

The Sapiential Dimension of Theology according to St. Thomas

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Abstract

In the wake of the (almost) universal rejection of neo-Thomism after the Second Vatican Council it was normal to view St. Thomas's theology within the prism of certain stereotypes. A particularly favoured generalisation said that in Thomas's theology Aristotle had trumped the Bible turning theology away from its principle source and power. In recent years however there has been a renewal in what this paper argues is a more holistic reading of St. Thomas focussing especially on his sapiential understanding of theology. Names synonymous with this renewal are Torrell, Emery, Pinckaers, Cessario, and Levering. It is the purpose of this paper to highlight the source of this more sapiential reading of St. Thomas by discussing four key dimensions of his understanding of theology: 1) what Thomas means by wisdom 2) the contemplative nature of theology 3) the unitive nature of theology 4) the importance of prayer and holiness for theology.

Keywords

St. Thomas Aquinas, sapiential theology, wisdom, contemplation, prayer

Look at My glorious Thomas, who gazed with the gentle eye of his intellect at My Truth, whereby he acquired supernatural light and science infused by grace, for he obtained it rather by means of prayer than by human study. He was a brilliant light, illuminating his order and the mystical body of the Holy Church.¹

In undergraduate studies in Theology my meetings with the Angelic doctor were rather fleeting. When St. Thomas was raised in a particular class it was always to highlight his "single" achievement: that he had married the Gospel to Aristotle resulting in a great systemisation

¹ Catherine of Siena. *The Dialogue of the Seraphic Virgin Catherine of Siena*, trans. Algar Thorold. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/catherine/dialog.ii.html> (accessed 5/5/2010).

of theology. This achievement was indeed great, we were told, but theology had “moved on.” For however great his achievement was, St. Thomas had also ushered in a rationalistic, non-scriptural and non-passionate age in theology. It was necessary to look at St. Thomas, but only as one significant author in the evolutionary chain of theology. This evolution resulted in the Second Vatican Council and a new era in theology where all previous authorities needed questioning and reappraisal. Thus my theological education was very much post-conciliar, where contemporary theologians were more important than theology as a whole and the giants of the twentieth century (Rahner, Balthasar, Küng *et al*) had replaced the Thomist monopoly of the pre-conciliar era.² The St. Thomas we were abandoning however was a stereotype: a dry rather sterile Aristotelian philosopher who did some theology on the side.

This stereotype of St. Thomas has been re-evaluated by a renaissance within Thomism that one might call sapiential. The principle figures in this renaissance are French speaking Dominicans beginning (prior to the Council) with Marie-Dominique Chenu and culminating in the work Jean-Pierre Torrell. Others who form part of this renewal include Servais Pinckaers (in moral theology), Gilles Emery (in Trinitarian theology), Serge-Thomas Bonino and American theologians, Matthew Levering, and Romano Cessario.³ For all these theologians (and Thomists) St. Thomas is first and foremost a theologian who must be understood in a holistic way taking into account his historical context and life as a Dominican friar, his work as a biblical theologian, his theological synthesis, his philosophical/metaphysical insights, and his mysticism. In light of this “renaissance” it is the purpose of this essay to briefly highlight some of the ways that St. Thomas may be described as a sapiential (wisdom) theologian.⁴ This I will do in the following order. First, I will look at what St. Thomas means when he speaks about wisdom. Here I will outline

² A similar point is made by R.R. Reno in his review essay of Fergus Kerr’s *Twentieth Century Catholic Theologians- From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), “Theology after the Revolution,” *First Things* (May 2007).

³ Many others could be added here such as, Nichols, Aidan, O.P., *Discovering Aquinas—An Introduction to his Life, Work, and Influence* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002); Healy, Nicholas M., *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003); and Barron, Robert, *Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

⁴ For a short and helpful historical overview of the three main sources of thought regarding wisdom that influence St Thomas (namely the Greek philosophical tradition of Plato and Aristotle, the sapiential sources of the Old Testament, and the Christian tradition beginning with St Paul, through St Augustine and the Fathers, and culminating in the early scholastics) see, Conley, Kieran, O.S.B. *A Theology of Wisdom – A Study of St. Thomas* (Dubuque, Iowa: The Priory Press, 1963), pp. 1–22. For an interesting comparison between the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament and St. Thomas’s understanding of wisdom see, Boadt, Lawrence, “Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Biblical Wisdom Tradition,” *The Thomist*, Vol. 45 (1985): pp. 575–611.

the three levels of wisdom in St. Thomas's writings, showing how each is important and distinct. Second, the question of whether theology is a contemplative wisdom will be addressed. Here we will find that contemplation for St. Thomas – understood differently to a prayerful mysticism – is at the heart of the theological enterprise. Third, I will address the question of whether there is an intrinsic unity in theology according to St. Thomas. And fourth, I will consider why prayer and holiness are important for St. Thomas in coming to theological knowledge.

