

Thomas Aquinas (TA), theologian and mystic

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Dob: 1224 (or 1225), Roccasecca

Dob to heaven: March 7, 1274, Fossa Nova Cistercian abbey

Family: nobility. TA's uncle was a Benedictine abbot of Monte Casino. As the 2nd born male, his family planned for him to become the future abbot of Monte Casino. At age 5-6, he was sent there as an oblate to be educated. Due to unrest in the region, he was sent to Naples. There he got acquainted with the newly established Dominican order (founded in 1215 in Toulouse) and joined the order (Note: this foiled the family's plans for TA).

The Dominicans had their own school and chair at the University of Paris. TA was sent to Paris to study to become a master to teach Theology. On the way to Paris, TA got kidnapped by his family and locked up for a year. During that time he learned Sacred Scriptures by heart and read Peter Lombard's Sentences.

TA, theologian

Too often people (including Catholics) only see TA as a philosopher rather than as a theologian. But his life and work show that he was a theologian who, where appropriate, employed philosophical concepts at the service of *Sacra Doctrina*.

TA was made a master (*magister*) on March 3, 1256. The role of a master in the Church had to do with *Sacra Doctrina*. As a master in *Sacra Pagina* = master in Holy Writ (Sacred Scriptures), TA had to teach Scriptures (both Old and New Testaments) and a course on Lombard's Sentences (then the standard textbook of Theology). The Sentences served as a training tool into *Sacra Doctrina*.

What *Sacra Doctrina* is and how TA understands it:

“It was necessary for the salvation of the human race that besides the philosophical disciplines, works of human reason, there be a different doctrine received through divine revelation. The reason for this is that man is destined by God to an end which surpasses the capacities of his reason . . . and that it is necessary that this end be known to him in order that he might direct his intention and his actions towards it.” This assertion is reiterated at the end of the same text: “It was necessary that there should be . . . a sacred doctrine obtained from revelation.” (I, q. 1, a. 1). Thus, *Sacra Doctrina* is necessary for salvation, and it is a much broader reality than theology alone. In addition to revelation transmitted in Sacred Scripture, *Sacra Doctrina* incorporates all forms of Christian teaching at all levels. In brief, *Sacra Doctrina* includes Sacred Scriptures and Sacred Tradition.

Doctrina refers to teaching.

Four questions about *Sacra Doctrina*: (i) Who is teaching? (ii) Who is taught? (iii) What is taught? (iv) the end of the teaching

(i) the One teaching is God, because “man's ultimate happiness consists in a supernatural vision of God: to which vision man cannot attain unless he be taught by God” (ST, IIa-IIae, q. 2, a. 3).

(ii) the one who is taught (the ideal student) is the Universal Church

(iii) What is taught consists of a collection “books”/writings (= Scriptures); this is the principal medium of God's teaching. In Scriptures, God teaches about Himself by means of human words -- words which need to be expounded so that we can gain an ever deeper understanding. *Sacra*

Doctrina is inexhaustible. The basic elements of *Sacra Doctrina* are the articles of faith contained in the Creed.

(iv) the end of the teaching is beatific vision.

Since God is the One teaching *Sacra Doctrina*, TA is not the one teaching it, rather he teaches those things which pertain to Sacred Doctrine, i.e. he teaches Theology. Theology means *sermo de Deo* (= speech about God).

At Santa Sabina in Rome, TA introduced the *ordo disciplinae* (= order of study) to make learning smooth for his students. This is what his *Summa Theologiae* was for, to provide an order of study structured in such a way as to avoid repetitions and needless questions. The book was intended for students in the 1st cycle of Theology.

The focus of TA's writings concerns *Sacra Doctrina*. For instance, *Summa Contra Gentiles* is a work of Theology, but employing rational articulation. The *Summa Theologiae* is a perfect case in point in this regard: the subject matter of this Summa from beginning to end is God. Part I: God and His work; Part II: God as the end of man/rational creatures; Part III: God incarnated in Christ, the way for man to reach his end.

Note: TA wrote commentaries on Aristotle's work (namely, *Metaphysics*) as extracurricular activity because he wanted Aristotle to be understood the correct way. TA was no merely a philosopher.

TA, mystic

Not too many people (including Catholics) know that he is also a mystic. Too often it is assumed that great intellectual ability somehow renders the soul less disposed to live a life in intimate union with God.

What do we mean by the word "mystic"? In our days, there is a tendency to restrict the meaning of this word to exceptional states accompanied by unusual phenomena (ecstasy, vision, elevation, bilocation, stigmata, miracles, etc.). Such experiences are not constitutive elements of what it is to be a mystic, however. They do not define what a mystical life is. They are only manifestations of the special graces which God sometimes grants to the mystic. A person can be a mystic without manifesting any unusual phenomena.

The mystical life is basically a supernatural and spiritual life, lived in intimate and conscious union with God. It is the Christian life in its highest perfection, in which the mystic obtains on earth a foretaste of the beatific vision (= union with God in Heaven). It is a life in which the faithful soul (i) perfectly cooperates with the promptings of the Holy Spirit, (ii) exercises the virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, and (iii) is absorbed in God, lives for Him alone, and by contemplation, adheres to Him and finds in Him its only consolation.

TA is a mystic precisely because he is a theologian. As shown above, since *Sacra Doctrina* is received from divine revelation, it must be received through and practiced in theological faith. Hence, Theology must be subordinate to *Sacra Doctrina* through faith. Put differently, faith is necessary for the practice/teaching of Theology [Note: this sounds like "stating the obvious" but it is not uncommon to encounter professors/teachers of Theology who have no faith such that their teaching is nothing but a distortion of *Sacra Doctrina*].

