

St. Thomas' Spirituality: Ninth Talk: Prayer Enters into Jesus' Work

By prayer we share in Jesus' love. As we learned in the last talk, some knowledge is required for love, since we cannot love what we do not know. Knowledge always expands. We never know enough. This reflects our profound desire for all truth, or God. Though good is the direct cause of love, we would not know the good without the truth. Moreover, we come to the truth first, then to the value of that truth. It is like finding our way through a fog. Nothing appears at first, then a little appears, then the fog clears, and we see clearly; we learn some truth. Almost immediately, we see the value of this truth, or its goodness. That good is what we love. As Thomas puts it in *Summa Theologicae*, Q 26, art 2, "Just as bodily sight is the beginning of sense love, so seeing spiritual beauty or goodness is the beginning of spiritual love. So knowledge is the cause of love for the same reason as good is, since a being can be loved only if known." Without knowing truth, we do not see goodness or beauty, so we cannot take that next step to love until we take the first step to know. But when we know spiritual truth, goodness and beauty are so unified with truth, that we experience them all in a flash.

This is the tremendous value of spiritual beings. They are much better than beings that suffer from material limits. Materially restricted beings, like humans, can present a lot of truth, while hiding lots of falsehood. In many of our most harmful interactions, we learn about these falsehoods after we have given ourselves to a person because of the partial truth that person projects. Later, we learn the hidden falseness of that person. This experience can crush us. Similarly, the truth that we discover in such individuals shows us goodness, without showing how limited that good is. Beauty is the most distracting of all, because it can overwhelm us, while there is little truth or goodness behind it. It is too superficial in beings with material surfaces, and is the cause of much misery among us. We feel betrayed by beauty so often that we beware of it.

In direct contrast, the more spiritual a being, the more simple it is, with no hidden parts. Therefore, if we learn the truth of spiritual beings, we find more good and more beauty. There is less risk in knowing and loving spiritual beings than in pursuing beings with material restrictions. The more spiritual the being we know, the more perfect our reasoning is when we think about it. The more united our knowledge is, the more satisfied we are. Our drive to the good is more complete if we know all the parts, powers and properties of the being. Completely spiritual beings, like angels and God, have no parts. But their powers and properties are vast. So we can not complete our knowledge of angels, and certainly can not complete our knowledge of God. They remain beyond our full understanding. But we can unite with them by love. Though our knowledge of God is incomplete, our love is complete. However, we grow in love, so shortly after loving God 100%, we can love Him more. We never know God 100%. As Thomas shows, this enables us to love God more than we know Him. We can love God perfectly, even though we cannot know Him perfectly.

God is always a problem for us because He is infinite. So we can follow Thomas by using the example of knowing science and loving it. We never complete science, e.g. we never know all of physics. But we can love physics unreservedly. So we can love physics more than we know it. Similarly, we can love mechanics more than we know it. These experiences show us the same relationship to God. We can love God much more than we know Him. We all know little old ladies, perhaps our grandmothers, who do exactly that. How did they arrive at perfect love for God? Prayer enabled them to unite with Jesus, especially by praying the prayer that He gave us (the Our Father). The act of praying is the act of loving interaction with God. Practice makes perfect.

In his treatise on the Passions in the *Summa Theologicae*, Thomas asks question 26 about how love relates to passions, or feelings. He shows that all our feelings, or emotions, are drives toward or away from something. All drives toward something are toward something good. All drives away from something are toward something better than the object the feelings avoid. So all passions, or feelings are about the good. Goodness is the basis for superficial feelings. It is also the basis for more stable drive toward meaningful value, or spiritual good. Thomas repeatedly emphasizes that we fit with the good; we are at home with goodness. It is where we belong. Some goods are smaller than we are, and we take them in. Other goods are bigger than we are, and they

take us in, if we freely agree to be taken. All good beings fit together, they synthesize. The more together the good beings are, the greater the synthesis, and the better it is. Therefore, the more we love it.

