Dominican spirituality TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE OP

Spirituality is not a word often associated with St Thomas' *Summa*. It is defined by *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* as 'people's subjective practice and experience of their religion, or the spiritual exercises and beliefs which individuals or groups have with regard to their personal relationship with God.' This seems remote from the rigorous, logical argumentation of the *Summa*. Thomas did not have a spirituality in this modern sense. He lived before the break-up, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, of the unity of theology, philosophy, ethics, and spirituality. He could not have imagined the study of theology as a merely intellectual exercise. Studying, praying, and living virtuously were interpenetrating dimensions of a life open to God's grace.

His spirituality was intellectual and moral. The *Summa* is 'in its structure and method, prayer ... both an exhortation to contemplation and an act of contemplation.' It is also a preaching of the gospel. Thomas is often contrasted with St Dominic, a wandering preacher who left hardly any writing, but they truly are brethren. 'The perfection of Christian life consists in charity – primarily in the love of God, and secondarily in love of neighbour' (II–II.184.3*corp*). And the most perfect act of charity is to share the gospel with others, which is why the most perfect state of life, he argued, is that of preachers and teachers. The writing of the *Summa* is an act of charity, an expression of God's friendship for humanity, and thus a work of the Holy Spirit and part of the spiritual life of a friar of the Order of Preachers.

The Prologue of the *Prima Pars* tells us that the *Summa* was written for 'beginners.' These were probably the young friars whom Thomas taught from 1265 to 1268 at Santa Sabina, on the Aventine in Rome,

F. L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. E. A Livingstone (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1532.

² A. N. Williams, 'Mystical Theology Redux: The Pattern of Aquinas' Summa Theologiae', Modern Theology 12/1 (1997), 56.

the priory given to Dominic by Pope Honorius III in 1219. Fergus Kerr OP believes that 'these would have been run-of-the-mill students who were being trained to preach in the vicinity of the priories in which they had joined the Order. Unlike Thomas himself, they would not have been destined to proceed to the great international universities to study theology.'

According to Thomas, these students were hindered from learning because of 'the swarm of pointless questions, articles, and arguments' in other works. He wished to offer a presentation which follows the *ordo disciplinae*. This is more than just putting the questions in a logical order; the very idea of 'order' is suggestive of his underlying spirituality.

St Dominic's principal legacy to his brethren was a form of government which directed the Order towards its end, 'preaching and the salvation of souls', according to the Primitive Constitutions. Thomas wrote an orderly account for friars whose lives were directed to a specific end, unlike monks who had no other purpose than to praise God. But embedded in the structure of the *Summa* is the longer journey of every human being towards God, in whom alone we may find our happiness and fulfilment. So the *ordo disciplinae* pointed these itinerant friars towards their final goal, the vision of God. Dominic's spirituality was incarnate in the government of the Order for the preaching of the gospel; Thomas' government of the material expresses a purposeful spirituality, ordered to the goal of the Christian life. The prologues offer the clearest signposts on the journey, and so we shall look to them for clues to the *Summa*'s spirituality.

Thomas never finished the *Summa*. In 1273 he had an experience, significantly at Mass, which prevented him from writing anything more. He said, 'Everything that I have written seems like straw in comparison with what I have seen, and what has been revealed to me.' It is not that this mystical experience suggested that all his writing was a waste of time. It was the fruition of the pilgrimage, intellectual and spiritual, that the *Summa* is, a glimpse of the goal.

This is a journey towards the one who is pure existence, *ipsum* esse. Existence is not something that God has; it is the utter act of the one who spoke to Moses from the burning bush saying 'I am who am.' Thomas' God is not the static entity of classical theism, but pure dynamism; 'He takes seriously the thought that the word "God" might actually be better regarded as a verb.' David Burrell translates Thomas as

Fergus Kerr, After Aguinas: Versions of Thomism (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 165.

