practice. All the time that people promoted smoking, the existing effects were just as deadly as we now admit. Existence remains. Existence is reliable. But existence is so extensive that it overwhelms us. Experience of this unending range of existence scares many people. So they long for a smaller set of concepts. That's the basic reason for ideologies that abandon existing things for just a few ideas. People can then repeat any of these few notions, and sound important. But all these people fade away quickly, as the popularity of smoking disappeared. Fads and fashions are other examples of ideas that aren't rooted in existence.

By contrast, Thomas takes us to ultimate existence: the pure act of God's love. We see created beings come and go. Even the ones that stay around for a long time, like the mountains we see from Santa Fe, change every moment. They erode from water and wind action. They crack, and sometimes lift up from geological motions. This change tells us that they are dependent creatures. They do not exist by themselves. Ultimately, all creatures depend upon a unified source that keeps the universe together. We imagine this Being to be very powerful, and we are correct. When we follow up on power, we realize that it expresses act. Among creatures, act is limited to just a few things that any creature can do. The more powerful creature can do more. This increased act goes from limited material activity into spiritual activity. By knowing things, our spiritual act sets us to acting along with anything that we know. Thomas reviews this in his commentary on Aristotle's *de Anima*. We follow his analysis when we realize that knowledge gets beyond material limits. Our knowledge is spiritual because it escapes the limits of a single cat to know cat as cat, or the cat-ing of all cats. Matter restricts a cat to be just that one cat. But knowledge is different. If you know one cat, you know them all.

Knowing is a fine example of spiritual power. It unites the knower with the known. Some knowledge is such a perfect union that the knower can invent the known. That's how computers came to be. The inventor knew the compute-ing so well that he could make some material things compute. He knew compute-ing so well that he could improve computers. A set of people now know the spiritual activity of computing so well that they improve computers every day. You don't invent computers, or improve them. But each of you invents ways to do common ordinary things every day. This is the spiritual process of knowing.

Less well-known to us in America is the spiritual activity of loving. We seldom admit that the inventor of the computer needed to love the computer. But he did. If he did not love the computer, he would not have done all that work to invent it. Love activated his knowledge. Love was the center act of all the acts the inventor had to perform to produce the computer. Even in a simple invention, love moves the knower to apply his knowledge. Those of you who have invented things will know this quite well. Ordinary people do not think of themselves as inventors. But you are. You invent your daily acts. You adjust to events as they unfold, and you invent your responses to what's happening.

Throughout our consideration of prayer, we have heard Thomas tell us how to respond to God's actions. Our individual responses to God's initiatives are our inventions. In the end, we invent how we live. This free

invention images God's free creation of the world. This is how we are in God's image and likeness. This is why Thomas held all people in reverence. Each person is an image of God. God gives each person as a gift to the world. Each person is a gift of God's love to all the rest of us, and to the universe. Each person is good beyond any count or measure. As we review these reasons that Thomas gives in many places, we come to realize that they are true. People are great gifts of God's love. The core dynamism of creation is God's love. As we saw in many examples from Thomas, prayer acknowledges this basic activity, and strives to do the loving thing in return for these gifts. The loving thing is to unite with the great lover, God. Love unifies.

As an act of unification, prayer is an act of love. In prayer we become more real because we emphasize the reality of God's love and respond by loving Him back. This act of mutual love unites us, and prepares us for ultimate union with God in heaven. This blessedness is the bliss of loving the one who loves us. This becoming one with God is every human's destiny. Thomas expresses this summary in these words: "The act of the intellect is done by the thing known being in the knower. Thus the excellence of the intellectual act is determined according to the intellect's degree of being. The act of will is perfected by going toward the actual thing desired as the end of willing. Therefore the excellence of the will's act depends upon the thing desired. A thing inferior to the human soul is in the soul in a nobler way than it is in itself. A thing higher than the soul, however, is in a nobler way in itself than it is in the soul. Hence, creatures which are lower beings than we, are raised up to our level by our knowledge. But we are lowered to them when we love them. So knowledge of lower beings is nobler than love of them, as Aristotle says. But for things which are above us, especially God, our love of them, or Him, is higher than our knowledge of Him. Therefore charity excels faith. *Summa Theologiae*, II, II, 23, 6, ad 1.

