

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## *Lesson 47*

### St. Thomas Aquinas – Part Two

Last week, we unfolded the academic life of this extraordinary, Christian thinker and teacher. We discussed how a young boy placed in a wealthy and powerful family dedicated his life to study and teaching, eschewing wealth in favor of poverty.<sup>1</sup> We also looked at a bit of his teaching on the role of reason in the life of a believer. We examined Thomas's proofs for the existence of God, and we began a discussion of Thomas's views on metaphysics.

This week, we want to focus on the views of Thomas that have shaped Western civilization and its morals. We also want to consider the form in which Thomas frequently wrote.

#### **BACKGROUND**

To put this lesson into context, we should remember several points about Thomas's world in which he taught and wrote. Thomas was placed into an academic setting where the world was beginning to reawaken to concepts and thinking that had been darkened for centuries. The Muslim invasions, the Christian Crusades, and the growth of larger cities with institutions of learning that considered many subjects outside of the focused religion of monasteries propelled this reawakening.

One of the major causes of Thomas's reflection on reason and logic was the need to confront beliefs and practices of Muslim faith as well as of pagans who had no faith at all. Thomas recognized that one could not argue morality or the existence of God with such people by appealing to Scripture. Any profitable discussion would have to come from principles of logic and reason, along with the quickening of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> As Thomas was approaching Paris with a near complete Cathedral at Notre Dame in the distance, it is reported his students said to him, "Master, how beautiful is that city of Paris!" Thomas replied, "Yes, indeed, it is beautiful." One student then suggested, "Please God that it [Paris] would be yours!" To which Thomas asked, "And what should I do with it?" The student answered, "You would sell it to the King of France, and with the money you would build all the convents for the Dominicans!" Thomas's response was uniquely Thomas, revealing great insight into his person, "In truth, I would rather have at this moment the sermons of St. John Chrysostom on Matthew." (See Lesson 30 on Chrysostom!)

<sup>2</sup> We should emphasize that Thomas thought that man comes to God not merely by his own rationality apart from the work of the Holy Spirit or from an exercise of free will. Thomas believed as Scripture teaches that the reality of God's redemption is not a product merely of man's choosing. It is a gift and result of God's free self-communication (for example, see John

In that regard, we looked at Thomas's five ways to prove the existence of God. But Thomas sought to establish much more than just that by reasoning. Thomas believed that biblical morality could be taught through a good logical understanding of the natural law of the universe. Thomas set out to do this using a bit of his approach to metaphysical truth.

Metaphysics, as we discussed in the last lesson, involves the understanding of what is real in the world and life. If physics is the study of the world we see and the rules that dictate its behavior, then metaphysics is the study beyond that of the world we cannot see and the dictates of its behavior.

For Thomas, a key to understanding the unseen essence or reality of something was to understand its purpose, and then to parse out those characteristics that were "essential" in the sense of "essence" from those that were non-essential or "accidental." To determine something's essence, Thomas thought one should probe that something's purpose. For example, if we wanted to know the essence of a pilot, or what makes a pilot a pilot, we should ask what a pilot does. If a pilot is one who flies an airplane, then the essence or "essential characteristic" of a pilot is the ability and actuality of flying an airplane. Whether the pilot is male or female, short or tall, English or Swiss, is non-essential or "accidental."

Thomas would use this approach of "essence" or "purpose" in setting out natural law arguments for morality.

## NATURAL LAW

In the physical realm, physical aspects of action and reaction are discernable by science. In the realm of right and wrong, the appropriate actions are questions of morality. Whether one is discussing right and wrong with a Muslim, a Jew, or a pagan, Thomas believed that a logical examination of morality tied to an object's essence would mandate a truthful (and biblical) conclusion.