Wisdom According to St. Thomas

Before looking more formally at St. Thomas's writing on wisdom, let us begin with his little known reflection on why a life dedicated to *sapientia* is worthwhile. Aquinas compares wisdom to the leisure of a game:

Zeal for wisdom has this privilege that, in pursuing its end, it suffices to itself. . . . In this the contemplation of wisdom is comparable to a game, for two reasons. First, because a game is enjoyable and the contemplation of wisdom carries with it the highest delight. . . . Then, because a game is not ordered to something else but to itself, and it finds in itself its own end; we also find this in the enjoyment of wisdom. . . . But contrary to what occurs in the case of our ordinary enjoyments, about which we anticipate that the least hindrance will bother our joy, sometimes greatly disturb it. . . . it is in itself that the contemplation of wisdom finds the cause of its delight. It does not suffer, therefore, from any anguish such as when we need to wait for something . . . that is why divine wisdom compares its own delight to that of a game: "I rejoiced day after day, playing in his presence" (Proverbs 8:30).⁵

To understand St. Thomas's views on wisdom it is necessary to begin with his discussion of *sacra doctrina* in the first question of the *Prima pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*. This is complemented by St. Thomas's discussion of wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit in Question 45 of the *Secunda secundae*. We will notice that for St. Thomas there are three levels of wisdom: philosophical (human), supernatural (gift), and theological.⁶ Wisdom though, as we will see, is also soteriological and Christological.

⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio libri Boetii De ebdomadibus*, Prologue, as cited and translated by Torrell, Jean-Pierre, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume 1: The Person and his Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington: CUA, 2005), p. 69.

⁶ On the three fold dimension of wisdom see the discussion by Matthew Levering in *Scripture and Metaphysics – Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 28–34. Also, Boadt, Lawrence, "Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Biblical Wisdom Tradition," pp. 595–96.

In Question 1 of the *Prima pars* St. Thomas asks whether *sacra doctrina*⁷ is the same as wisdom. This question is asked in the context of an overall discussion of the nature and purpose of *sacra doctrina* (theology) as an introduction to his *Summa* of theology. He begins his answer by stating simply that theology is wisdom above all human wisdom, “not merely in any one order, but absolutely.”⁸ St. Thomas defines wisdom as the ability to arrange and to judge. The higher the thing to be arranged and judged the greater the wisdom. He gives the example of the ordering of a building. The one who gives form to the building is called architect and is wiser than the one who constructs the materials. Furthermore, in the ordering of human affairs one is called wise when he directs his acts to a fitting end. Therefore, states St. Thomas, the one who considers the highest cause of the universe (God) is most fittingly called wise. He cites Augustine’s definition of wisdom as “knowledge of divine things.” (*De Trin.* xii, 14) This wisdom is a reference to the highest form of philosophical wisdom. A more precise discussion of wisdom as an intellectual (philosophical) virtue is found in the *Prima secundae*, where Thomas follows Aristotle’s definition of wisdom as an intellectual virtue concerning knowledge that is least knowable to our intellects but most knowable in its own nature (that is, the highest causes).⁹ St. Thomas concludes his response by speaking of a second type of wisdom, which is theological in nature: “But sacred doctrine essentially treats of God viewed as the highest cause – not only so far as He can be known through creatures just as philosophers knew Him – “That which is known of God is manifest in them” (Rm. 1:19) – but also as far as He is known to Himself alone and revealed to others. Hence sacred doctrine is especially called wisdom.”¹⁰ Thus *sacra doctrina* is theological wisdom, dependent on reason and revelation. It is in this way that the Thomist tradition sees theological wisdom as participatory, that is, an intellectual participation in the revelatory knowledge of

⁷ Leaving aside the debate as to the exact meaning of this term, we will use it in the broadest sense as equating to theology. Although, Torrell’s point should be conceded: “*Sacra doctrina* incorporates all forms of Christian teaching at all levels. Theology is therefore not identical with *sacra doctrina*, but is rather its scientifically developed form.” Torrell, Jean-Pierre, OP, “St. Thomas Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic”, *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol.4, No. 1 (2006), p. 3. For discussion on the meaning of *sacra doctrina* for Thomas see Weisheipl, James A., OP, “The Meaning of *Sacra Doctrina* in *Summa Theologiae* I, q.1,” *The Thomist* 38 (1974) and the overview in Torrell, Jean-Pierre. *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume 2: Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), pp. 1–4.

⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.1, a.6.

⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, q.57,a.2. For an excellent overview of Aristotle’s understanding of knowledge of God as wisdom see, White, Thomas Joseph, OP, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity – A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology*, (Florida: Sapientia Press, 2010), pp. 33–64.

¹⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas. *ST*, I, q.1, a.6, resp.

God himself.¹¹ Theological wisdom according to St. Thomas is the link between *sacra doctrina* and the intellectual virtue of wisdom. This revelation of divine Wisdom is not something supernaturally just added on to natural reason to aid it to come to truth; rather it penetrates and reorders our natural reason in light of the God who has revealed it.¹²

In the same article in the *Summa* St. Thomas replies to the objection (n.3) that theology and wisdom cannot be connected because theology requires study whereas wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In this reply we get the important distinction between wisdom as gift and wisdom that is theological. Wisdom, as Thomas has pointed out, is the ability to judge correctly. Now there are two ways that one can judge rightly; therefore, Thomas writes, there is a two-fold wisdom. The first way of judging rightly is by way of inclination. This is the correct judgement of someone who is inclined to that judgement by the virtue they have. The second is by way of knowledge. This is the correct judgement of someone knowledgeable in moral science, although without (necessarily) possessing the virtue concerned. Thomas then relates this to the greatest wisdom, namely knowledge of divine things. “The first manner of judging divine things belongs to that wisdom which is set down among the gifts of the Holy Spirit: “The spiritual man judgeth all things” (1 Cor. 2:15). And Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* ii): “Hierotheus is taught not by mere learning, but by experience of divine things.” The second manner of judging belongs to this doctrine which is acquired by study, though its principles are obtained by revelation.”¹³

This distinction is elaborated on by Thomas in the *Secunda secundae*, Question 45, where Thomas addresses wisdom as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. What Thomas adds here is the notion of “connatural” knowledge. This knowledge pertains to the one who knows something because of how he lives his life. Thus, says Thomas, one can know that chastity is a good through the perfect use of reason (moral science). This though is different than the one who knows chastity is a good through the acquired virtue of chastity; that

¹¹ “For the Thomist, theological wisdom is the perfection of the knowledge of God as he has revealed himself, and the knowledge of creatures as they are related to God so known.” La Nave, Gregory, F., “God, Creation, and the Possibility of Philosophical Wisdom: The Perspectives of Bonaventure and Aquinas,” *Theological Studies*, 69 (2008), p. 832.

¹² Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, p. 31. In making this point Levering draws on the important essay by Brian Shanley O.P. whose thesis is that *sacra doctrina*, according to St Thomas, involves the encounter of the person with God resulting in a sharing in God’s own life. “In the intersubjective experience of faith, the horizon of the believer is completely transformed (both cognitively and affectively) so that the world takes on a new presentational dimension in the light of God revealing.” Shanley, Brian, OP, “Sacra Doctrina and the Theology of Disclosure”, *The Thomist* 61 (1997): p. 175.

¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas. *ST*, I, q.1, a.6.

by actually living a chaste life one judges rightly in a “connatural” way.¹⁴ “Accordingly it belongs to the wisdom that is an intellectual virtue to pronounce right judgment about Divine things after reason has made its inquiry, but it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit to judge aright about them on account of connaturality with them.”¹⁵ Thomas states that wisdom as gift – connatural knowledge of divine things – is caused by the theological virtue of *caritas* and not faith because it unites us to God and its focus is the will.¹⁶

Therefore, in summary, St. Thomas affirms three distinct and irreducible “wisdoms”: first, the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, that is, a knowledge of divine things that comes from the Holy Spirit and not through human reason; a *scientia* that comes through the mode of instinct and the inclination to love. The second is theological wisdom that comes from Sacred Teaching (*sacra doctrina*), founded on the first and infallible Truth (God) as outlined in canonical Scripture. The third is metaphysical wisdom, founded on human reason. The first and second have a divine source, although each according to its own way. The second and third, although in differing ways, use human concepts and reason.¹⁷ Metaphysical wisdom, the wisdom of the intellect, is perfected by divine Wisdom, which is only arrived at through faith. A point made by St. Thomas in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*:

This intellectual life is made perfect by the true knowledge of divine wisdom, which is eternal life: “this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). But no one can arrive at any wisdom except by faith. Hence it is about in the sciences, no one acquires with them unless he first believed what is said by his teacher. Therefore, if we wish to acquire this life of wisdom, we must believe through faith that things propose to us by it. “He who comes to God must believe that he exists and rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6); or as we read in another verse of Isaiah, “if you do not believe you will not understand” (Isaiah 28:16).¹⁸

Moreover, Thomas’s understanding of wisdom is also soteriological and Christological. The very first article of the first question of the *Summa theologia* addresses the need for theology (*sacra doctrina*). Thomas states that the *telos* of the human person needs to be known

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas. *ST*, II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

¹⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas. *ST*, II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas. *ST*, II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

¹⁷ This neat summary is found in Journet, Charles, *Introduction à la Théologie* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1945), p. 9.