Because he packed a lot into a few simple words, we need to ponder this statement, and unpack it. Existing knowledge exists by acting as the thing known acts. Their existing acts merge. So when you know a given dog, you know its act. Its act includes what is specific to that dog, and no other, and what is common to that dog and all others. You do this by being one with the existing, or the dog-ing of the dog. You transcend the material limitations of the dog. You get beyond his restrictions (matter) expressed in his body, to his activity, or soul. You also get beyond your own material limits. You get outside your skin to the dog. You get inside its skin to its activity. This is the activity that you know. You also know the dog's limitations, but these are ever-changing, and not very important. That's how you can identify the dog as it grows from a pup to an adult. Its material conditions vary second by second, but you ignore those insignificant changes, to focus upon the greater acts. These acts include the specific dog-ing which this dog and no other does, and the general dog-ing that all dogs do. These existing acts activate you when you know that dog. Your act of knowledge is identical with the dog's act of being. If the dog did something else than what you know him to do, you wouldn't know the dog.

In that sense, you become the dog. Obviously, you do not become the dog's limitations. You do not shrink to his size, get hairy, and bark. But you mentally act out his physical acting out of his general dog-ing. Therefore, you can identify that dog as that dog. More importantly, you act out his general dog-ing, so that you can identify any other dog as doing the same general act. So it's a member of that same group. This is a particular example of your spiritual activity. Since every human does this, every human is spiritual, and worthy of our respect. This is an excellent act at the level of the knower. So this act extends from the lower acting of the dog to the higher acting of the knowing human. That raises the dog up to a higher level of existence: known by man.

If you notice the goodness of the dog, and love it as such, then your act of will reaches out to a lesser being to become one with it in the act of loving. In this case the human loves the dog, so the greater being loves the lesser being. The point of love is to be spiritually one with the beloved, and this occurs in this act. But the object of the will determines the value of the will-act. In this case, the human love unites with the lesser being. So the act's object is lower, and the act's value is lower than the human who loves the dog.

Now consider beings whose existence is greater than ours. God is the most important of these greater beings. If we know God, our knowing is partial because God is infinite, and we are finite. Our knowing does not act at the level of God's Pure Act. So our knowing is a reduction of this greater being. It is merely a part of what

God does. It is partial knowledge. By contrast, loving God is an act of union with God. Since God is greater than we are, and the object of our love determines the value of our love-act, God exalts us when we love Him.

Dig into that for a while. Loving God unites us with the greater Being, and lifts us up. This is the main effect of prayer. Our love-act unites us with the being we love. When we love God, we advance beyond our spiritual value into the value of God. No wonder we love to pray. No wonder prayer is an experience of rising up. Our existence advances toward God's existence in prayer. Our little spiritual activities extend into God's great spiritual activities. Prayer unites us with God, providing a foretaste of heaven. We have experienced this.

What could be greater than existing in union with Existence Himself? What can compare to acting at one with Pure Act? Why would we ever do anything besides the spiritual activity of uniting with God? Thomas goes from this sublime generality to practical reasons why. We do detailed things like earning a living so that we can live another day to pray more effectively, and thus advance to blessed union with God. All specific events fit into this pattern, so everything is meaningful as it contributes to our spiritual advancement. If we wake up another day, it's the blessing of other steps to take to God. By this understanding, we see each day, and every part of it, as a gift from the Great Gift-giver. These gifts, given in love, tune us into the harmony of the universe. It's all a love story. The Greatest Lover loves us. He asks us to love Him freely. He asks us to figure out how to love Him more completely with every gift of every second of life.

Thomas recognized this, and communicated it rather well. He did not say it all at once because he realized that all that existence overwhelms us. So he said it step by step. We have taken some of these steps, so we can follow. The important work is ahead of us. We need to look past the surface of every event to see the love behind it. Perhaps we have a hard time identifying love. After all, love is not what Americans are famous for. In every American, the love of God operates. So we admit, when we are profoundly honest, that we want to love, and to be loved. Ultimately we want God's love, and to love Him. But we want to include every creature in that love. So does God. Remember, he loved them all into existence. Our existence is proof of His love. Our unfulfilled desires are proof that we need to love more. We are in the midst of a love story.

