



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Hall

Wednesday, 23 June 2010

Saint Thomas Aquinas (3)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to complete, with a third instalment, my Catecheses on St Thomas Aquinas. Even more than 700 years after his death we can learn much from him. My Predecessor, [Pope Paul VI](#), also said this, in a Discourse he gave at Fossanova on 14 September 1974 on the occasion of the seventh centenary of St Thomas' death. He asked himself: "Thomas, our Teacher, what lesson can you give us?". And he answered with these words: "trust in the truth of Catholic religious thought, as defended, expounded and offered by him to the capacities of the human mind" (*Address in honour of St Thomas Aquinas in the Basilica*, 14 September 1974; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, [ore], 26 September 1974, p. 4). In Aquino moreover, on that same day, again with reference to St Thomas, Paul VI said, "all of us who are faithful sons and daughters of the Church can and must be his disciples, at least to some extent!" (*Address to people in the Square at Aquino*, 14 September 1974; ORE, p. 5).

Let us too, therefore, learn from the teaching of St Thomas and from his masterpiece, the *Summa Theologiae*. It was left unfinished, yet it is a monumental work: it contains 512 questions and 2,669 articles. It consists of concentrated reasoning in which the human mind is applied to the mysteries of faith, with clarity and depth to the mysteries of faith, alternating questions with answers in which St Thomas deepens the teaching that comes from Sacred Scripture and from the Fathers of the Church, especially St Augustine. In this reflection, in meeting the true questions of his time, that are also often our own questions, St Thomas, also by employing the method and thought of the

ancient philosophers, and of Aristotle in particular, thus arrives at precise, lucid and pertinent formulations of the truths of faith in which truth is a gift of faith, shines out and becomes accessible to us, for our reflection. However, this effort of the human mind Aquinas reminds us with his own life is always illumined by prayer, by the light that comes from on high. Only those who live with God and with his mysteries can also understand what they say to us.

In the *Summa* of theology, St Thomas starts from the fact that God has three different ways of being and existing: God exists in himself, he is the beginning and end of all things, which is why all creatures proceed from him and depend on him: then God is present through his Grace in the life and activity of the Christian, of the saints; lastly, God is present in an altogether special way in the Person of Christ, here truly united to the man Jesus, and active in the Sacraments that derive from his work of redemption. Therefore, the structure of this monumental work (cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *La "Summa" di San Tommaso*, Milan 2003, pp. 29-75), a quest with "a theological vision" for the fullness of God (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 1, a. 7), is divided into three parts and is illustrated by the *Doctor Communis* himself St Thomas with these words: "Because the chief aim of sacred doctrine is to teach the knowledge of God, not only as he is in himself, but also as he is the beginning of things and their last end, and especially of rational creatures, as is clear from what has already been said, therefore, we shall treat: (1) Of God; (2) Of the rational creature's advance towards God; (3) Of Christ, Who as man, is our way to God" (*ibid.*, I, q. 2). It is a circle: God in himself, who comes out of himself and takes us by the hand, in such a way that with Christ we return to God, we are united to God, and God will be all things to all people.

The First Part of the *Summa Theologiae* thus investigates God in himself, the mystery of the Trinity and of the creative activity of God. In this part we also find a profound reflection on the authentic reality of the human being, inasmuch as he has emerged from the creative hands of God as the fruit of his love. On the one hand we are dependent created beings, we do not come from ourselves; yet, on the other, we have a true autonomy so that we are not only something apparent as certain Platonic philosophers say but a reality desired by God as such and possessing an inherent value.

In the Second Part St Thomas considers man, impelled by Grace, in his aspiration to know and love God in order to be happy in time and in eternity. First of all the Author presents the theological principles of moral action, studying how, in the free choice of the human being to do good acts, reason, will and passions are integrated, to which is added the power given by God's Grace through the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as the help offered by moral law. Hence the human being is a dynamic being who seeks himself, seeks to become himself, and, in this regard, seeks to do actions that build him up, that make him truly man; and here the moral law comes into it. Grace and reason itself, the will and the passions enter too. On this basis St Thomas describes the profile of the man who lives in accordance with the Spirit and thus becomes an image of God.

Here Aquinas pauses to study the three theological virtues faith, hope and charity followed by a

critical examination of more than 50 moral virtues, organized around the four cardinal virtues prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. He then ends with a reflection on the different vocations in the Church.

In the Third Part of the *Summa*, St Thomas studies the Mystery of Christ the way and the truth through which we can reach God the Father. In this section he writes almost unparalleled pages on the Mystery of Jesus' Incarnation and Passion, adding a broad treatise on the seven sacraments, for it is in them that the Divine Word Incarnate extends the benefits of the Incarnation for our salvation, for our journey of faith towards God and eternal life. He is, as it were, materially present with the realities of creation, and thus touches us in our inmost depths.

In speaking of the sacraments, St Thomas reflects in a special way on the Mystery of the Eucharist, for which he had such great devotion, the early biographers claim, that he would lean his head against the Tabernacle, as if to feel the throbbing of Jesus' divine and human heart. In one of his works, commenting on Scripture, St Thomas helps us to understand the excellence of the sacrament of the Eucharist, when he writes: "Since this [the Eucharist] is the sacrament of Our Lord's Passion, it contains in itself the Jesus Christ who suffered for us. Thus, whatever is an effect of Our Lord's Passion is also an effect of this sacrament. For this sacrament is nothing other than the application of Our Lord's Passion to us" (cf. *Commentary on John*, chapter 6, lecture 6, n. 963). We clearly understand why St Thomas and other Saints celebrated Holy Mass shedding tears of compassion for the Lord who gave himself as a sacrifice for us, tears of joy and gratitude.