⁴ Kerr, After Aquinas, 187.

asserting, 'To be God is to be to-be.' God's happiness is identical with this act of being, in which God enjoys himself utterly.

Everything is created to come to its own perfection, to be as fully as possible. Thomas sees things not statically but in terms of their potential flourishing. So the study of Christian theology is not the dry exploration of ideas about God. It is our response to God, in whom we shall find the happiness for which we are made. So these 'beginners' who followed the ordo of the Summa were not just learning what to preach in their itinerant ministry; they were beginning their journey home to God. We are created ad imaginem Dei, in the image of God. But for Thomas this 'ad', which means 'towards', implies a dynamic process, of coming to be, flourishing as God intended. As Kerr writes, 'a small bit of grammar carries a good deal of theology.'6

Dominic's form of government was also designed to preserve the unity of the Order. The brethren were quickly scattered all over the known world. The Order might easily have fragmented; but the preachers of the Kingdom, into which is gathered the whole of humanity, must remain one. We preach God's will for the unification of humanity in his Son. The Summa is marked by the same concern for unity. The questions are not just ordered to an end, but express a more or less unified theological vision. One of the ways in which we come to flourish is in becoming one, from Thomas' controversial insistence on the unity of the human person, body and soul, to the unity of humanity in Christ, and the unutterable unity of God. Theological questioning heals divisions and tensions at every level of our being, personal and communal, ecclesial and political, drawing us into the oneness of God.

This seems to put an extraordinary weight upon study. How can it have this spiritual import? The prologue opens with reference to the role of the 'teacher of Catholic truth'. Veritas is the motto of Thomas' religious order. The impulse for the Order's foundation came from Dominic's encounter with the Albigensian heresy in the south of France. It is fundamental to human dignity, and part of how we are made ad imaginem Dei, that we are capable of knowing the truth. Knowledge is not just about things. To know the truth is, in some sense, to become what is known. Thomas frequently quotes Aristotle's words, 'the soul, in a way, is everything.' To know is not to look dispassionately at something with a scientific eye. It is to open oneself to its being, which is its truth.

⁵ David B. Burrell, Aquinas, God and Action (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 54.

⁶ Kerr, After Aquinas, 124.

It is a passivity by which one's being is enlarged. 'Knowing is a new way of being on the knower's part.'7 For us living after Descartes, this may seem bizarre. For us knowledge implies disengagement, distance, detachment. For Aquinas it is part of how we come alive, realise our potential as rational beings who are attuned to the meaning and being of things.

Charles Taylor distinguishes between the 'porous self' of pre-modernity, and the 'buffered self' which came into existence in the eighteenth century.8 Thomas lived in the world of 'the porous self'; one's sense of self was founded on relationships with other beings, human and spiritual. One is a 'we' before one is an 'I'. The 'buffered self' is essentially private, pre-existing its involvement with others. McCabe contrasts the modern view, 'that society is made of individuals', with the older view, 'that the individual is made of societies.'9

We can either dismiss Thomas' spirituality, and its underlying epistemology, as merely of antiquarian interest, founded on an outdated understanding of what it means to be a human being. Or, we may read it as a critique of fundamental assumptions of our culture. It is, of course, impossible for us to become thirteenth-century men and women and inhabit Thomas' world, but we may find in Thomas a fruitful challenge to our contemporary self-understanding. Thomas' account of knowledge rings true in some ways. When we come to know and love someone, then we do become open to them, vulnerable to their way of being alive; our humanity is enlarged. Novels and films extend our sympathies, and invite us to be in the world differently. Without having to pretend that the Enlightenment never happened or to surrender our hard won sense of individuality, the idea that 'the soul, in a way, is everything' invites us to be free of a suffocating sense that our identities are founded on detachment and separation.

If knowing is not, then, a private affair of the solitary ego, but is embedded in my belonging to others, then obviously thinking together is part of our communal life. Argument is not the duelling of eighteenth-century gentlemen but one of the ways in which we build and sustain the community of truth. Dominic debated with Albigensians so as to draw them back into the community of the Church, and not to condemn them. These young friars, for whom Thomas was writing, were

⁷ Kerr, After Aquinas, 30.