You can see where this is going. It advances to the most unified being, the perfect synthesis of truth, good, and beauty: God. Just as Thomas showed us that prayer is about uniting with God, so we see that love is coming home to goodness, ultimately to God. God is the most existing being, the Source of all others that exist. He is Existence Himself. No wonder we love Him above His creatures. Yet Jesus shows us, by taking on human nature, body as well as soul, that material beings integrate into the overall synthesis. Jesus' work is to make clear to us that He renews, purifies, and unites all creation to God in Him. This is the greatest synthesis that exists, and Jesus invites us to participate. First, we participate by praying, so that we can come to see this grand unity, then we love how all good things fit together, and finally, we unite with this transcendent synthesis by loving it entirely in God.

Likeness is the cause of love, as Thomas shows. Jesus, by becoming human, establishes such a remarkable likeness to us, that we can love Him as He loves us. His love of us reaches out so that He comes as a man to be with us. This likeness enables us to love Him more than if He remained invisible as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. We naturally pray when we encounter this likeness, because its reality calls us to be real, or to second the reality of what Jesus has done. Naturally, we desire more likeness. So we pray for that increased oneness with Jesus. Jesus wants us to be one with Him and each other as He is one with the Father. This is our deepest desire: to accept God's love, and to love Him in return.

All desires, or all passions, are based upon similar love. We do not feel toward something without loving it in some degree. So "love" is the name of the principle movement towards the end that we love. As we noted in the first talk, Thomas concentrates on existing actions. Love is the most important of all these. God loved the universe into existence, and loved us to be. His love rescues us from sin, and urges us on to be one with Him. Then we can be one with God, since He is God incarnate. This is the ultimate goal, but we get there by loving little things like hamburgers first. Then we climb the ladder of love ever upward to more spiritual beings, and ultimately to God. Prayer advances us each step of the way into the work of Jesus, or our salvation.

Based upon the likeness Jesus established by becoming man, we can increase this likeness by uniting more completely with every moment. Praying always is always uniting with God. Simultaneously, we unite with all other things. Just like Jesus united with the universe by becoming man and living with us, so we unite with the entire universe by following Jesus in prayer. By prayer, we love Jesus more, and accept His love more, so that our likeness increases. Eventually, we can become so much like Jesus that we do what He did. In article 1 of question 28, Thomas shows that lover and beloved can be one in two ways. You have experienced each way. You can be friends with your beloved in the actual presence of the two beings. Or you and your beloved can be united by affection across some division. Similarly, Jesus transcends the division caused by sin by becoming man, and loved us by being present during His life. As we noted when considering Thomas' poetry, Jesus continues to be present in the Eucharistic way. By prayer, we can be present to God in both ways. Our intimacy with God in prayer can be direct some times. We can also participate in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and be present by affection across divisions due to our distractions. When we receive Jesus in the Eucharist, He is present to us more closely than we are present to Him. But unity grows. Growth occurs because Jesus acts in us, and because we desire to be ever more present to Jesus. Like calls to like, and we unite more completely.

Love is a mutual indwelling of persons. Charity is the great example. God indwells with us, and we with Him. This is Jesus' message, His reason for living and redeeming us from sinful separation. The lover wants to know everything about the beloved, to be more united. Love unites, so that the lover and the beloved are increasingly one. This union necessarily makes them increasingly alike. St. Irenaeus put this increasing unity starkly: "God became man so that man could become God". We start off existence like God because He created us in His image and likeness. We become more like God because Jesus taught us how to pray, and we unite with Him increasingly by continued prayer. Eventually, the union of our love, which is stronger than the union of our

knowledge, unites us completely with God. As Thomas shows, creation is all about love. God loves us, and if we freely respond by love, we become more one with Him. It's all a love story.

Thomas notes that a friend is one with his friend, whether they are bodily together or not. We become bodily together with Jesus in the Eucharist. So we participate in His work by accepting His love. He wants to be one with us. If we freely respond by welcoming Him in the Eucharist, then we unite with Him bodily. At other times, we unite with Him by affection across the distance separating us. Remember that Thomas loved to participate in the Eucharist, especially as celebrating priest, so that he could be one with Jesus as completely as possible this side of death. That's why the Eucharist was the joy of his life.