Thomas believed that all things act according to their character. Thomas considered this "Natural Law." Thomas taught that man is able to discern the end or purpose of matters through using his mind. Because of that, man can also recognize that certain actions will likely lead to the proper end whereas other actions will not. Man is then "imbued with a natural concept, whereby he is

---

6:44, "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him"). Thomas would write extensively that man's choices were also a product of both rational thought and an exercise of free will.

directed to act in a befitting manner, and this is called *the natural law* or *the natural right*, but in other animals *the natural instinct*.”<sup>3</sup>

So, Thomas saw the natural law as something instilled in people where people are naturally guided to act in a befitting manner.<sup>4</sup> Thomas’s view diverges from many of the reformers we will meet in the coming centuries of study. For these reformers (many of whom form the basis for much of Protestant thought today), human nature is so marred by the fall that it cannot ever be trusted to properly deduce what is right or wrong. Thomas maintained an inherent view of humanity’s goodness.

That is not to say that Thomas believed all men lived up to the natural law. Nor did he believe that all men understood or agreed with natural law. For example, Thomas believed that the essence or purpose of all things is to seek and serve God. For a human to fail to seek or serve God, then that person is denying his/her very nature. However, that inaction is something many people do.

Similarly, Thomas taught that people have children, eat, *etc.*, because it was imbued (instilled) within a person as part of natural law. But, some people might take actions that are inappropriate to the end result that nature has in place. For examples, people eating too much or too little. For Thomas, actions to meet the purposes that are natural are proper only if they are proportionate to the purpose.

Thomas considered that the “ends” to which natural law leads were primary and secondary. The primary ends were (1) self-preservation, (2) procreation, (3) education of children, (4) living in society, and (5) worshipping God. In addition, Thomas set out numerous secondary “ends.” From these ends, Thomas was able

---

<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theologica*, Supp. Q. 65 Art. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson was commenting on natural law when he penned the famous words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” in the Declaration of Independence, justifying the breaking away of the United States from England. Some might question whether Scripture allowed such a breakaway in light of Paul’s statement in Romans 13:1-2 that “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established ... Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.”

If we look at the very sentence that precedes these words, Jefferson wrote, “When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the *Laws of Nature* and of Nature’s God entitle them....”

The 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher John Locke followed Thomas’s views on Natural Law. Locke, in turn, was Jefferson’s inspiration for the quoted section of the Declaration of Independence. It was Locke who wrote that the natural rights of man were “life, liberty, and property.” Jefferson inserted the “pursuit of happiness” for “property.”

to argue for scriptural morals among those who do not adhere to Scripture. For example, drunkenness not only injures one's health, but also harms one's abilities to make wise choices. It thus violates the natural law of self-preservation. Stealing violates the value of living in harmony in society together and thus is wrong.

By looking at natural law in this way, Thomas believed that the behavioral mandates of Scripture could be found in the natural order of things by well-reasoned analysis. Thomas also believed that a valid understanding of the natural law would allow Christians to comment on moral issues that are either not directly addressed by Scripture, or seem to have different answers depending upon where in Scripture one looks.<sup>5</sup>

## SEXUALITY

Thomas applied this same approach of studying the ends to determine the propriety of actions on the issue of sexuality. For Thomas, sexual relations had three purposes or ends: (1) procreation, (2) binding together husbands and wives, and (3) pleasure. For sexuality to be proper, therefore, it had to meet all three purposes. This is why the Catholic Church then (and now) views contraception as wrong. It violates the first end of sexual relations. Obviously, these purposes also explain the sins of fornication, adultery, and homosexuality. Each violates at least one of the purposes of sexuality.

Surprising to many, especially Protestants who do not typically “rank” sin, Thomas's approach on this and other issues allows him to rank sexual sins. Thomas places those that violate more than one of the objectives as worse (and more worthy of greater punishment or needed penance) than others that violate merely one of the three aims.