¹⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ioan: Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. by James A. Weisheipl with F. R. Larcher, vol. 1 (Albany, NY: Magi Books: 1980) 5, lect.4, n.771.

so that the thoughts and the actions of the person can be directed to this end. “Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation.”¹⁹ Even though human reason can know divine things unaided (philosophical wisdom), this knowledge is limited, prone to error, and available to only a few. Furthermore, our “whole salvation”, which is in God, depends on knowing the truth of God. “Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fittingly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that besides philosophical science built up by reason, there should be a sacred science learned through revelation.”²⁰ This statement, right at the beginning of his great *Summa* of theology, is a far cry from the common stereotype of St. Thomas that holds that his theology was merely a dressed up philosophy.

Finally, for Thomas, wisdom is Christological. Jesus Christ is Wisdom Incarnate. In the Prologue to his *Commentary on the Sentences* we find the following:

Among the many opinions coming from different sources as to what true wisdom might be, the Apostle gives one that is singularly firm and true when he says, ‘Christ, the power of God and wisdom of God, has become for us God-given wisdom’ (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30). This does not mean that only the Son is wisdom, since Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one wisdom, just as they are one essence. Rather, wisdom especially belongs to the Son because the works of wisdom in many ways agree with what is proper to the Son.²¹

To be wise then is to know the Son; theological wisdom begins with Jesus. As Matthew Levering puts it, sapiential theology (for St. Thomas) is “a participation in Christ’s sacred instruction in divine Wisdom.”²² This Christological basis to theological wisdom is most fully expressed in Thomas’s *Commentary on John’s Gospel*. St. John’s Gospel soars to sapiential heights, according to Thomas, precisely because he is the beloved disciple: “The true sign of friendship is that a friend reveals the secrets of his heart to his friends.”²³ In order to know we need to hear and learn:

In each way (that one comes to Christ) it is necessary that one hear and learn. The one who comes through a knowledge of the truth must hear

¹⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q.1, a.1.

²⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q.1, a.1.

²¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, Prologue.

²² Levering, Matthew. *Scripture and Metaphysics – Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology*, p. 4.

²³ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on St John*, 15, lect.4, n. 2016.

when God inspires: “I will hear what the Lord God will speak within me” (Psalm 84:9); and he must learn through affection, as was said. The one who comes through love and desire—as the described below (John 7:37), “if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink”—must hear the word of the father and grasp it, in order to be moved in his affections. That that person learns the word in her grasp set according to the meaning of the speaker. But the word of God the Father breathes forth love. Therefore, the one who grasps it with eager love, learns. “Wisdom goes into holy souls, and makes them prophets and friends of God” (Ws 7:27).²⁴

Reflecting on St. Thomas’s *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*, Michael Sherwin elaborates on this same point:

Consequently, in the discipline of the Christian life Christ is the beginning and principle of our wisdom in two ways. According to his proper nature in his divinity as the Word of God, he is wisdom itself. In relation to us, however, as the Word made flesh in the incarnation, he becomes a wisdom attainable by us (*Ioan.* I, lect. I, n. 34). Both as the word and as the word made flesh, therefore, Christ is the principle and wellspring of all our wisdom.²⁵

Theology as Contemplative Wisdom

I will now turn to the question of whether Thomas considers theological wisdom to be contemplative. Before addressing this it is necessary to consider what St. Thomas means by the word contemplation. This term is usually reserved for a type of ecstatic prayer or deep mystical union with God. For St. Thomas, however, theological contemplation is acquired whereas mystical contemplation is infused.²⁶ For the former, “the contemplative life consists in an act of the cognitive power directed by the will.”²⁷ Contemplation is the perfection of the knowing subject, and is qualified by the object known. Theological contemplation “ends” in the object desired to be known, namely God. Theological contemplation “requires all the intellectual and affective powers of the person dedicated to it, (and) all the resources of a graced nature open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”²⁸ This contrasts to mystical contemplation, which in no way resides in the capacity of human nature; it is purely a

²⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on St John*, 6, lect. 5. n. 946.

