

St. Thomas' Spirituality: Eighth Talk: How Love Flows Through the World

St. Thomas develops love in many ways, more than we can investigate. But here is a selection of his most frequently quoted conclusions, together with many supporting reasons, fruit of his profound wonder.

What is love?

This question is so hard for most people to answer that Thomas provides reasoned definitions in many places. The first difficulty is that love stands for many things. In English, we use love for all things which satisfy, or even relieve tension. So we say that we love to eat, to rest, to exercise, to be with friends, to give ourselves to a spouse, to care for our parents, and to be one with God. Love includes a lot. Obviously, this inclusion slides from one kind of love to another. In Latin, there are two words for love. One is love of bodily things, called corporeal love, and the other is of spiritual things, called spiritual love, or soul love. Each type of love is a union of lover and beloved. This love can be in process, so that the lover wants to be one with the beloved, and follows through on this desire by advancing toward the beloved. Or a love act could be completed, so that the lover is now one with the beloved. These are general conclusions from psychological analysis.

But they are not well known to us today. Instead, we consider love to be a feeling. Thomas took up that possibility in great detail. As we consider what love is, keep our focus on the spirituality of love, especially love of God, which is our greatest interest. He loves us, and we love Him. Each of us wants to be one with the other. But there are some problems in achieving this union.

One of our problems is that we confuse love with feeling. It's an ancient problem, and people in Thomas' time suffered from it. Though the Latin language had two different words for the verb love (*amare, deligere*), people did not use them consistently. This overlapping of terms promoted confusion. So Latin-speakers did not distinguish precisely between bodily and spiritual love. But Thomas distinguishes between them in *Summa Theologiae*, Treatise on the Passions, Question 26, article 1 (ST, TP:26:1). Love is not confined to sensory desire and union, because we experience drives to be one with both bodily and spiritual beings. He calls these drives "appetites". In our usage, "appetite" means hunger or ability to eat, so we can substitute the phrase "drive to be one with". In the *Summa*, you will find the word "appetite". Now you know what it means. Just at "appetite" for food means drive to be one with food by consuming it, so we drive to be one with spiritual things. An example of that is our drive to be one with God. We also want to be one with knowledge, justice, our country, our family, our church... Among creatures the list is endless and repetitive. But God is the ultimate one.

Thomas notes that we love wisdom. We want full knowledge, so we love wisdom. We drive toward wisdom when we ask profound questions about the whole enchilada, or the universe. We realize that the universe is a whole, and we drive to understand the universe. Notice that we love to be united with another being, in this case the universe. Wisdom goes beyond the universe by noting that the universe changes. So it is insufficient, going from one inadequate state to another. Wisdom therefore expands to include the Creator of the universe Who is the stable source of the unstable change-system. Wisdom also shows us that God is the goal of all these changes in the universe. Wisdom is so spiritual that it finds God. God is so spiritual that He is infinite. We can't get around Him. We cannot know him completely. But we can learn about Him forever.

Truth that extends to wisdom is a fine example of our spirituality. But Thomas makes another distinction. Loving is not the same as knowing. Knowing is our act of becoming one with what a thing is, or its truth. Loving is our act of becoming one with the thing itself, or its goodness. The good is what all spiritual beings desire, or want to be one with in loving. We confuse love and knowledge because as soon as we know the truth of some being, we also see its goodness, so our experience of knowledge and love is usually fused. We must make efforts to distinguish them. It helps to notice that we love quite a few beings that we do not understand. Perhaps the most obvious example is mom. Our love for her is not something that we comprehend. She is always more than what we know about her, but we love her anyway. Thomas develops this example to show that love is more completely human, and more uniting than knowledge. The greatest example of loving a being we do not understand is loving God. He surpasses understanding because He is infinite truth. So we never get com-

prehend Him. But we love Him because He loves us. Our union by love is more complete, even though our knowledge of Him lags behind. Thomas develops that in great detail.

Part of these details is the difference between bodily love and spiritual love. It is enough for now to realize that the two are different. We do each, so we drive to be one with food by bodily love, and we drive to be one with God by spiritual love. In each drive, we love. The bodily love is very close to feeling, or passion. This distinction between feeling and love is in the next article of this question. Thomas admits that most people do not distinguish between them. This is why so many people today consider love to be a feeling, just as they did in 1250. But Thomas gives several reasons why love differs from feeling. First, feeling is a semi-automatic response to an appearance. Appearance is not the thing itself. How often have we reacted to an appearance, and bought the item because of the ad that appeared so enticing? Then we find that the thing we bought is not at all what it appeared to be. So we know that appearances are deceiving. Instead of surface appearance, we need the more stable meaning of a being. In fact, we notice that a single being has many appearances. That's a good way to tell the difference between appearance and the being which appears in several different ways. As Thomas loves to remind us, we need to get behind appearances to the existing pattern of the being itself. Appearances mislead us, usually by feelings. Feelings are responses to appearances, and therefore very superficial. That's why these feelings shift irresponsibly. That's why feelings are not reliable.