---

<sup>5</sup> An example is polygamy. In the Old Testament, one reads repeatedly of multiple wives by a number of the Patriarchs as well as King David and many others. So, is it a “sin” to have multiple wives? Thomas argues, “yes.” He bases his position on the principal ends of marriage being begetting and rearing children, the necessary needed intimate social relationship for man as well as the sacramental representation of Christ and the Church. Thomas says the first purpose of children can be met with polygamy, but the second and third cannot. Jealousy keeps peaceful community of family from existing with multiple wives. Of course, one husband and many wives do not represent one Christ and one Church. Now, the argument of Christ and the church is of no benefit in arguing this morality to a pagan. But, a main point is that it answers those who point to the Old Testament examples to justify polygamy, and those are not pagans. They are people who believe in Scripture.

This is still the legal basis for prohibition of polygamy in America. Courts have recognized that polygamy endangers the peaceful community, causes “social harm,” and hence, violates natural law. Reynolds v. United States, 98 U.S. 145 (1878).

## WAR

Warfare was a challenging issue for Christians in Thomas's day, just as it is in our own. The sixth of the Ten Commandments states, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13). Yet, Scripture describes God commanding the Israelites to kill a number of people as they conquer the holy land. As we get to the New Testament, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Mt. 5:21-22).

In light of these biblical admonitions, one might ask what role a Christian is to have in a war. This is a current issue for many who consider the importance of the Iraq war today, the complicated issues at play, and the consequences of the conflict on innocent lives. In the current Iraq war, some estimate the number of dead (excluding soldiers that have died) to be as high as hundreds of thousands of people. What is the Christian response? Is there a "clear Christian answer?" If not, then what are the debating points that Christians should consider as they make personal decisions about the war? Thomas speaks out on these issues in ways that were current for his day, but are also thoughtful for our own.

Thomas lived at a time when a large number of the population was going to fight in the crusades. In fact, at least two of his brothers were enlisted in the army as Crusade fighters. Thomas was familiar not only with war, but also with the loss of innocent lives in conflict (what today we call "collateral damage"). Thomas taught extensively on this subject.

To Thomas, a war was only appropriate if it was "just." To be "just," a war had to meet 3 criteria: (1) the cause for the war must be just, (2) the war must be declared by a just authority, and (3) the intent behind the war must be just. By this, Thomas meant that the war must be (1) fought for a legitimate reason that was godly (for example, the saving of others' lives); (2) declared by someone who legitimately has the right as the religious or sectarian ruler or governing body; and, (3) must not be for purposes of revenge, territorial aggression, or personal gain. These three requirements for a just war have since been codified into international law with one additional requirement added: the war must be a last resort.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas believed and taught that many virtuous acts would sometimes have two effects – one good and one bad – something Thomas called the dilemma of Dual Consequences. These actions would then produce a moral quandary. Can one

---

<sup>6</sup> We can go back to President Bush's (41) public pronouncement of the original Gulf War entered into on behalf of Kuwait and hear his explanation that the cause was "not a Christian war, not a Jewish war, not a Muslim war" but a "just war." Bush then basically recited the requirements handed down from Thomas Aquinas.

take the action when part of the result is wrong or bad? (obviously, there is no moral quandary where all results from an action are either good or bad. It's the result that is mixed that produces the moral debate.) War was such an area for Thomas.

War itself as a just enterprise would have the liberating or satisfactory positive to justify itself. Yet, the collateral damage (or in the immediate context of today, the loss of so many innocent mothers, children and others) is tragic and clearly ungodly. So, what should a Christian do? Many taught (and still do) that the Christian response is to do no harm. If innocent people are going to be killed, then the Christian should take no part. Thomas did not agree with this approach. Thomas taught that the appropriateness of the act is found in the intent of the actor.

By looking at the intent of the actor, Thomas believed that one could determine whether the "good" would outweigh the "bad" from the actions. If the intended effect is to bring a good result, then the actions are appropriate. If the motives are not so pure, however, then the actions result in sin.

As these results apply to war, it justifies the bombing, for example, of military targets. The idea of bombing a non-military target for motives like "demoralizing" the opponent, however, would be sinful.