²⁵ Sherwin, Michael, OP, “Christ the Teacher in St. Thomas’s Commentary on the Gospel of John,” in Dauphinais, Michael and Levering, Matthew (eds) *Reading John with St. Thomas* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2005), p. 175.

²⁶ This distinction and what follows comes from the insightful essay by Jean-Pierre Torrell, OP, “St. Thomas Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic”, pp. 11,12.

²⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, III, d. 35.

²⁸ Torrell, “St. Thomas Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic”, p. 11.

grace given. This is not to say there is no preparation for mystical contemplation just that it is not cognitive, but involves asceticism and prayer.²⁹

Therefore – back to our question – does Thomas consider theological wisdom to be contemplative (as he understands this term)? Again, our starting point here is the beginning of the *Summa theologiae* and the discussion on the nature and purpose of *sacra doctrina*. Thomas asks in article 4: “Is theology a practical science?” His answer is yes; however, theology is principally speculative rather than practical. (For Thomas the words *speculative* and *contemplative* are interchangeable terms.³⁰) “Christian theology is about God, who makes men and is not made by them. It is therefore more contemplative than practical.”³¹ Because the end of theological wisdom is God it is not primarily concerned with creation, human action etc. (the practical); rather theological wisdom is contemplative (speculative) “because it is more concerned with divine things than with human acts; though it does treat even of these latter, inasmuch as man is ordained by them to the perfect knowledge of God in which consists eternal bliss.”³² The very structure of his *Summa theologiae* bears this out (the so called exit-return structure). St. Thomas begins his exploration with God, moves on to creation and the human person’s seeking of God (morality), and ends with the means through which the person returns to God, namely Christ and the sacraments. As A.N. Williams has recently noted, St. Thomas’s *Summa theologiae*, one of the greatest of all systematic theologies, can be understood both “as an exhortation to contemplation and an act of contemplation.”³³

There has been much recent literature on the contemplative nature of St. Thomas’s work.³⁴ These studies situate St. Thomas in his

²⁹ Torrell, “St. Thomas Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic”, p. 11. The distinction here is similar to the distinction we have already looked at between infused, connatural wisdom and theological wisdom. It is a distinction that St. Thomas repeats throughout his writings.

³⁰ See Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas – Person and Work*, p. 157, and Pinckears, Servais, OP, “Recherche de la signification véritable du terme speculative,” *Nouvelle revue théologique*, 81 (1959): pp. 673–85.

³¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q. 1, a. 4.

³² St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q. 1, a. 4.

³³ Williams, A. N., “Mystical Theology Redux: The Pattern of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*,” *Modern Theology* 13:1 January (1997), p. 56.

³⁴ See, *inter alia*, Joseph Pieper. *The Silence of St. Thomas – Three Essays*, trans. John Murray, S.J. and Daniel O’Connor (Indiana: St Augustine’s Press, 1999); Torrell, Jean-Pierre. *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume 2: Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003); Kwasniewski Peter A., “Golden Straw: St. Thomas and the Ecstatic Practice of Theology,” *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2004): 61–90.; Williams, A.N. “Mystical Theology Redux: the Pattern of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*,” *Modern Theology* 13:1 (January, 1997); Barron, Robert. *Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master* (New York: Crossroad, 1996). This renewal in thinking about St Thomas as a mystical theologian arguably began with the historical studies of Marie-Dominique Chenu, OP. See for example, *Introduction a l’étude de*

milieu, namely as a thirteenth century Dominican whose academic work flowed from his spirituality, which was centred on the Word and the liturgy. It is from this starting point that we can understand St. Thomas's theology as being participatory, that is, a going out of oneself and entering into the very knowledge and love of God.³⁵ It is for this reason that Torrell describes St. Thomas as a spiritual master, a contemplative theologian:

When Thomas says that theology is principally speculative, he means that it is in the first instance contemplative; the two words are practically synonymous in Thomas. This is why – we shall not be slow to see this operative in Thomas's life – research, study, reflection on God can find their source and their completion in prayer. The Eastern Christians like to say of theology that it is doxology; Thomas would add some further clarification to that, but he would not reject the intention: the joy of the Friend who is contemplated is completed in song.³⁶

The twentieth century Thomist philosopher, Joseph Pieper makes a similar point seeing that the greatness of St. Thomas's philosophical and theological work lie in contemplation; “in his attitude of veneration toward everything that is – which veneration is revealed above all in his falling silent before the ineffability and incomprehensibility of Being.”³⁷ Pieper also notes the significance of Thomas stopping his work prior to his death – the infamous testimony of Bartholomew of Capua who recounts Thomas saying that his work, in the face of experiencing some type of ecstasis, seemed so much as straw.³⁸

The last word of St. Thomas is not communication but silence. And it is not death which takes the pen out of his hand. His tongue is stilled

S. Thomas d'Aquin (Paris: Vrin, 1950) and *Aquinas and his Role in Theology*, trans. Paul Philibert, OP, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002).

