

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 46

St. Thomas Aquinas – Part One

Very rarely a truly gifted and incredible person explodes onto the world stage with seemingly unmatched talents and gifts. It may be a Michael Jordan in basketball or a Beethoven with music. Doubtless, there are a number of others equally gifted whose life keeps them in relative obscurity. Every so often in human history, however, someone has landed in an area where his/her talents are apparently beyond the scope of ready comprehension. This is a person marked out for the history books for centuries to come. In the arena of faith and theology, St. Thomas Aquinas is such a person.

Thomas lived less than 50 years, yet he truly had a lasting impact on not only the Church, but also Western civilization. In his short life, he wrote over 60 books, many of them exceedingly long and detailed. Not every book qualifies as a masterpiece, but in the areas of theology and philosophy, a number of his volumes belong in anyone's Hall of Fame.

Thomas had a gift. His gift was not to stare at a blank chalkboard and dream up significant points out of thin air. Rather, his gift was to take that which he had studied and learned, sift it, separating the wheat from the chaff, and then using the results to construct his ideas. Much of what we read in Thomas, therefore, we can read in others. We readily see that Thomas relied heavily on Aristotle, Augustine, and others. Thomas took their ideas and transformed them into a coherent theology and philosophy that would "make rational sense" both to his contemporaries and to future generations.

His work is even more remarkable when set against its time period. Thomas wrote when access to learned material was very scarce, for Thomas lived and wrote in the Middle Ages. With the printing press still several centuries away, the ready availability of materials for study (as well as the spreading of any truly gifted writings like those of Thomas) was limited. Thomas's "library resources" for his material was minimal (fortunately, Thomas had a photographic memory!¹). In

¹ Saint Antoninus (1389-1459) wrote of Thomas's photographic memory. Of course, writing in the 1400's, Antoninus did not use the word "photographic," but the meaning was the same! "He remembered everything he had read, so that his mind was like a huge library." Antoninus quoted in the Catholic Encyclopedia (1912 Edition) Vol. 14, *Aquinas, St Thomas*.

Once, when Thomas was asked what his greatest personal gift was, he responded, "I suppose it is that I have understood whatever I have read!"

writing, Thomas had no typewriter, no liquid paper or ballpoint pen. He did not even have notebook paper or a Big Chief tablet!² Yet in the midst of his life, Thomas turned out volume after volume that merits our greatest respect as thoughtful, original, and godly insight. He was truly a Christian scholar with a unique place in history.

How? How did Thomas arrive at such a place? What went into his life to make him such a shining star? What exactly were his accomplishments? What did he write or do that makes a church study group almost 800 years later heap such accolades on him?³

Answering these questions are our study goals over the next two weeks. While we could spend *literally years* seeking to understand and appreciate the thoughts and contributions of Thomas to philosophy as well as theology, we are so limited in time that we will hardly skate the surface. In order to view the vast terrain Thomas covered in his writings, we will have to take such a “bird’s eye view” that we might more fairly characterize our approach as staring out of a plane at 30,000 feet so we can see the huge area Thomas covered.

We are not doing our study justice if we fail to look at some of the close detail of Thomas’s work that demonstrates the true artistry and brilliance he achieved in his brief life. So, what we will do is three-fold. We will first look at his biographical life to place not only his work into context, but also to understand what convergence of factors produced such a man. We will then take the high altitude look at the breath and expanse of territory Thomas reached in his work. But before we conclude, we will also take one small area out of the many, and look with enough detail to more greatly appreciate Thomas’s genius and reach.

THOMAS’S LIFE

St. Thomas Aquinas was born around 1224 or 1225 and died in 1274. He was the third child of a feudal Lord (Landolph, Count of Aquino), meaning his family was quite well to do and had certain political authority. “Aquinas” was not his family name. In fact, “Aquinas” was not his name at all. Thomas was born in the Italian town of Aquino. Technically, we might call him St. Thomas of Aquino, but then most people would wonder whom we were talking about or why we were not using the name history has left on Thomas!

² Actually, Thomas dictated most of his works. History records that Thomas sometimes kept several writers busy at once as he dictated multiple works simultaneously.

³ Or for that matter, consider that half of the parochial schools in America are named after Thomas!