While we can love our pets and each other, and we should, we need most of all to accept God's love, and return it ever more fully. Thomas distinguishes between three types of love. We love our pet dog with a limited love called *eros*. It is the love tied up with sensory interaction. We love to see our dog, especially if he wags his tail and jumps up to us. We love to touch our dog. He returns all this sensory interaction in ways too numerous for us to list. This sensory interaction is most touching at the emotional level. Our dog and us emote together, mostly in joy, but also in sorrow. The range of emotional union is wide and valuable. But it does not compare to love for equals: love of one human for another. This love is *philo*. We use Greek words because our overloaded English word has lost meaning. Human-to-human love is much more active. We unite not only on the sensory level, with its emotions, but also on the intellectual level, with its more valuable acts. So extensive are these that we cannot describe them. But we remember how much more enjoyable union of thought is than union of senses. To share ideas, and the process of discovery, far surpasses human-to-pet interaction. Matter limits sensory interaction severely, compared to mental interaction. And we have just begun. The second human interaction is to share wills. This is the ultimate delight. When two humans want the same thing, and work to achieve it, their union is much deeper and precious than sharing knowledge. They are more united. Friendship like this is priceless. If this friendship extends to ultimate commitment, so that he lives for her and she for him, this union of minds and wills is amazing. If this union extends to any children they may have, then the greatest human union exists. Married union tops all the others we have considered. When union of thought and will produces children, for whom the parents give their lives, we see the ultimate expression of human-to-human love. But there is yet a greater love. The love of God, or *agape* surpasses all other loves. Thomas called this kind of love charity. When we love the greatest Good, God Himself, then we go beyond creation to the Creator. No greater love can exist. The existence of this love animates us to fit all details into complete integrity.

Thomas shows us an existing order. God is the Source Who creates beings with various spiritual acts. He is the ultimate spiritual act, the Pure Act, Who does all that can be done. He is perfectly simple, so that His Act is everything. His Act is His Being. His Justice is His Mercy. As he told Moses: "I am Who am", Ex 3:14. He is His existence. So there is no defect in His being. He is Being. There are no parts in God, so His Justice is His Mercy. His Truth is His Goodness. He is the One. As an example of God being his Goodness, Thomas tells us in the *Summa Theologicae* I Q 6: "To be good belongs pre-eminently to God. For a thing is good according to its desirableness. Now everything seeks after its own perfection; and the perfection and form of an effect consist in a certain likeness to the agent, since every agent makes its like. Hence the agent itself is desirable and has the nature of good. For the very thing which is desirable in it is the participation of its likeness. Therefore, since God is the first effective cause of all things, it is manifest that the aspect of good and of desirableness belong to Him; and hence Dionysius (*De Divinis Nominibus* iv) attributes good to God as to the first efficient cause, saying that, God is called good "as by Whom all things subsist" (Creator of all that exists).

In his clear, analytical, way Thomas provides the reasons why God is the first being, from which all others come. If anything we encounter is good, it comes from God, who is Goodness Himself. In other sections, Thomas does the same kind of analysis to show that God is Truth Himself, Mercy Himself, Justice Himself. The list goes on, but God is the Source of all things, so he is the unity of all the goodness we see in parts around us. Therefore, His existence is perfect, and perfectly simple. That makes Him the source of all our understanding of existing qualities. Everything that we see spread around in pieces here in creation, is one in Him. Since we work from what we know to what we do not know, and proceed by relating what we know to what we do not know, we always use the same process. An example is: 2 relates to 4 as 4 relates to 8. We know the relationship twice 2 is 4, so if we extend that relationship to 4, we find that twice 4 is 8. This is an analogical relationship. Thomas, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Logic*, shows how analogy works. At the ultimate source of all these relationships, we find God. So God is the Source of quantities like 2 and 4, the Source of their regular relationships, and the Source of the process of doubling, or multiplying by 2. That makes God the perfect root of all the imperfect creatures we find in the universe.