³⁵ This point is well made by Robert Barron: “Thomas (in his theology) is *decidedly not trying to capture or define the divine*; on the contrary, he is attempting to show us precisely how to *avoid the temptation of such definition*. He is demonstrating how the soul can be liberated in the act of surrendering to the God who reveals himself as an unsurpassable and ecstatic power in Jesus Christ. Thus, the *simple* God is the God who cannot be understood or controlled; the *good* God is the one who captivates us and draws us out of ourselves; the God *who is present to the world* is the divine power that will not leave us alone, that insinuates itself into our blood and bones; the *eternal* God is the one who invites us into the ecstasy of being beyond time; the *immutable* God is the rock upon which we can build our lives; the God of *knowledge and love* is the spirit who searches us and knows us, who seeks us and who will never abandon us. It is this all-embracing, all-captivating, all-entrancing, all-surrounding power that Thomas Aquinas seeks to celebrate.” *Spiritual Master*, p. 108.

³⁶ Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas – Person and Work*, p. 157.

³⁷ Pieper, Joseph. *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 159.

³⁸ For the best and most recent account of Thomas's last days and this specific episode see Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas – Person and Work*, pp. 283–289.

by the superabundance of life in the mystery of God. He is silent, not because he has nothing further to say; he is silent because he has been allowed a glimpse into the inexpressible depths of that mystery which is not reached by any human thought or speech.”³⁹

This contemplative dimension of St. Thomas’s theology is highlighted by the importance he places on certain “image and likeness” texts found in the New Testament.⁴⁰ The *imago Dei*, our reason, sees the truth of God “in a mirror” (1 John 3:2). The goal of the theologian is to rise from a consideration of ourselves (our reason) to knowledge of God which is transformative. This knowledge, like all knowledge, involves the knower being assimilated into that which is known. Therefore, in order to know God we need to be transformed into God. This is the destiny of the blessed in heaven that have been perfectly transformed. Our earthly transformation is not perfect, but through faith, contemplation, and study we can “see in a mirror dimly.” (1 Corinthians 13: 12).⁴¹ Theology involves an elevation of the mind so as to make the mind more and more like God. In writing of Thomas’s Trinitarian theology, the contemporary Thomist, Gilles Emery states: “We cannot know the essence of God the Trinity, but we can “tend” (*tendere*) toward the mystery above ourselves (*superius*), through contemplation, in order to know and love him more.”⁴²

The Unity of Theology According to St. Thomas

It is difficult for us to conceive of a theology faculty that does not have strictly segregated disciplines. This is simply a reflection of how modern research orientated universities operate.⁴³ However, this flies

³⁹ Joseph Pieper. *The Silence of St. Thomas*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ For example 1 John 3:2: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” And 2 Corinthians 3:18: “We all who with unveiled faces reflect as in a mirror in glory of the Lord, we are transformed into his likeness, from glory to glory, as by the Lord who is Spirit.”

⁴¹ “We know the glorious God by the mirror of reason, in which there is an image of God. We behold him when we rise from a consideration of ourselves to some knowledge of God, and we are transformed. For since all knowledge involves the knower’s being assimilated to the thing known, it is necessary that those who see be in some way transformed into God. If they see perfectly, they are perfectly transformed, as the blessed in heaven by the union of fruition: *when he appears we shall be like him* (1 John 3:2); but if we see imperfectly, then we are transformed imperfectly, as here by faith: *now we see in a mirror dimly* (1 Corinthians 13:12).” St Thomas Aquinas, *In 2 Cor 3:18*, n. 114. As noted by Gilles Emery, this citation by St Thomas is lifted almost verbatim from St Augustine’s *De Trinitate* XV, 8, 14. Emery, Gilles, OP, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person* (Naples: Sapientia Press, 2007), p. 70.

⁴² Emery, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person*, p. 71.