At the age of 5, Thomas' parents sent him to study as an "oblate" (think apprentice monk) at the famous Benedictine Monastery Monte Cassino.⁴ By this point, Monte Cassino was a well-known, "establishment" monastery. That his parents sent him is not a clear reference to his parent's godly devotion. It is more likely that his parents sought the political power that would come to the family by having a high placed son within the famous Abbey.⁵

After five years of study at Monte Cassino, Thomas left the monastery. History reports different reasons for his departure. The reasons range from political unrest in the region to the need for such an incredibly talented child to receive the best education possible. Thomas's parents moved him to the University of Naples to continue his studies.⁶ Universities were in their infancy at this time, but they brought about several significant changes in scholastics and ultimately society.

The universities were headquartered in the developing large cities, not in the feudal towns/lands or countryside where most monasteries were found. The universities taught more than the religious practices of the monasteries. The Universities taught a full curriculum that included studies in various arts beyond simply the faith of the church⁷ (hence, the term, "University;" it offered the "universe" of knowledge.) Along with the broad university approach, the cities were teeming with new ideas brought back from the crusades. Exposure to Islam and the Islamic academics brought out new sources for learning. Noteworthy in

⁴ This was the monastery we studied in lessons 36 and 37 started by St. Benedict.

⁵ Medieval society closely tied religious and political powers. The Church principally protected and structured society by supporting a feudal system where local lords like Thomas's father ruled their surrounding countryside. The church in turn benefited from the feudal system as the local church and feudal lord (again, read this as Thomas's father) ruled hand in hand, the church tending to issues of faith and money while the lord dealt with security and farming/local economy. The centers for society were both the lord's castle and the Church's cathedral. Understanding this allows us to see how the family would have benefited greatly being both feudal lord and local church ruler – should such work out for Thomas. The significance this played in the life of Thomas is explained well by the French Medieval scholar Fr. Marie-Dominique Chenu in *Aquinas and His Role in Theology*, (The Liturgical Press 2002).

⁶ The University system was new at this point in time. The University of Naples began in 1224. Since 1200, multiple universities arose including Oxford, Paris, Bologna, and Cambridge.

⁷ The Middle Ages and the university system offered studies in the "liberal arts" (Lat. *Artes liberales*). "Arts" was not a reference to art as the word is used today. Rather, it meant branches of knowledge. Similarly, "liberal" was not the opposite of "conservative!" The Latin root (*liber*) meant "free" (we get "liberty" from it). The "liberal arts" were branches of study that free men were able to pursue. They contrasted with the fields of study pursued as a vocation. The universities taught liberal arts as seven areas of study: grammar (language), rhetoric (public speaking), dialectic (logic), arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music.

this regard is the return of Aristotle's writings. Since the time of Boethius (see lesson 35), Aristotle had faded from the libraries of the monasteries.⁸ The Muslim world, however, had copies of Aristotle's works in Arabic. These works made their way back into Western civilization where they were translated and found their way into the universities for study.

Not only was education undergoing a revolution at this time, but the church was seeing some major changes as well. Recall lesson 42 where we studied St. Francis of Assisi. Francis launched a "mendicant" movement (meaning a movement where people embrace poverty) that shook up the church. Followers of Francis had no place for the commerce and financial maneuvering of the Church or culture. They instead concentrated on the simple virtues of preaching and contemplation, letting those who chose to contribute meet their physical needs.

The Franciscan community was one arm of the mendicant movement; the second arm followed St. Dominic (c. 1170–1221). The Dominican movement was granted papal authority in 1216, but the church at large did not readily receive it. This mendicant order was committed to "apostolic preaching" and is called to this day the "Order of Preachers." Living on alms, the order "was instituted principally for the preaching and salvation of souls."⁹ It was fairly shocking to have an established order that traveled only on foot, and rejected all property, revenues, and the carrying of money. This order was not conducive to the Feudal system and the Church's economic role in society. The Preachers made study and teaching their chief occupations.

Even though the feudal lords and much of the church structure found the Dominicans repugnant, if not outright dangerous, this focus on preaching and teaching had great broad appeal in society as it stood for a gospel and faith apart from the economic trappings of much of the Church. In its first five years alone, the Preachers grew from 16 Preachers to over 60 convents of Preachers ranging from Spain through France, England, Hungary, and Italy. By 1228 (seven years later), the Preachers had centers in Greece, Poland, and Scandinavia as well.

And what has all this to do with Thomas? Quite a bit!

When Thomas went to Naples to study, he was exposed to Aristotle. The writings of Aristotle resonated in his mind and became a life long dedication of Thomas (Thomas would often refer to Aristotle simply as "The Philosopher"). While

⁸ Thomas was a big fan of Boethius. He even wrote a commentary on Boethius's book on the Trinity.