Instead of appearances, we seek meaning. It is more work to find meaning, but we get through changing appearances to the unchanging pattern when we attain the meaning of the being. Its pattern may be hamburger, which varies from many appearances of hamburgers that can be seen. The burger's activity pattern is some nourishment, together with attendant goods like saturated fat, calories, seasoning... When we know this deeper pattern, we can deal with the hamburger as it is stable food. This is the burger's truth. Its truth reveals its value, or its goodness. Sometimes, we must study the truth of a being to derive its value. Hamburgers are good examples, since your knowledge of what they are and how good they are has changed through the years. When you were a teenager, the meaning and value of hamburgers was high on your list of truth and goodness. With time, this may change for several reasons, like your own growth and development.

To know the meaning of any being is to see its good. That goodness attracts us. Ultimately God is the most attractive of all goods. We have a vague notion of this attraction when we know God. So we want to unite with God, the greatest good. Thomas reminds us that we know many lesser good things that we do not desire. So the union of knowledge is quite different from the union of love. By love, we drive toward the beloved, usually by steps that we can identify. The higher the good that we love, the further away it is, so the more steps we must take toward it. The first step that Thomas mentions is relaxing into seeing the goodness of the beloved. Our relaxing into this value is like coming home, we see how good it is, and we fit right into it, or we love it in general. It is so good that we are complacent in it, or pleased with it. We say: isn't that nice. The second step is desire, which overcomes whatever obstacles there may be to complete union with the beloved. Desire can last a while, if there are many obstacles to overcome. The final step is joy in complete union with the beloved.

This is most easily seen in loving a hamburger. Substitute your favorite food for the beloved. When we first become aware of the burger, its goodness fits into us, and we love it remotely. Isn't that burger nice? Then we realize that we could have the burger, we could approach it. So desire rouses us to complete any intermediate steps toward union with the burger. As we unite with the burger by eating it, we experience joy from this simple union. The same general set of steps exists for union with God. Our knowledge of God shows us some of His infinite goodness. Isn't God nice? We incline toward God because He is so good, and we recognize the fit between us and God. Second, we desire God, or drive toward Him earnestly. Here the steps between us and God are more numerous than between us and a burger. So desire, or drive to God, will last longer, usually a lifetime. In the burger, we consume the good, but God is not consumable. Instead, we are the lesser, loving the greater, being. But our increased union is tremendously enjoyable, and final union is beatific.

Like all analogies, we work from the better known experience of loving hamburgers to the less known love of God. There are connections, but they limp because they are not the same connecting acts. Even if the

analogy limps, it is enough to keep us going along the way to God. One huge way in which this analogy limps is that the burger does not love us at all, while God loves us more than we can comprehend. When we enjoy the burger, our rest in that good is short and not very delightful. But when we enjoy God, our rest is eternal and perfectly joyful. Love of God is perfect love. All other loves are imperfect analogies to that complete love of Love Himself. But all loves, from loving a burger to loving God are alike because love is an act. We must activate love for it to exist. With the burger, we must activate our desire for it, drive for it to overcome obstacles, and actively enjoy it. With God, we must follow the same steps of activating our desire for Him, driving to overcome barriers to Him, and actively enjoying Him. The good of both the burger and God exist outside us. They are objective, whether we act to attain them or not.

This last consideration shows us the objectivity of the good that we could love. When we love it, we unite with it in ways that surpass our usual understanding. Ordinarily, we are so busy hustling for goodies that we do not reflect at all about what we love, or how love works. Thomas provides an accurate detailed account of love. He shows us that love is an act of uniting. We so unite with the burger that we consume it, digest it, and incorporate it into our bodies. When we love God, we do not consume Him, digest Him, or incorporate him into our bodies. But we unite with Him spiritually, so that somehow we become one. How this happens we do not know, so we turn to another analogy: friendship.

In another place, Thomas analyzes friendship, say between Sue and Ed. He shows us that bodily they remain separate, but spiritually they become so one that what pleases Sue pleases Ed. Similarly, what pleases Ed pleases Sue. If each is pleased by hamburger, they delight in preparing and presenting hamburgers to each other. While we are sure about how sharing hamburgers works, the greater good of truth is not so clear to us. But truth pleases all people. So Sue shares a truth with Ed, and they unite by accepting it. Truth is the uniting element. As soon as they recognize the truth that hamburgers have too much saturated fat, they identify the goodness of avoiding that fat, and they can unite in refusing further hamburgers until they balance the fats that could threaten their health. They unite more completely by sharing a truth than by sharing a burger. As truths intensify from this ho-hum truth to greater truths, sharing them becomes better, and intensifies the love of each person. Each person is a good beyond measure, so Sue and Ed come to love each other as persons. In some way, friends become personally one. The obvious way is shared interests, or truths. Though we would love to understand **how** this works, we fail. Instead, we know **that** it works. We know this so completely that we do not say anything derogatory about Sue to Ed, or Ed to Sue. That would be a personal attack upon the friend, and would be an attack upon the other friend as well. We know quite clearly **that** they identify, but are not sure **how**.