⁴³ For an overarching critique of the modern research university and the segregating of knowledge see MacIntyre, Alasdair, *God, Philosophy, Universities – a history of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (London: Continuum, 2009).

in the face of a sapiential understanding of theology, especially as St. Thomas understood it and as his more sapientially inclined disciples would interpret him. Thomas considers the intrinsic unity of theology at the beginning of the *Summa theologiae* asking: “Is Christian theology (*sacra doctrina*) a single science?”⁴⁴ The affirmative answer that Thomas gives is based on the oneness and simplicity of divine knowledge. The unity of theological wisdom is greater than philosophical wisdom as the latter has natural divisions while theology “extends to everything.”⁴⁵ Thus theology, for Thomas, “possessed a more intrinsic unity than philosophy, since the latter admits the innate duality of metaphysics and ethics?”⁴⁶ In theology all things are treated under the aspect of God, “either because they are God Himself or because they refer to God as their beginning and end.”⁴⁷ God is the subject of theological *scientia* therefore the end which the theologian pursues is not simply an accumulation of objective facts about God, but the living God himself.⁴⁸ This means that although theological knowledge treats of different aspects such as creation, salvation, Christ etc., its overarching object remains God who is the source of the intrinsic unity of theology.⁴⁹

St. Thomas understands that although there are natural distinctions or differing dimensions (what today we would call disciplines) in theology these should retain an underlying unity. Based on the studies of Jean-Pierre Torrell, we can describe three such dimensions in Thomas’s work. First is the speculative dimension, or what is called *intellectus fidei* – to bring one’s reason to what is held by faith. Second is his effort to understand (both historically and allegorically), so as to better preach, the sacred Scriptures. This dimension is the most neglected of Thomas’s theology. His formal academic title was *Magister in Sacra Pagina* (Master of the Sacred Page) and Scripture was the soul of his theological vision.⁵⁰ The third dimension is what Torrell calls the mystical, meaning how, practically speaking, the Christian returns to God (what today is called moral theology). Each of these dimensions form a whole, a unity that, however, will become

⁴⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q.1, a.3.

⁴⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q.1, a.3.

⁴⁶ Pinckaers, Servais, O.P. *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr Mary Thomas Noble O.P. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), p. xxi.

⁴⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q.1, a.7.

⁴⁸ Torrell, “St. Thomas Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic,” p. 5.

⁴⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q.1, a.7.

⁵⁰ Conrad Pepler summarises this point well: “St. Thomas was not first and foremost an Aristotelian philosopher; he was primarily an expounder of the Scriptures, he studied over them, prayed over them, lived them in the Church and in her liturgy, and thence he expounded the Word of God in the schools.” “The Basis of the Mysticism of St. Thomas,” Aquinas Paper 21 (London: Blackfriars, 1953), p. 10, cited by Kwasniewski Peter A., “Golden Straw: St. Thomas and the Ecstatic Practice of Theology,” *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2004), p. 82.

fragmented post-Thomas.⁵¹ Louis Bouyer sums up well this unitive dimension: “Theology, as St Thomas quite expressly understood it, is an organic whole, not artificially and as it were externally unified by an independent philosophy, but proceeding from the inner unity of God’s revelation and his whole saving design, a unity which in any case is essentially mysterious.”⁵²

Prayer, Holiness, and Theological Knowledge

As I have noted, Thomas sees Jesus Christ as Wisdom incarnate; therefore, to be wise means to be a disciple of Jesus. For the Greeks, (for example, Plato), discipleship and knowledge were intertwined.⁵³ For a Christian this insight should be obvious. “If he really wants to know Christ, he must *love* Him; if he would understand he has to *follow*. Wisdom comes through discipleship.”⁵⁴ As already noted, Thomas believed that John’s Gospel reaches to such sapiential theological heights because he was the beloved disciple: “The true sign of friendship is that a friend reveals the secrets of his heart to his friends.”⁵⁵ Matthew Levering puts it like this, “Since Christ is the Wisdom of God, his wisdom is the Trinity, and learning his wisdom, as his friend, means to share in his Trinitarian life.”⁵⁶

This is why prayer and theology are linked. Theology is not simply a rationalistic explanation of propositions of faith; rather, for Thomas, there is a double perfection in theology that needs to be in harmony: the intellectual and the affective. Theology communicates realities that are the object of speculation (the intellectual) that at the

⁵¹ Torrell. *St Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, pp. 2, 3.

⁵² Bouyer, Louis. *The Invisible Father: Approaches to the Mystery of Divinity*, trans. Hugh Gilbert O.S.B. (Petersham, Massachusetts: St Bede’s Publications, 1999), p. 255.

⁵³ A point made by Peter Kwasniewski in reference to an essay by Berquist, Marcus, R. “Learning and Discipleship,” *The Aquinas Review* 6 (1999), pp. 1–51. Kwasniewski Peter A., “Golden Straw: St. Thomas and the Ecstatic Practice of Theology,” p. 71.

⁵⁴ Kwasniewski, “Golden Straw,” p. 71.

⁵⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St John*, 15, lect.4, n. 2016.