⁹ Constitutions of the Order of Preachers.

studying these “new fangled ideas” (which date from 300 B.C.!¹⁰), Thomas was also exposed to the Dominicans, who stood against the very church economic interest Thomas was supposed to embrace for the family’s political strength. Thomas joined the movement, which to his parents was the 21st century equivalent of joining an anti-family cult! So, while his parents had wished Thomas to run a well-established monastery and enhance the family’s political/economic clout, Thomas instead opted for a piety that renounced all property and wealth in favor of poverty, studying, teaching, and begging.¹¹ This decision did not go over well at home!

In his late teenage years, the Dominicans sent Thomas to Paris¹² where he was to continue his studies. His parents found out about it and took advantage of the trip to “rescue” Thomas from his cult! In May 1244, one of Thomas’s older brothers kidnapped him while on the journey to Paris. As Bernard Gui recorded the story, the kidnapped Thomas was taken to a family keep where he was locked in a room overnight with a prostitute. The plan was to strip Thomas of his celibacy and, in essence, force him from his celibate religious order.

The encounter with the prostitute did not work out as the family had planned. Thomas grabbed a hot iron poker from the fireplace and held it out against the prostitute lest she try and approach him. The next morning the family removed the prostitute (Thomas’s celibacy was still in tact), and tried plan B. Plan B was to lock Thomas in seclusion with nothing but a Bible and a few other books (including Aristotle) for company.

It seems clear the family actually knew very little about the Dominicans. The Dominicans goal was *silence* and *study*, save those times where they were preaching and teaching. So the family took a man whose heart’s desire was for quiet alone time to study, and locked him up in a room for quiet alone time to

¹⁰Aristotle was the student of Plato. (Aristotle also taught Alexander the Great!). Plato’s teacher had been Socrates. Aristotle taught in Athens at what was the greatest school of his day. We do not have any actual works of Aristotle today. The works we have are his lecture notes from the classes he gave at his school. If you wish to read more of Aristotle, you are referenced to the Biblical Literacy classes on Paul in Acts as he spoke to the Athenians.

¹¹ The Dominicans were also perceived to be anti-feudal. The feudal system was based around the economic and religious security of the castle and its church. The Dominicans would go out beyond the feudal confines and teach/preach to all people, whether integrated into a feudal society or not. Needless to say, this was not what Thomas’s feudal lord father had in mind when he funded Thomas’s education!

¹² There is no doubt that Thomas’s brilliance was well perceived even at an early age. Paris was the city of philosophy at this time. It was the hotbed of intellectual growth and understanding.

study! Needless to say, plan B did not work. Thomas came out of his forced seclusion over a year later with a great deal of knowledge and preparation for service and teaching.

After this, the family gave up, and Thomas continued on his Dominican way¹³ to Paris where he was both student, and eventually, teacher (for several years, he taught a 6 a.m. course where attendance was standing room only!). Outside of his teaching, Thomas was silent by nature and practice.¹⁴

Thomas taught that Christians should use their brains and that faith was safely questioned and probed because Christianity had nothing to fear from truth. While 100 years earlier Bernard of Clairvaux had said, “I believe though I do not understand,” for Thomas and others that was not adequate. By the time of Thomas, the Muslims and the pagans actively stood against the church in intellectual ways and many in the church were not satisfied without having answers to the debated questions.

So in Thomas, we see not merely a teaching of “Thus saith the Lord” that uses biblical texts to justify a belief or position. Instead, Thomas believed Christianity could stand toe to toe with Islam or paganism and be shown true simply on the basis of rational thought. Thomas wrote:

Mohammadans and pagans do not agree with us in recognizing the authority of any Scripture available for their convictions, as we can argue against the Jews from the Old Testament, and against heretics from the New. But these receive neither: hence it is necessary to have recourse to natural reason, which all are obliged to assent to.¹⁵

Thomas believed that the Bible and faith were rational. True rational thought, for Thomas, would inevitably lead to the truths of scripture. Thomas believed faith was the more expedient route to truth, because using reason to get to biblical truth took a lot of time and brains (both of which he found often in short supply!)! Still, he considered it important for faith to have reasoning on its side.

¹³ Over his short life, Thomas would teach in a number of locations, always as a Dominican, shunning a horse and traveling by foot (part of the poverty thing!).