This makes God the ultimate object of prayer and of all we do. Everything we do, we do to advance to God. He is the Greatest, followed by spiritual beings like angels, followed by humans, followed by other beings which are more material. This is the existing order to creation. As we relate to ever-more spiritual beings, we advance to the ultimate Spirit. That's where we want to be. God is simultaneously our Source and our Destiny. Thomas puts it in these words: "The closer things are to their mover (source), the more effectively they follow the influence of the mover. The things that are closest to the fire are the ones that are most heated by it. And intellectual beings are closer to God than inanimate natural beings. So the influence of the divine movement is more effective in intellectual beings than in any other natural beings. But natural beings share in the divine movement to the extent that they derive from it a natural desire for the good, and also the fulfillment of that desire when they attain their own particular goals. Much more, then, do intellectual beings attain the fulfillment of their desires, which they offer to God in prayer." 426

Thus Thomas puts together things that we seldom even think of, much less combine. Starting with existence, he works to how things exist, especially how spiritual things exist. They exist by acting more completely than material things. We humans who are in the middle between angels and rocks, act spiritually as well as materially. Our spiritual aspect drives for God. Nothing else satisfies us. So we advance by steps, of which the most important is prayer. Since prayer helps us be real by acting most perfectly to unify with Pure Act, it is our way to full existence. Pure Act is Love, so prayer helps us to be loved by Love, and to love Love. This integrity of activity makes more sense than any competing goal we might pursue.

Developing this love, Thomas says: "It is part of friendship that people who love should wish the desire of those they love to be fulfilled, inasmuch as they want the good and the perfection of the ones they love. This is why it is said to be proper to friends that they want the same thing. Now it has been shown above that God

loves His creatures, and He loves each one the more, the more it shares in His own goodness, which is the first and primary object of His love. Therefore, He wants the desires of his rational creatures to be fulfilled, because they share most perfectly of all creatures in the goodness of God. And His will is an accomplisher of things, because He is the cause of things by His will, as has been shown above. So it belongs to the divine goodness to fulfill the desires of rational creatures which are put to Him in prayer.” 426

Thomas unites friendship in the sense of *philo* with the ultimate friendship of *agape* when he works from the known human-to-human love to the less known love that God has for us, and we have for Him. He shows the part in each kind of love that exists in the same way. Each lover wants to please the beloved by providing what the beloved desires. We want to please our human friends, God wants to please us, and we want to please God. It is the same love dynamic at work in all three cases. Everything, at its base, is a love story.

God starts this love story, as Thomas tells us next: “Goodness in creatures comes from God’s goodness according to similarity. [God is much better than His creatures, but like them in some way.] Plainly it is good for humans to help people who come to them with legitimate requests. Those who give because of these requests are generous, kind, merciful and concerned. So it belongs especially to God’s goodness to hear pious prayers. So the Psalms say: ‘He will do the will of those who fear Him, and He will hear their prayers, and save them’, Ps 144:19. And in Mat 7:8, The Lord says: ‘Everyone who asks, receives, and everyone who seeks, finds, and to one who knocks, the door will be opened’”. 426

God loves us more than anyone else. He loves to give us what we really want. Unfortunately, we often desire things that are bad for us. At a deeper level, we don’t really want them. Examples of this include things that we buy, but then decide we don’t want. That keeps refund and exchange personnel busy. Because God is Love, He answers our prayers by providing what we really need. The most important of all that we need is God Himself. Thomas tells us that in the *Summa Theologiae*, I Q6. “All things, by desiring their own perfection, desire God Himself, inasmuch as the perfections of all things are so many likenesses of the divine being; as appears from what is said above (Q4, A3). So, of those things which desire God, some know Him as He is Himself, and this is proper to the rational creature; others know some participation of His goodness, and this belongs also to sensible knowledge; others have a natural desire without knowledge, as being directed to their ends by a higher intelligence.”

Thomas reminds us that reality is simple. God created so that spiritual beings could act in union with Him. Our perfection is to act with God. As we seek our perfection, we realize that everything coming from God is like Him. Our experience of these things shows us that they intrigue us because they are like God, but they do not satisfy us. Only God satisfies. So we seek perfection in Him. But the whole operation is love, as Thomas says in the *Summa Theologiae*. I, Q 12, a 6: “The intellect which has more of the light of glory will see God the more perfectly; and he will have a fuller participation of the light of glory who has more charity; because where there is the greater charity, there is the more desire; and desire in a certain degree makes the one desiring apt and prepared to receive the object desired. Hence he who possesses the more charity, will see God the more perfectly, and will be the more beatified.” We start from God, Who is Love. We advance to Love by loving Him in prayer, and we spend eternity beatified in His love.

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