⁸ Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007),

⁹ Herbert McCabe, God Matters (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987), 231.

from their earliest days in the Order trained to argue with each other. 10 Thomas asserted that 'if anyone wants to write back against what I have said, I shall be delighted, because there is no better way of disclosing truth and confuting error than by arguing with people who disagree with you.'11 The whole of the Summa is founded on considering the arguments of opponents, taking them seriously, modifying and refining one's opinions in the light of their objections, and seeking the larger truth in which we can be one. During his composition of the Summa, he was engaged in disputations with people on just the subjects about which he was writing. 12 The solitary labour of writing drew life from constant immersion in public debate.

Disputation also belongs to our journey towards our end. Disobedience to reason is a kind of disobedience to God¹³. So we obey God's call to share his life by reasoning with each other. And because argument is part of our spiritual journey towards the one who is love, then necessarily it must be charitable. Of course academic disputes in Thomas' time were often as bitter as they are today, but Thomas, at least, almost never dismissed the arguments of his opponents as rubbish. Uncharitable reasoning would be a sort of contradiction in terms, a subversion of one of the ways in which we engage with each other. Thomas was even known to refuse to reply to a vicious attack on his views by a new Master of Arts, because 'he did not wish to spoil the new Master's day.'14

If the topic about which we think and argue is 'catholic truth', and ultimately the truth of God, then our knowing is necessarily enmeshed with our loving. Thomas' exploration of thinking and willing, knowing and loving, come together in his treatment of the gift of wisdom (I-II.45). Here we see, argues Thomas Heath OP, how 'knowledge of the goodness of an object causes us to love it; love then brings about a different and better kind of knowledge; this new appreciation deepens the love which, in turn, intensifies the appreciation and so on.'15 So thinking about catholic truth is inherently bound up with love. It is a truth that cannot be known dispassionately. And this great intellectual even concedes that the 'little old lady' (vetula) who is

¹⁰ Simon Tugwell (ed.), Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 210.

¹¹ De Perfectione, §30, quoted by Tugwell, Albert and Thomas, 337.

¹² Tugwell, Albert and Thomas, 253.

¹³ DV. 11.1. 17.5.

¹⁴ Tugwell, Albert and Thomas, 230.

¹⁵ Blackfriars 35, 200.

burning with the love of God will know more than 'a scholar full of his own superiority'.16

So, for these early Dominicans, debate was more than a matter of the cold acquisition of knowledge. It was a foretaste of the joy of the beatific vision. Albert the Great, Thomas' master, talked of the pleasure of seeking the truth together: 'in dulcedine societatis quaerere veritatem'. 17 Thomas was frequently called the *felix doctor*, the happy teacher. Those who pursue wisdom are, he writes, 'the happiest that anyone can be in this life.'18 They share in wisdom's play in the presence of God (Proverb 8:30.19 By study one's mind and heart are open to God who is pure joy, a small glimpse of our final end.

But here we reach the most profound challenge of Thomas' spirituality, which is that in this life we are joined to God as to the unknown: 'We cannot know what God is, but only what he is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does' (I.3prol). Even the proofs of the existence of God are less opposed to atheism than to those who think God's existence is obvious. In Thomas' world, in which virtually everyone believed in God, he had to establish that it was a matter of faith. In itself God's existence is evident, but not for us (I.2.1) The proofs are, paradoxically, the first step in letting go our pictures of God, painfully liberating ourselves from the grip of what seemed to his contemporaries an obvious, sacramental way of looking at the world, filled with divine splendour. Kerr argues that 'far from being an exercise in rationalistic apologetics, the purpose of arguing for God's existence is to protect God's transcendence. '20

The proofs are, in a way, the first step in that negative path, the *via* remotionis, by which we let go all false images of God. We draw near to God by stripping our mind of all concepts that seek to contain God. This is the most profoundly ascetical exercise, far more radical than fasting. This is the spirituality of the theologian who, writes Torrell, 'must abandon idols and turn toward the living God (Acts 14:14). He must renounce the constructions of his own mind, personal idols that have no less a hold.... Negative theology is the intellectual form of our respect and adoration in confrontation with God's mystery. 121 Herbert

¹⁶ Torrell II. 98.