¹⁴ Thomas had the nickname of “Dumb Ox.” “Dumb” did not refer to his intellect, but to his quietness. As for the “ox,” history records that Thomas was quite an eater! Some might say he was even a bit chubby! Calo would write after his death that Thomas was “of heavy build.”

¹⁵ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 1, Chapter 2.

We will miss much of Thomas's thought if we fail to see that reason was, for him, a supplemental tool for the faithful. Reason alone was not enough to guide humanity. Revelation was irreplaceable. Thomas taught that there were a few areas where intellectual logic apart from revelation could not establish truth (for example, the Trinity). So, reason served faith while faith and revelation protected reason from error.

So in Thomas, we see reason as a supplemental tool for the faithful. Thomas taught that animals learned by "sensing." Sensing in this sense means using the senses: vision, smell, touch, hearing, and taste. Animals would learn based on what they experienced sensually. For example, a dog learns by experience that sitting will earn a treat. No one explains to the dog intellectually to place his hindquarters on the ground.

Thomas further posited that angels were without bodies and without the five senses. Thomas believed that angels learned by "intellect." Here, Thomas meant that angels learned through reasoned thinking rather than sensory experience. For example, an angel could understand "It is wrong to do evil" and make a reasoned decision on that knowledge.

Humans, according to Thomas, had the abilities of both animals and angels. Humans could learn through experiences of the senses and human could learn intellectually. For Thomas, humans should seek to learn about God both ways. Humans should learn by experiencing God in his creation and throughout life's experiences. But, humans should also strive to know and understand God through reasoning and intelligence.

Thomas learned from reading Boethius (see lesson 35) that Aristotle's works could be used to further Christian thought and belief. Over and over, Thomas would employ the writings and logic of Aristotle (among others) in his efforts to use intelligence for teaching and understanding. Many in the Church viewed this use of Aristotle as unsound and improper.¹⁶ Thomas's Franciscan counterpart teaching in Paris was St. Bonaventure. Bonaventure suggested that using Aristotle to teach faith "is like mixing water in the pure wine of God's word." To this, Thomas responded, "It is not a case of mixing water into wine, but of turning water into wine!"

¹⁶ The cynicism for Aristotle's works came, in no small measure, because most of the works had fallen from the western world's libraries. Even though they were "old," they were deemed "new dangers" because they were brought back into the western world from the Arabic translations that the Muslims had been using.

For Thomas, the use of medicine and science were not threats to God and his truth. They were testimonies to God's design and hence were praiseworthy endeavors on their own, useful to further our understanding and experiences.

As we break out more of Thomas's teaching, we will see his influence on a number of areas today. We will accordingly break this part of our class into topical sections to consider some of his more prominent ideas. We will do so set against the framework of Thomas's efforts to provide reasoned defenses of Christian beliefs that could establish Biblical truths in ways that could be argued logically to pagans and Muslims who have no regard for biblical authority.

HOW DO WE KNOW GOD EXISTS?

Earlier in Lesson 43, we discussed St. Anselm of Canterbury and his "proof" that God exists. Anselm's "proof" (remember Anselm pre-dated Thomas by 115 years) was not acceptable to Thomas. Thomas believed that reasoning would logically conclude there is a God, but he believed that to reach that conclusion one would need a lot of time and a lot of clear thinking!

Ultimately, Thomas put forward five different proofs that God exists. The five proofs are readily available on the internet as well as in the many books on Thomas (in addition, of course, to the actual writings of Thomas).¹⁷ As an example, we consider the first proof.

The first proof Thomas put forward is the "unmoved mover." Thomas reasoned that observation shows that things move. Yet when something moves, it does not do so without some cause, what we might term the "mover." If you see a rock before you, and sometime later the rock is in a different location, then the rock moved. Yet, it would not have moved without something acting upon it. Thomas then noted that the very cosmos, the earth and stars and all within them also are capable of moving. Their very existence is, to some degree, movement. Therefore, there must be some "mover" which itself is beyond the moving cosmos. This is the mover that sets in motion all things.

In 21st century speak, we might put it this way: if in fact all atoms are in motion, if the universe is constantly expanding and contracting, if there was (as some

¹⁷ These five proofs (in short form) are: (1) the unmoved mover (explained in the text above); (2) the first cause (everything results from something else, so somewhere there must have been an initial catalyst); (3) contingency of being (matters in the universe are related or contingent on other matters in the universe, yet it is impossible for everything to be contingent. So there must be one being not contingent on others); (4) degree of perfection (for varying degrees of perfection to exist, ultimate perfection must also exist); and (5) design (design is seen in this world, there must be a designer).

scientists assert) a “big bang” that commenced the life of our universe, then what caused the initial movement? What brought about the first electron rotating around the first atom? Thomas reasoned there must be something that works *outside* of the universe. This would be something that does not need a cause for its movement because, being outside our universe, it is not subject to the same laws, namely that any movement demands a cause/mover.

