



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 16 June 2010

Saint Thomas Aquinas (2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to continue the presentation of St Thomas Aquinas, a theologian of such value that the study of his thought was explicitly recommended by the [Second Vatican Council](#) in two documents, the Decree [Optatam totius](#) on the Training of Priests, and the Declaration [Gravissimum Educationis](#), which addresses Christian Education. Indeed, already in 1880 [Pope Leo XIII](#), who held St Thomas in high esteem as a guide and encouraged Thomistic studies, chose to declare him Patron of Catholic Schools and Universities.

The main reason for this appreciation is not only explained by the content of his teaching but also by the method he used, especially his new synthesis and distinction between philosophy and theology. The Fathers of the Church were confronted by different philosophies of a Platonic type in which a complete vision of the world and of life was presented, including the subject of God and of religion. In comparison with these philosophies they themselves had worked out a complete vision of reality, starting with faith and using elements of Platonism to respond to the essential questions of men and women. They called this vision, based on biblical revelation and formulated with a correct Platonism in the light of faith: "our philosophy". The word "philosophy" was not, therefore, an expression of a purely rational system and, as such, distinct from faith but rather indicated a comprehensive vision of reality, constructed in the light of faith but used and conceived of by

reason; a vision that naturally exceeded the capacities proper to reason but as such also fulfilled it. For St Thomas the encounter with the pre-Christian philosophy of Aristotle (who died in about 322 b.c.) opened up a new perspective. Aristotelian philosophy was obviously a philosophy worked out without the knowledge of the Old and New Testaments, an explanation of the world without revelation through reason alone. And this consequent rationality was convincing. Thus the old form of the Fathers' "our philosophy" no longer worked. The relationship between philosophy and theology, between faith and reason, needed to be rethought. A "philosophy" existed that was complete and convincing in itself, a rationality that preceded the faith, followed by "theology", a form of thinking with the faith and in the faith. The pressing question was this: are the world of rationality, philosophy conceived of without Christ, and the world of faith compatible? Or are they mutually exclusive? Elements that affirmed the incompatibility of these two worlds were not lacking, but St Thomas was firmly convinced of their compatibility indeed that philosophy worked out without the knowledge of Christ was awaiting, as it were, the light of Jesus to be complete. This was the great "surprise" of St Thomas that determined the path he took as a thinker. Showing this independence of philosophy and theology and, at the same time, their reciprocal relationality was the historic mission of the great teacher. And thus it can be understood that in the 19th century, when the incompatibility of modern reason and faith was strongly declared, [Pope Leo XIII](#) pointed to St Thomas as a guide in the dialogue between them. In his theological work, St Thomas supposes and concretizes this relationality. Faith consolidates, integrates and illumines the heritage of truth that human reason acquires. The trust with which St Thomas endows these two instruments of knowledge faith and reason may be traced back to the conviction that both stem from the one source of all truth, the divine *Logos*, which is active in both contexts, that of Creation and that of redemption.

Together with the agreement between reason and faith, we must recognize on the other hand that they avail themselves of different cognitive procedures. Reason receives a truth by virtue of its intrinsic evidence, mediated or unmediated; faith, on the contrary, accepts a truth on the basis of the authority of the Word of God that is revealed. St Thomas writes at the beginning of his *Summa Theologiae*: "We must bear in mind that there are two kinds of sciences. There are some which proceed from a principle known by the natural light of the intelligence, such as arithmetic and geometry and the like. There are some which proceed from principles known by the light of a higher science: thus the science of perspective proceeds from principles established by geometry, and music from principles established by arithmetic. So it is that sacred doctrine is a science, because it proceeds from principles established by the light of a higher science, namely, the science of God and the blessed" (ia, q. 1, a.2).

This distinction guarantees the autonomy of both the human and the theological sciences. However, it is not equivalent to separation but, rather, implies a reciprocal and advantageous collaboration. Faith, in fact, protects reason from any temptation to distrust its own abilities, stimulates it to be open to ever broader horizons, keeps alive in it the search for foundations and, when reason itself is applied to the supernatural sphere of the relationship between God and man,

faith enriches his work. According to St Thomas, for example, human reason can certainly reach the affirmation of the existence of one God, but only faith, which receives the divine Revelation, is able to draw from the mystery of the Love of the Triune God.

Moreover, it is not only faith that helps reason. Reason too, with its own means can do something important for faith, making it a threefold service which St Thomas sums up in the preface to his commentary on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius: "demonstrating those truths that are preambles of the faith; giving a clearer notion, by certain similitudes, of the truths of the faith; resisting those who speak against the faith, either by showing that their statements are false, or by showing that they are not necessarily true" (q. 2, a.3). The entire history of theology is basically the exercise of this task of the mind which shows the intelligibility of faith, its articulation and inner harmony, its reasonableness and its ability to further human good. The correctness of theological reasoning and its real cognitive meaning is based on the value of theological language which, in St Thomas' opinion, is principally an analogical language. The distance between God, the Creator, and the being of his creatures is infinite; dissimilitude is ever greater than similitude (cf. DS 806). Nevertheless in the whole difference between Creator and creatures an analogy exists between the created being and the being of the Creator, which enables us to speak about God with human words.