In Q 28 art. 1, Thomas shows that all kinds of love are oneness of lover and beloved. One important reason for this unity is that "when we love a thing, by desiring it, we take it on as belonging to our well-being. In the same way, when a man loves another with the love of friendship, he wills good to him, just as he wills good to himself. Therefore he sees his friend as his other self, by willing good to him as to himself. Hence a friend is called a man's other self. Augustine says, *Confessions* iv, 6: 'Well did one say to his friend: thou half of my soul.'" Thomas knows that a soul is single, a unit, and can't have a half. But in the excess of love, and the limits of language, being half of my soul is another way to say that your soul is my soul. We are one in the spiritual way that is important for humans, yet we are equal. This statement bridges the gap between material things which we know best of all, and spiritual things that we strive to know better.

Human person-to-person relations show us how man-to-God relations work because both man and God are persons. The human to human action is like the divine to human action. Love is so active that we cannot confine it, but we notice that "love moves man to desire and seek the presence of the beloved, as of something suitable and belonging to him". This is the first kind of union, of beings present to each other. The second kind of union, by affection, with some separation between the beings "is called formally 'love' because love itself is this union of bond. In this sense Augustine says, *De Trinitate*, viii, 10, that 'love is a vital principle uniting, or seeking to unite two together, the lover, to wit, and the beloved'. For in describing it as uniting, he refers to the union of affection, without which there is no love, and in saying that 'it seeks to unite', he refers to real union." Whether we can actually unite with another creature, or are on our way to complete union with God, all love unites. You can see that Thomas finds love at the center of the universe. It is the dynamic of all creation. God's love, Himself, starts the action. We cooperate by freely returning love, and growing in love until we unite with Love Himself. "He who abides in love abides in God, and God in him." I Jn 4:15.

Another way to say this union is that love is mutual indwelling. In article 2 of Q 28, Thomas notes: "The lover is not satisfied with a superficial apprehension of the beloved, but strives to gain an intimate knowledge of everything pertaining to the beloved, so as to penetrate into his very soul. That's what the Holy Ghost, Who is God's Love, does: He searches all things, yea the deep things of God." Union means that the two lovers are one, so one is in the other. This can't be done with matter. It is impenetrable. But spirits unite. Their activity blends. You have noticed that love brings two people together so that they energize each other. Fresh springs of activity flow from lover to lover, enabling much more being to be than either one could accomplish alone. Thomas reminds us that this union is why "we speak of love as being 'intimate' and 'of the bowels of charity'. . . .the lover seems to be in the beloved, as though he were become one with him. But in so far as he wills and acts for his friend's sake as for his own sake, looking on his friend as identified with himself, thus the beloved is in the lover. . . .friends return love for love."

In view of all this, prayer is both cognitive and volitional (know, will), as ST II, II, Q93 shows. *Oratio* is the mouth's reason, and expresses praise of God's love for us, thanks for His love, intercession for others to participate in this knowledge/love, confession of our sins that separate us from knowledge/love, and petition for our own soul's increase in contemplation. This contemplation is knowledge united to love. We will examine contemplation in more detail later. For now we bask in the warmth and light of connecting with the basic activity of God: love, spread into the universe, first by creation, then by personal interaction by God the Son taking on human nature as Jesus Christ. Expanding upon this sketch, Thomas shows that it's very appropriate to pray

because God created us in His image and likeness, so that we can cooperate with Him in causing good results. Prayer enables us to cause more good results than we can count. We co-create by arranging God's creation.

Prayer is an act of religion because it reunites us with God to the best of our ability at the moment that we pray, extends our ability to pray, and eventually opens us to God's transforming action, so that we can pray perfectly for all eternity. Here in the *Summa Theologicae*, Thomas sharpens up the reasons that he provided in his commentary on the *Sentences*. That is why some of this sounds familiar to us. But he adds important reasons like "our prayers should entitle us to receive what almighty God planned from all eternity to give us". God's generosity extends beyond giving us good things into giving us free will so that we can freely request some of these good things. This brings us into the causal chain, allowing us to participate in God's generosity. This experience adds to "our confidence in running to Him, and to recognize that He is the source of all that is good for us. So Chrysostom says: 'Consider what a joy is granted to you, what glory is bestowed upon you, that you can speak with God in your prayers, that you can engage in conversation with Christ and plead for whatever you want, whatever you desire.'" Only infinite Love could arrange this kind of friendship with man, that He would "treat us not as servants, but as friends."