Human persons are very good, but not every person likes every other person. By contrast, God pleases all persons. Nobody doesn't like God. Everybody loves God, and drives toward Him. Uniting with Him is everybody's goal. In prayer, when we come closer to God, we enjoy Him more than any other good. Love of God changes our drive to Him by fulfilling it partially, so we delight in loving God. Person-to-person unity gets better with better persons, as you have discovered. God is the greatest Person, or Trinity of Persons, so unity with Him is the best of all loves.

In his Treatise on the Passions, Q 27, article 1, Thomas goes into details about love. He shows that love is a reaction to the good, so it is passive, or receives good. Good is the active aspect of the relationship called love. Good is the same nature as the soul. Both are spiritual. Even the hamburger's good is not the material limits of size and shape, but the spiritual activity of flavors to be tasted, nourishment for the body, and so on. In God, spirituality is supreme. There is no limit to God, so there is no matter to restrict God's activity. God is simple unity. So the truth of God is the Goodness of God. That unity makes God the most lovable of all beings, and the object of both our knowledge and our love. It stretches our minds to consider how truth and goodness can be one, but it relieves us to know that God does not have any parts to get in our way as we know and love. There are no parts that we could miss in our knowledge or love, so there are no unfortunate surprises, like the ones we find in limited creatures. This shows us that God is the ultimate knowable and lovable being. True, we knew that already, by intuition. But it's comforting to know that a genius like Thomas can give reasons why.

As Thomas points out in article 1, the beloved is the cause of our love. Among all the parts that any being may have, the good of your beloved is the specific cause of your love. That good is like to your goodness. Your goodness can be expanded, enhanced, and improved by uniting with the goodness of your beloved. Seldom do we hear about this relationship, but it's important. When you love better beings you become better. Plato gave us a wonderful picture of this becoming as a ladder of love. When we are young, we love simple things like food and sleep. As we age, we love better things, and become better. If we continue climbing this ladder of love, we advance to ever better things. At the top is God. By loving God you become the best of men.

The reason is simple: love unites. If we love hamburgers, we unite with burgers, but that's not much. If we love God, we unite with the best of all beings. Because God is infinite good, we do not achieve complete union with him in this life. Because God is infinite, we will spend eternity expanding our union with Him. Since there is no end to God, there is no end to our progress in becoming one with Him. Fortunately, God takes us to Himself more entirely, if we freely accept Him. He is the active partner in this love affair.

We conclude that love is active choosing to be one with the beloved. The person makes this choice because he knows the truth of the beloved. Since the truth is also the good, the person who knows the truth of a being knows its goodness. The person unites with the truth by acting in the way we call intellect. This act exposes the good, making possible the person's choice. If the person chooses to unite with the good in the way we call will, then the person has completed the higher mental activities, and is one as completely as union can be between the person and the known/beloved. We call this complete union contemplation. Remember as a child being absorbed in a sunset. That was contemplation. You may have been absorbed in a person. You contemplated that person. Contemplation is the most happyfying experience we can have. We will examine it later.

What is Beauty?

Where does beauty fit in all this? You have probably heard that beauty is like truth and goodness. They form a triad of things that surpass all limits. They are all transcendent. As Thomas says in article 1 of this same question 27: "The beautiful is the same as the good. They differ only as facets of the same being. The good is what all persons seek. As such it satisfies desires. The beautiful is what all persons seek to see or know as lovely. This facet is either seen with the organic eye or with the mental eye. A sunset is beautiful to the organic eye, and to the imagination. A triangle may not be beautiful to the organic eye, but is beautiful to the mathematical imagination. In this respect, beauty is definitely in the eye of the beholder. Mathematicians delight in the beauty of geometrical proofs, which don't look beautiful to most people. But beauty is about the appearance of the surface of bodily things or the appearance of the relationships in logical or mathematical beings. So the most intellectual of our senses, vision and hearing, provide beautiful sights and sounds. But we do not say that tastes, odors or touch feelings are beautiful. These examples make evident that beauty adds to goodness a relation to cognition. So "good" means what pleases the drive to good, while "beautiful" pleases apprehension of sight, hearing, or relations.

Though beautiful is limited in every creature, it is unlimited in God. In that sense, the highest experiences we humans have are experiences of truth, goodness and beauty. They transcend all the limits that plague us with creatures. This drive to go beyond the limits is our experience of desire for God. It is the fundamental activity that exists. Thomas wondered about it so profoundly that he was able to express many of its dimensions clearly, and thus become the angelic doctor.