St Thomas not only based the doctrine of analogy on exquisitely philosophical argumentation but also on the fact that with the Revelation God himself spoke to us and therefore authorized us to speak of him. I consider it important to recall this doctrine. In fact, it helps us get the better of certain objections of contemporary atheism which denies that religious language is provided with an objective meaning and instead maintains that it has solely a subjective or merely emotional value. This objection derives from the fact that positivist thought is convinced that man does not know being but solely the functions of reality that can be experienced. With St Thomas and with the great philosophical tradition we are convinced that, in reality, man does not only know the functions, the object of the natural sciences, but also knows something of being itself for example, he knows the person, the You of the other, and not only the physical and biological aspect of his being.

In the light of this teaching of St Thomas theology says that however limited it may be, religious language is endowed with sense because we touch being like an arrow aimed at the reality it signifies. This fundamental agreement between human reason and Christian faith is recognized in another basic principle of Aquinas' thought. Divine Grace does not annihilate but presupposes and perfects human nature. The latter, in fact, even after sin, is not completely corrupt but wounded and weakened. Grace, lavished upon us by God and communicated through the Mystery of the Incarnate Word, is an absolutely free gift with which nature is healed, strengthened and assisted in pursuing the innate desire for happiness in the heart of every man and of every woman. All the faculties of the human being are purified, transformed and uplifted by divine Grace.

An important application of this relationship between nature and Grace is recognized in the moral theology of St Thomas Aquinas, which proves to be of great timeliness. At the centre of his teaching in this field, he places the new law which is the law of the Holy Spirit. With a profoundly evangelical gaze he insists on the fact that this law is the Grace of the Holy Spirit given to all who believe in Christ. The written and oral teaching of the doctrinal and moral truths transmitted by the Church is united to this Grace. St Thomas, emphasizing the fundamental role in moral life of the action of the Holy Spirit, of Grace, from which flow the theological and moral virtues, makes us understand that all Christians can attain the lofty perspectives of the "Sermon on the Mount", if they live an authentic relationship of faith in Christ, if they are open to the action of his Holy Spirit. However, Aquinas adds, "Although Grace is more efficacious than nature, yet nature is more essential to man, and therefore more enduring" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 94, a. 6, ad 2), which is why, in the Christian moral perspective, there is a place for reason which is capable of discerning natural moral law. Reason can recognize this by considering what it is good to do and what it is good to avoid in order to achieve that felicity which everyone has at heart, which also implies a responsibility towards others and, therefore, the search for the common good. In other words, the human, theological and moral virtues are rooted in human nature. Divine Grace accompanies, sustains and impels ethical commitment but, according to St Thomas, all human beings, believers and non-believers alike, are called to recognize the needs of human nature expressed in natural law and to draw inspiration from it in the formulation of positive laws, namely those issued by the civil and political authorities to regulate human coexistence.

When natural law and the responsibility it entails are denied this dramatically paves the way to ethical relativism at the individual level and to totalitarianism of the State at the political level. The defence of universal human rights and the affirmation of the absolute value of the person's dignity postulate a foundation. Does not natural law constitute this foundation, with the non-negotiable values that it indicates? Venerable John Paul II wrote in his Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* words that are still very up to date: "It is therefore urgently necessary, for the future of society and the development of a sound democracy, to rediscover those essential and innate human and moral values which flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person: values which no individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy, but must only acknowledge, respect and promote" (n. 71).

To conclude, Thomas presents to us a broad and confident concept of human reason: *broad* because it is not limited to the spaces of the so-called "empirical-scientific" reason, but open to the whole being and thus also to the fundamental and inalienable questions of human life; and *confident* because human reason, especially if it accepts the inspirations of Christian faith, is a promoter of a civilization that recognizes the dignity of the person, the intangibility of his rights and the cogency of his or her duties. It is not surprising that the doctrine on the dignity of the person, fundamental for the recognition of the inviolability of human rights, developed in schools of thought that accepted the legacy of St Thomas Aquinas, who had a very lofty conception of the human creature. He defined it, with his rigorously philosophical language, as "what is most perfect to be

found in all nature - that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature" (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 29, a. 3).

The depth of St Thomas Aquinas' thought let us never forget it flows from his living faith and fervent piety, which he expressed in inspired prayers such as this one in which he asks God: "Grant me, O Lord my God, a mind to know you, a heart to seek you, wisdom to find you, conduct pleasing to you, faithful perseverance in waiting for you, and a hope of finally embracing you".

To Special Groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially the many parish and student groups. I offer a warm welcome to all who have come from Hong Kong, Pakistan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, may you always find in Christ present in the Eucharist the spiritual nourishment to advance on the path of holiness; may Christ be for you, dear *sick people*, a support and comfort in trial and in suffering; and for you, dear *newlyweds*, may the sacrament that has rooted you in Christ be the source that feeds your daily love.

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