Over time since Thomas set out this proof, a number of scholars have furthered the concept in agreement (C.S. Lewis, for example) while others have opposed the proof as inadequate (Immanuel Kant, *et al.*).

The first of Thomas’s proofs might have some persuasive power over an atheist, but, like the proof of Anselm, it does not prove the God of biblical teaching. The “unmoved mover” does not have to be moral or immoral, personal or impersonal, etc. For that aspect of faith, Thomas offers other proofs.

METAPHYSICS

“Metaphysics.” Now that’s a word we do not use every day! To some, it may sound awfully intellectual and difficult to understand! But, it really is not that difficult a word at all.

Let’s take a moment and make sure we all use the word in the same way. Remember High School “Physics” class? “Physics” covered the subject of the natural world (read that “nature”) and the laws that govern it. These are laws of gravity, laws of acceleration and force, $E=mc^2$, etc. “Meta” means “after.” “Metaphysics” is the study of things after or beyond the physical world. If in physics we study the world as we see it, then in metaphysics we study beyond that, we study how the world *really is*.

Think of “metaphysics” as the study of what is, or what is real. In human terms, we ask a “metaphysical” question when we ask, “What are we really?” Put another way, what makes a human a human?

To answer this question, Thomas pointed out that there are two kinds of characteristics for people, there are “essential” characteristics and there are “non-essential” characteristics. When we say “essential,” we usually mean that something is necessary. Thomas used the word “essential” with its more basic meaning to refer to something that is “of the essence” of a thing (Thomas would call the “non-essential” characteristics “accidental” characteristics). Arms, for example, are not essential to make a human a human. You could take away a person’s arms, and that person would still be human.

To determine something's essence, or we might say their "metaphysical reality," Thomas believed we should focus on the purpose of whatever we are examining. For example if we want to know what makes a pilot a pilot, we should look at the end or purpose of a pilot. The purpose of a pilot is to fly. Flying is the "essential" characteristic or essence of what makes a pilot a pilot. That the pilot is short or tall, male or female, red hair or black hair, nice or mean, these are "accidental" or "non-essential" characteristics. They do not go to the essence of what makes a pilot a pilot.

Now, why does this matter? For Thomas, this is the building block of much of his thinking in morality and life. Thomas says that the essence or purpose of humans is to seek and serve God. That is what makes us human. When we in fact seek and serve God, we are living true to our nature and true to ourselves. When we fail to seek and serve God, we are denying our nature.

This "essence" approach to things permeates much of Thomas's writings. Next week, we will further explain the "essence" of things and then we will study next week in more depth how Thomas uses this approach to write on the morals of sexuality, of government, of ecology, of war, etc. We will also show how Thomas's writings proved to be the seminal works that brought about Jefferson's vision for America's unique political structure, the Catholic church's views on birth control and abortion, as well as America's involvement in the Iraq war!

POINTS FOR HOME

If Thomas were writing this, he would likely tell us:

1. Use the intellectual gifts God has given you!
2. God and Jesus are truth. Truth has nothing to fear from honest investigation and reason.

And, this advice would be biblical! The word of God teaches:

1. Your mind matters! "Love the Lord your God with all your soul and all your *mind*" (Matthew 22:37). "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2). "My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). For the Christian, ultimate "truth" is not revealed through the senses (experience) or through philosophy (reason and the mind) but through the Person of Jesus Christ who reveals God and ultimately reality to us by faith. This leads us to Point for Home 2:

2. “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6). “Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). “Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist” (Ephesians 6:14).
3. Use the Bible and your relationship with God to keep your “reason in check!” “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal” (Isaiah 26:3). “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. (2 Timothy 3:16)
4. Finally, Philosophy is often viewed in a negative light in the Christian world. No doubt, philosophy apart from revelation will always inherently suffer from limitations in understanding God. But that does not mean that philosophy is of no use! In its truest form, philosophy is a love of and dedication to reason and thinking. It reveals truth about the world God has made. Paul recognizes this in Romans 1:20, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” Psalm 19 puts it this way: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.”