Thomas would add that motive itself was not the only important factor in determining whether participation in the war is sinful. The good to be achieved must also outweigh the bad. It would not be proper, for example, to destroy a hundred innocents merely to get a handful of warriors.

## **POLITICAL STRUCTURES**

Thomas has influenced our political structures in many ways in Western civilization. As already noted, Thomas's writings were the inception of the doctrines that formed the Declaration of Independence and justified the breaking away of the United States from the British government.

Before Thomas's writings, the Church taught that to disobey law (and that would include succeeding from the British!) was sin. But, Thomas taught that the role of government was to take care of society for the common good. Hence, the Christian obligation was to follow such government, not follow an outlaw who uses a governing position for other purposes.

Thomas considered and ranked six different forms of government. The forms and his rankings were:

1. A monarchy (rule by one) (which Thomas considered the most efficient form of government, although it was also open to abuse because there is no check on the monarch's authority).
2. An aristocracy (rule by few) (which was slightly less efficient than a monarchy because of the possible disputing of the ruling few and thus less able to meet the end of proper governing).
3. A polity (rule by citizenship) (which with more rulers than the above two is also less efficient, yet is still more likely to maintain the virtue that easily eludes one solo ruler or the ruling few).
4. A democracy (rule by elected representatives) (which is rather inefficient because there are too many people deciding, making it hard for anyone to manipulate the system for evil purposes).
5. An oligarchy (rule by a self-sustaining few for selfish purposes) (which has few that rule for selfish means making it more efficient than a democracy at achieving evil ends); and,
6. Tyranny (rule by one for selfish purposes) (which basically means everyone is out for themselves making it the most efficient way for evil to result).

Interestingly, the rule by one was considered the most efficient and yet most dangerous form of government. It was most efficient because when something needed to be decided, one person made the decision. There was little room for debate and no room or need for compromise. Still, the rule by one could also be the worst and most dangerous form of government “since the power granted to a king is so great, it easily degenerates into tyranny.”<sup>7</sup> Thomas would write that a force for evil does more evil when it is unified.

Thomas believed that the government by many was inherently weaker because of the difficulty of competing interests to get things done. Still, the government by many was the safest for preventing abuse for the very same reasons. Furthermore, Thomas would write that “all should take some share in the government: for this form of constitution ensures peace among the people.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, such a government could better provide for checks and balances to keep abuses at bay.

This analysis was a building block for Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and others who wrote on similar issues. Ultimately, when the United States was founded, it was the choice of the fathers to have a democracy, not because it was most efficient, but because it would less readily be used to abuse the rights of people as

---

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologica* 1-2, q. 105 reply to object 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theologica* 1-2 q. 105.

the monarchy of England had done. Added to the democratic structure of America were checks and balances of the branches of government as recommended by Thomas as a means of best ensuring goodness and truth in politics.

### OTHER POINTS

We have hardly touched the surface of Thomas's works. He wrote of the origin of evil (viewing it as a privation of good, rather than a creation in itself – much like Augustine). He also taught a good bit on the issue of humanity's free will (he believed in it!). His view of the afterlife was typically Catholic for his time. He taught that purgatory, paradise, and Hades were the three options upon death. Thomas taught in the immortality of the soul as a logical necessity.<sup>9</sup> He taught on most every subject imaginable, including modern debates ranging from abortion (he was against it) to what makes man happy. He taught on personal issues (*e.g.*, how habits develop, *etc.*) and doctrinal issues (*e.g.*, communal bread becoming the body of Christ, *etc.*).

As opinionated as he was in his writings, we do Thomas an injustice if we think him one who was quick to judge. Historical accounts note that he was one who thought of things carefully before judging. He was always unmovable on matters of the faith. But on personal matters, he cared little for defending himself from the attacks of others. While Thomas was a bit eccentric on his interactions with others, he was not without a quick wit when the occasion called for it. Once, another friar teased Thomas in front of a few friends while standing in front of a window. The friar called out, "Thomas, come see the flying ox!" Thomas went over to the window to the humor of the other friar. While the other friar was laughing at Thomas's gullibility, Thomas explained that it was better to believe that an ox can fly than to think that a religious person can lie.