¹⁷ Albert the Great, Commentarii in octo libros politicorum, book 7, quoted in Tugwell, Albert, 30.

¹⁸ Sententia libri Ethicorum, 10.11.

¹⁹ Janice L. Schultz and Edward Syman (eds), An Exposition of the 'On the Hebdomads' of Boethius (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2001), 5.

²⁰ Kerr, After Aquinas, 58.

²¹ Torrell I, 34, 35f.

McCabe OP calls this Thomas' 'sanctity of the mind'. Legend has it that as a child he insistently asked: 'What is God?'. All of his life was devoted to attempting to answer questions, but this was the question that defeated him. McCabe writes: 'As Jesus saw that to refuse the defeat of the cross would be to betray his whole mission, all that he was sent to do, so Thomas knew that to refuse to accept defeat about this one question would be to betray all that he had to do, his mission. '22 It is only in the beatific vision, when we are so united with God that God becomes 'the form of the intellect', that we shall see God as he is, sharing in God's self-knowledge and utter happiness. The intellectual asceticism of this life is an opening of our minds and hearts to receive this gift. Dominic insisted that the brethren be beggars for their bread. For Thomas, the intellectual life is the opening of our minds to receive this ultimate gift, a sharing of God's own being, deification.

This may all seem aridly intellectual, the pilgrimage of a mind, but the Secunda Pars, devoted to our moral life, sets it firmly in our lives as rational but bodily beings, passionate, desiring animals. Morality is not fundamentally about obeying rules. It is, again, dynamic, becoming the sort of people, as Kerr writes, 'who would be fulfilled only in the promised bliss of face-to-face vision of God.' 'Ethics for Thomas is ... motivated by anticipated happiness.'23 Given the centrality of this moral vision in the Summa, placed between the doctrines of Creation and the Incarnation, Tugwell can go so far as to say that 'the whole of the Summa can be seen as an exercise in moral theology',24 just as it is all an exercise in spirituality.

The Prologue to the Prima Secundae gives us the foundation of Thomas' ethical spirituality, the goodness of creation and human freedom. Thomas' understanding of us as moral agents, made in the image of God, is based on his doctrine of creation, 'that God is the exemplar cause of things and that they issue from his power through his will.' The Dominican Order was initially founded to confront Albigensianism in the south of France. This was one of those outbreaks of dualism which periodically infect Western Europe. Thomas' doctrine of creation rejected its claim that the world is evil. His understanding of what it means to be human was rooted in this anti-dualism. It is not surprising that the only two miracles attributed to Thomas concern food! His most contentious claim was the fundamental unity of the human being. The soul is

²² McCabe, God Matters, 236.

²³ Kerr, After Aquinas, 130.

²⁴ Tugwell, Albert and Thomas, 336.

the form of the body. The journey towards God described here is made by rational animals, passionate beings. One of his favourite quotations was 'nothing in the mind if not first in the senses.' He scandalised his contemporaries with assertions such as that 'the soul is not the whole person. My soul is not me.'25 It was this insistence that provoked the first attacks on Thomas, especially by the Franciscans, and even by some of his Dominican brethren.