The light faith is that which gives the theologian's science/knowledge a real content. Hence it is necessary that the theologian, as a scholar, to direct the requisites of his knowledge right to their

final end in order to reach Him who is the ultimate end of his life as believer. Here, then, is the most profound reason why the theologian can also become a mystic.

In his Commentary of the Sentences, TA states “Everything in *Sacra Doctrina* is considered in relation to God (*sub ratione Dei*), whether it has to do with God Himself, or whether it is related to God as principle or as end.” For TA, one thing is certain: the entire universe, including man himself, can neither find its meaning nor be understood except in relation to God. The structure of his *Summa Theologiae* reflects this conviction. What makes Theology so distinctive from any other field of knowledge is that it is the sole body of knowledge of which the end as a science (*finis operis*) is identical with the end of him who practices it (*finis operantis*). God is the end (*telos*) of Theology, God is also the end of the believer.

Theology is a speculative science. “Speculative” in this context means “contemplative.” This is not to say that theology is nothing more than contemplative. TA acknowledges that it is also “practical” in that it has the task of guiding human action according to the Gospel and with a view to beatitude. But the “practical” is not the determining attribute of Theology; “contemplative/speculative” is. This is why TA states, in the Commentary on the Sentences, “All those who think rightly recognize that the end of human life is found in the contemplation of God.” At the end of the *Summa Theologiae* and literally at the close of his life, TA repeats unhesitatingly, “The contemplation of truth ... is the end of the whole of human life” (II-II, q. 80, a. 4

Thus, with fear and trembling, the theologian (who follows the footsteps of TA) lives in the humble awareness that the practitioner does not always measure up to his own knowledge. But such theologian also has the peaceful certitude that by practicing Theology in theological faith permeated with charity, according to all the demands required by its “subject” (God) – all the demands of the Gospel – then he or she too can become a mystic in the manner of TA.

Note: “Faith permeated with charity” implies that although contemplation is primarily an activity of the intellect, it has its origin in affectivity because it is charity which impels toward the contemplation of God. Put differently, contemplation engages the whole person, intellect, will and sensible affectivity. As such, contemplation is an arduous experience that embraces the totality of the person and his life. It is in practicing theology in this way that Thomas Aquinas himself became a mystic and a saint.

A note about contemplation:

Within the capacity of human potential, there are two kinds of contemplation:

- (i) contemplation of the philosopher: a contemplation of God starting from the created world and based on the powers of human reason alone. This is a very imperfect contemplation.
- (ii) theological contemplation: as discussed above, this is a contemplation grounded in theological faith and impelled by love of God -- a contemplation that gives a foretaste of eternal beatitude.

Above and beyond the capacity of human potential is mystical contemplation: this is purely a grace. Certainly, it requires preparation, but this preparation derives from asceticism and prayer rather than science or intelligence. This preparation in itself does not warrant that the practitioner will the gift of mystical contemplation, however.

We speak of mystical contemplation as infused contemplation, whereas for theological contemplation we speak of acquired contemplation. They are not mutually exclusive, however.

Theological contemplation is primarily directed by theological faith and entails human initiative. Mystical contemplation, without separating itself from faith, is primarily directed by God's gift and depends entirely on divine generosity.

The distinction between theological and mystical contemplation is analogous to the distinction between the virtue of wisdom (which derives from study and knowledge, together with a certain penetration of the intellect) and the gift of wisdom which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. By this, the person's capacity for judgment derives from a certain connaturality with divine things (= the person who is deeply united to God in charity can see and understand with the mind of God). Note: TA did not use the terminology of "mystical contemplation," such terminology came only after his time. But he was very familiar with the realities meant by those words. He thus distinguishes of the wisdom of the mystics that blossoms into infused contemplation, from the wisdom of the theologian that merely grants an acquired contemplation. The virtue of wisdom and the gift of wisdom are not mutually exclusive and, likewise, theological contemplation does not exclude mystical contemplation and vice versa. If anything, the theologian's knowledge becomes sharpened by the experience of mystical contemplation. This is what happened to TA himself.

TA, an exemplary theologian and mystic

There are three principal features in TA's:

- (i) his devotion to the crucifix,
- (ii) his great veneration for the Eucharist, best reflected in his prayer *Adoro Te Devote*, and
- (iii) the link between TA's prayer and his intellectual work. TA engaged himself in prayer when he had to study, teach, write, or dictate, and in particular when he had to treat of difficult topics.

It is self-evident that TA practiced theological contemplation and his contemplation as friar-preacher-theologian found its natural expression in his work. However, in the final months of his life, he experienced repeated ecstasies, and the last-known ecstasy provoked the cessation of his writing activity. It was around Dec 6, 1273, when he was still in the midst of composing the *Summa*. To his secretary (brother Reginald) who bemoaned this cessation, TA simply replied, "I no longer can. Everything that I have written seems straw in comparison with what I have seen" Note: These words do not mean that TA's repudiation of his work as theologian. Just as straw is the support and the sheath of the grain, the words of the *Summa* and TA's other works are obviously not the divine reality of which they speak; but they point to it out and lead to it. From the moment when, by a special grace TA was able to contemplate the divine reality itself, he had had good reason to be detached from the words he had employed until then. But this detachment in no way implies that he considered his work worthless. In brief, from the moment TA received the gift of infused contemplation, he moved past theological contemplation.

FYI: the main source for this document is Fr. Jean Pierre Torrell, OP.