On a personal level, those who knew Thomas considered him soft-spoken, likeable, cheerful, always in a good mood, generous, patient, careful, and always compassionate towards the poor. His days were spent rising before all others for his personal quiet time and mass. He would then attend a second mass with others before teaching his 6 a.m. class. After class, he would write, dictate and study until lunch. He would take an afternoon nap, and then write through the evening, taking very little exercise time (generally a brief walk). Thomas spent a great deal

---

<sup>9</sup> This thought confuses some today. Thomas wrote on the philosophical problem of what is the "soul" and does it continue after death. His writings on this have led some to suggest that Thomas did not believe in a physical resurrection in the afterlife. Thomas did, however, believe in the orthodox view of a physical resurrection in the afterlife writing, "The soul does not take an airy or heavenly body, or a body of another organic constitution, but a human body composed of flesh and bones and the same members enjoyed at present." *Compendium of Theology* 153, Gilby translation (Oxford Press 1964) 278.



of time in prayer. He was a deeply caring person who was often seen to be crying during services.

In 1273, while just around 48 years old, after writing over 60 books of most every conceivable subject available for the mind to ponder, Aquinas had an unusual experience while worshipping. What exactly transpired we do not know. Aquinas had some vision or experiential encounter with God, the details of which he never gave. But after the experience, Thomas put down his pen, never to write again. When a priest urged Thomas to write more, Thomas responded that after his experience of God, not only could he write nothing more, but all that he had written before was “of little value.” It was reported that Thomas instructed his followers to destroy his writings after his death. One priest noted that the writings were not to be destroyed, for while Thomas may not have needed those writings after his experience with God, the Church still needed the writings!

In 1274, Pope Gregory X called a council in Lyon and asked Thomas to come take part in the deliberations. Although very sick and frail at the time, Thomas started the walk to Lyon (remember he was a Dominican and would walk wherever he went). He fell while walking near the town of Terracina where some Cistercian monks brought him to their monastery. They were so hospitable that when they asked him to explain the Song of Solomon, he complied. With death at hand, Thomas’s last known words were given while he was taking Communion. Thomas said:

I receive you, the price of my redemption, for whose love I have watched, studied, and labored. You have I preached; You have I taught. Never have I said anything against You: if anything was not well said, that is to be attributed to my ignorance. Neither do I wish to be obstinate in my opinions, but if I have written anything erroneous concerning this sacrament or other matters, I submit all to the judgment and correction of the Holy Roman Church, in whose obedience I now pass from this life.

On March 7, 1274, at the age of 49, Thomas died while in the care of the monks.

Very soon, the Church recognized Thomas as its Doctor. While his writings were at first suppressed by some, within a few decades, the Church came to rely on them most heavily. That reliance has grown through the centuries. Pope Leo XIII designated Thomas patron of all Catholic universities, academies, colleges, and schools throughout the world.

## POINTS FOR HOME

1. As Christians, we have in the word of God, absolute truth that we may use in understanding not only God, but also how we should live in our world. This is the assurance of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16 that all Scripture is “God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” So the New Testament church, not only examined Scripture, but also “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).
2. Still, we do readily acknowledge that God has made us thoughtful, rational people who are to use our minds in discerning right and wrong. So, we rightfully pray with the Psalmist, “Teach me good discernment and knowledge, For I believe in your commandments” (Ps. 119:66). As the Proverbs say, we “Incline our heart to understanding,” we “cry for discernment,” we “seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures” (2:2-4).
3. God himself calls man to reason! “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool’...for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it!” (Isaiah 1:18).
4. In the midst of this, we never forget that the greatest wisdom, the greatest truth, the greatest treasure of all, is knowing Jesus and experiencing him in a relationship of intimacy. “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). In a physical and metaphysical sense, we have the assurance from God that “Neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the past nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38).