There cannot be a vast gulf between nature and grace, because nature too is a gift from God. Thomas asserts that so long as something exists, 'God must be present to it, and present in a way in keeping with the way in which the thing possesses its existence' (I.8.1). The cultivation of the virtues, then, is not the imposition of an alien life on an utterly corrupt humanity. As Thomas famously says in many and various ways, grace perfects nature and does not destroy it. Despite the wounding of sin, we retain a desire for God. 'God has thus left, at the deepest level of every being, a desire to return to him.'26 Our passions need to be healed rather than suppressed, liberated for our deepest desire, which is for God. They are ruled by reason but, recalling Aristotle, 'not by the despotic rule of a master towards his slave, but by the civil and royal rule which governs free men who are not entirely subject to dictate' (I–II.17.7corp). This is evocative, surely, of Thomas' experience of Dominican government, the ruling of free friars who would not accept being pushed around!

Thomas inherited from Aristotle the belief that 'friendship is what is most necessary to live'. In his own words, 'Among all the things that a human being needs, other humans are the most necessary to him.'²⁷ But Aristotle's conception of the friendship of the free citizens of the Greek city is transformed, in the light of John 15:15, 'I call you no longer servants but friends.' Our natural need for friendship, whether in marriage or the city, is gathered up into our sharing in the friendship which is the life of the Trinity. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we become friends of God, and the Father and the Son come to make their home in us. This deep sensitivity to friendship was surely rooted in his experience of the fraternal life of the Order. We know little of Thomas' own friendships – clearly Reginald, his socius on his travels for many years, was a close friend – but friendship was characteristic of the early brethren, for example, St Dominic's love of

²⁵ Quoted by Torrell II, 257 (see In I ad Corinthios, 14.19, lect. 2, n. 924).

²⁶ Torrell I, 343.

²⁷ SCG III.128.1, translation modified from Torrell, II, 281.

the brethren. There were also many examples of the friars' easy friendship with women. Jordan of Saxony, Dominic's successor, who died shortly before Thomas became a Dominican, was famous for his deep friendship with the Dominican nun, Blessed Diana d'Andalò.28 In the next century, there was the friendship of St Catherine of Siena and Blessed Raymond of Capua. The spiritual life is a graced flourishing of what is most natural to us.

The second fundamental intuition of Thomas' ethics is the conviction that the moral life is an expression and embrace of our freedom. In the Prologue to the Prima Secundae, he says that we are made in the image of God, because the human being 'is intelligent and free to judge and be master of himself.' He will examine how the human being is 'the source of actions which are his own and which fall under his responsibility and control.' The radical transcendence of God, to whom we are joined as to the unknown, means that there is no competition for power between God and humanity. God's grace makes us free. Kerr writes, 'Thomas sees no conflict between God's working in everything and everything doing its own thing, so to speak. Or rather: he is well aware of the temptations, common in his day and ours, to see rivalry between God's sovereign freedom and human autonomy, either making God an item in the world or reducing creatures to puppets. "It seems difficult for some people," he remarks, "to understand how natural effects are attributed to both God and to a natural agent" (SCG III.70.1).129 So God gives us our part in the realization of God's will. Our prudent moral action is a sharing in God's providential government of the world. One of the ways, surprisingly, in which we may do this is through prayer. Prayer for Thomas was above all asking for things. Our prayers do not change God's mind, but rather it is God's will that things happen in accordance with our prayers. So we have in prayer what Thomas calls 'the dignity of causality'.

This sense of human freedom again reflects the spirituality of Dominic's Order. Dominic handed over the government of the Order to the brethren, confident in their responsibility. He was famous for his trust of the brothers. When he sent out his youngest friars to preach, the Cistercians warned him that he would lose them. Dominic replied, 'I know for certain that my young men will go out and come back, will be

²⁸ See further Gerald Vann OP, To Heaven with Diana! A Study of Jordan of Saxony and Diana d'Andalò with a translation of the Letters of Jordan (Reprinted; New York: iUniverse, 2006).