Dear brothers and sisters, at the school of the Saints, let us fall in love with this sacrament! Let us participate in Holy Mass with recollection, to obtain its spiritual fruits, let us nourish ourselves with this Body and Blood of Our Lord, to be ceaselessly fed by divine Grace! Let us willingly and frequently linger in the company of the Blessed Sacrament in heart-to-heart conversation!

All that St Thomas described with scientific rigour in his major theological works, such as, precisely, the *Summa Theologiae*, and the *Summa contra gentiles*, was also explained in his preaching, both to his students and to the faithful. In 1273, a year before he died, he preached throughout Lent in the Church of San Domenico Maggiore in Naples. The content of those sermons was gathered and preserved: they are the *Opuscoli* in which he explains the *Apostles' Creed*, interprets the Prayer of the *Our Father*, explains the *Ten Commandments* and comments on the *Hail Mary*.

*The content of the Doctor Angelicus' preaching corresponds with virtually the whole structure of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Actually, in catechesis and preaching, in a time like ours of renewed commitment to evangelization, these fundamental subjects should never be lacking: what we believe, and here is the Creed of the faith; what we pray, and here is the *Our Father* and the *Hail Mary*; and what we live, as we are taught by biblical Revelation, and here is the law of the love of God and neighbour and the *Ten Commandments*, as an explanation of this mandate of love.*

I would like to propose some simple, essential and convincing examples of the content of St Thomas' teaching. In his booklet on *The Apostles' Creed* he explains the value of faith. Through it, he says, the soul is united to God and produces, as it were, a shot of eternal life; life receives a reliable orientation and we overcome temptations with ease. To those who object that faith is foolishness because it leads to belief in something that does not come within the experience of the senses, St Thomas gives a very articulate answer and recalls that this is an inconsistent doubt, for human intelligence is limited and cannot know everything. Only if we were able to know all visible and invisible things perfectly would it be genuinely foolish to accept truths out of pure faith. Moreover, it is impossible to live, St Thomas observes, without trusting in the experience of others, wherever one's own knowledge falls short. It is thus reasonable to believe in God, who reveals himself, and to the testimony of the Apostles: they were few, simple and poor, grief-stricken by the Crucifixion of their Teacher. Yet many wise, noble and rich people converted very soon after hearing their preaching. In fact this is a miraculous phenomenon of history, to which it is far from easy to give a convincing answer other than that of the Apostle's encounter with the Risen Lord.

In commenting on the article of the Creed on the Incarnation of the divine Word St Thomas makes a few reflections. He says that the Christian faith is strengthened in considering the mystery of the Incarnation; hope is strengthened at the thought that the Son of God came among us, as one of us, to communicate his own divinity to human beings; charity is revived because there is no more obvious sign of God's love for us than the sight of the Creator of the universe making himself a creature, one of us. Finally, in contemplating the mystery of God's Incarnation, we feel kindled within us our desire to reach Christ in glory. Using a simple and effective comparison, St Thomas remarks: "If the brother of a king were to be far away, he would certainly long to live beside him. Well, Christ is a brother to us; we must therefore long for his company and become of one heart with him" (*Opuscoli theologico-spirituali*, Rome 1976, p. 64).

In presenting the prayer of the *Our Father*, St Thomas shows that it is perfect in itself, since it has all five of the characteristics that a well-made prayer must possess: trusting, calm abandonment; a fitting content because, St Thomas observes, "it is quite difficult to know exactly what it is appropriate and inappropriate to ask for, since choosing among our wishes puts us in difficulty" (*ibid.*, p. 120); and then an appropriate order of requests, the fervour of love and the sincerity of humility.

Like all the Saints, St Thomas had a great devotion to Our Lady. He described her with a wonderful title: *Triclinium totius Trinitatis*; *triclinium*, that is, a place where the Trinity finds rest since, because of the Incarnation, in no creature as in her do the three divine Persons dwell and feel delight and joy at dwelling in her soul full of Grace. Through her intercession we may obtain every help.

With a prayer that is traditionally attributed to St Thomas and that in any case reflects the elements of his profound Marian devotion we too say: "O most Blessed and sweet Virgin Mary,

Mother of God... I entrust to your merciful heart... my entire life.... Obtain for me as well, O most sweet Lady, true charity with which from the depths of my heart I may love your most Holy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and, after him, love you above all other things... and my neighbour, in God and for God".

To Special Groups:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a warm welcome to the numerous student groups present, and in a special way to those taking part in the programmes sponsored by the Foyer Unitas Lay Centre, the Anglican Centre of Rome and the Midwest Theological Forum. I also thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking visitors, especially those from Scotland, Norway, Sweden, Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, the Bahamas and the United States of America, I invoke God's abundant Blessings.

I now greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Today is the liturgical Memorial of St Joseph Cafasso and the 150th anniversary of his death. May the example of this attractive figure of an exemplary priest, to which I want to devote the next Wednesday Catechesis, help you, dear *young people* to experience personally the liberating power of Christ's love that profoundly renews human life; may it sustain you, dear *sick people*, in offering up your suffering for the conversion of those who are prisoners of evil; may it encourage you, dear *newlyweds*, to be a sign of God's faithfulness, also with mutual forgiveness, motivated by love.

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