⁵⁶ Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, p. 139. The following passage from Robert Barron sums up Thomas’s spiritual approach to theology: “Thomas Aquinas was a mystic, someone whose life was literally ecstatic, caught up with God. Many of his brothers reported that, while saying Mass, Thomas would weep copiously, almost in a literal sense living through the Passion of Christ that he was celebrating and remembering. One of his good friends, Reginald of Piperno, said that Thomas solved his intellectual problems, not so much with thought as with prayer. Wrestling with particularly thorny theological problems, Aquinas would rest his head against the Tabernacle and, with tears, beg for inspiration. A careful and attentive reading of the texts reveal that this mystical passion, this ecstatic response to God, paradoxically suffuses all that Thomas wrote in his admittedly dry and laconic style.” Barron, Robert. *Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master*, p. 24.

same time must be received in charity (the affective).⁵⁷ And as Gilles Emery, in commenting on the spiritual nature of Thomas's Trinitarian theology, states, "theology demands the practice of prayer (as the example of Thomas himself shows) by which the soul is purified, elevated toward the spiritual reality of God, and ordered to God by devotion. There is nothing more foreign to Thomas Aquinas than a rationalist conception of theology."⁵⁸ "The ultimate end (of theology)," writes Thomas, "is the contemplation of the first truth in the land of the Father (*contemplation primae veritatis in patria*)."⁵⁹ How do we attain this "first truth"? Through being purified by our actions (*caritas*): "Blessed are the pure of heart; they shall see God." (Mt 5:8)⁶⁰ The theologian then "can only situate himself in relation to God, see in him his origin and his end, bring back to God everything in the universe as well as his own actions, and finally, pray to him, adore him, humble himself before him in contemplation."⁶¹

To conclude this discussion of St. Thomas's sapiential approach to theology I will look at his inaugural lecture. This lecture, requested by the Chancellor of the University of Paris as part of the University's statutes, highlights well some of the themes I have been addressing.⁶² In this lecture Thomas comments on Psalm 103:13 "Watering the earth from his things above, the earth will be filled from the fruit of your works." He takes from this passage the following as the theme for his lecture: "Similarly the minds of teachers, symbolized by the mountains, are watered by the things that are above in the wisdom of God, and by their ministry the light of divine wisdom flows down into the minds of students."⁶³ Thomas is therefore outlining what the role of a theologian is. He first points out why theology (*sacra doctrina*) is exalted. The first way it is exalted is because of its source – "The fount of wisdom is the word of God on high" (Ecc 1:5). The second way is in its content, both philosophical and, more importantly, theological, especially as found in Sacred Scripture, which "are the highest things, in which this wisdom is

⁵⁷ Emery, Gilles, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person* (Florida: Sapientia Press, 2007), p. 65. For an excellent overview of the connection between holiness and theology from a Thomistic perspective see Ryan, Fainche. "Theology as a Road to Sanctification?" *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74 (2009).

⁵⁸ Emery, *Trinity*, p. 65.

⁵⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sentences*, I, Prol. a.3, cited in Torrell, "Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic," p. 5.

⁶⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sentences*, I, Prol. a.3, ad.1.

⁶¹ Torrell, "Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic," p. 5.

⁶² For a discussion of this lecture and the story surrounding it (including St Thomas being visited by St. Dominic in a dream and providing him with the inspiration of the content of the lecture) see, Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Person and his Work*, pp. 50–53. The translation used is by Tugwell, Simon, *Albert and Thomas – Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist, 1988), pp. 355–59.

⁶³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Inaugural Lecture*, p. 355.

said to dwell.”⁶⁴ And the third way that theology is exalted is “In the sublimity of its goal, because the goal of this teaching is very exalted, namely eternal life. ‘These things have been written so that you may believe and have life in his name’ (John 20: 31). ‘Seek the things that are above’ (Col 3:1).”⁶⁵

St. Thomas then highlights the profound dignity of the doctor commissioned to teach this wisdom, while commenting also on the conditions required of the disciple to hear and learn. He concludes on the need of the theologian to rely on God (through prayer) for wisdom:

Surely, no one would claim to possess in himself and from his own resources the needed aptitude to fulfil such a ministry (of the theologian). But this aptitude can be hoped for from God: “We cannot claim anything as our own. The power we have comes from God (2 Cor 3:5).” But to obtain it from God, we must ask it of Him: If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God and it will be given him, for God is a generous giver who neither grudges nor reproaches anyone (James 1:5).” Let us pray to Christ that he may wish to grant it to us. Amen.⁶⁶

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⁶⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Inaugural Lecture*, p. 355.

⁶⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Inaugural Lecture*, p. 355.

⁶⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Inaugural Lecture*, p. 359.