²⁹ Kerr, After Aquinas, 43f.

sent out and will return; but your young men will be kept locked up and will still go out.'30

In the *Tertia Pars* the spirituality of the *Summa* finds its synthesis. God responds to our thirst for happiness by drawing near to us as we are, flesh and blood, in the Incarnation of the Son and the sacramental life of the Church. Once again the prologue signposts the way on which we are embarked; Jesus Christ 'showed in his own person that path of truth which, in rising again, we can follow to the blessedness of eternal life. This means that after our study of the final goal of human life and of the virtues and vices we must bring the entire theological discourse to completion by considering (consideratio) the Saviour himself and his benefits to the human race.'

The pilgrimage into which Thomas is initiating those young friars here reaches towards its consummation, 'the blessedness of eternal life.' But we are flesh and blood; 'Nothing in the mind unless first in the senses.' So Thomas stresses that Christ shows us the path of truth; we shall consider Christ himself, for in him the end of the journey is made visible and tangible. It belongs to God's friendship with humanity to show himself in Jesus, 'so that knowing God under visible form, we might be enraptured into love of the invisible.'31 Torrell points out that this formulation, from the SCG, is probably taken by St Thomas from the Christmas Preface. His theology is rooted in the celebration of the liturgy, in which our faith is visibly expressed.

In Christ we see the one in whom humanity and divinity are united, and so can hope to attain unity with God ourselves. In Christ, God takes us by the hand to lead us into friendship. This contemplation of the life and death of Jesus offers more than just a moral example. Knowledge, again, is transforming. By seeing God in Jesus, we begin the process of becoming like God. Thomas is writing for a culture in which faith needed to be made manifest, incarnate. It was often said that Dominic preached as much by example as by word. One of Thomas' favourite quotations was 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.' The saints are 'deiform', transformed by the vision of God (I.12.6), and this begins in our consideratio of Christ. Thomas offers us thirty-three questions on the mysteries of Christ's life, one for each year of his life. It is a thoroughly trinitarian

³⁰ Simon Tugwell OP (ed.), Early Dominicans: Selected Writings (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1982), 91.

³¹ SCG IV.54, n. 3927.

spirituality; we are configured to the Son by the mediation of the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit is the giver of all gifts. The Word offers us the teaching, and the Spirit makes us able to receive it.

This visibility finds its climax in the Eucharist. Lay people, who rarely went to communion, longed to see the host lifted up after consecration. Eamon Duffy asserts that 'seeing the host became the high point of lay experience of the Mass. '32 In the host was made tangible the one in whom humanity and divinity are joined, the promise of beatitude. But for Thomas, the visibility is not just as of an object. The sacraments 'belong to the general category of signs' (III.60.1). David Bourke wrote that 'the very act of producing meaning and the act of causing are one and the same.'33 They effect what they mean. They are signs that speak to us. The Eucharist nourishes us as meaning made flesh.

We are caught up in the very happening of redemption in the mysteries of Christ's life. Thomas, we have seen, has a dynamic spirituality; we flourish by sharing the life of God who is pure act. Through the sacraments, one becomes 'a participator not merely in the fruits of the Passion but in the death, Resurrection, and "newness of life" of Christ himself.'34 One shares in the present happening of grace. Thomas refers to Christ not just as risen but rising now, homo resurgens. 'The historical Christ, today glorified, touches us by each of the acts of his earthly life, which is the bearer of a divinizing life and energy.'35

So Thomas' exploration of the Eucharist, which is almost the last subject touched upon in the Summa, is the climax of his spirituality. It responds to the hunger of our minds for meaning, of our wills for delight, our bodies for nourishment, and that deepest need of all, for friendship with each other in God. All that is given here. It is fitting that it was in the Eucharist that Thomas had that mystical experience that was the glimpse of the end of the journey, towards which his Summa pointed. It is reported that shortly before he died, when the Eucharist was brought to him, Thomas said: 'I receive you, price of my soul's redemption, I receive you, viaticum for my pilgrimage, for whose love I have studied, kept watch and laboured and preached and taught.'36

³² Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 94.

³³ Blackfriars 56, xxi.

³⁴ Ibid., xxiii.

³⁵ Torrell I, 139.

³⁶ Tugwell, Albert and Thomas, 265.