

Silence before God in the Life and Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas

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ROBERT CARDINAL SARAH'S recent *The Power of Silence* (2017) identifies the interior silence of the human person before God as a dimension of Christian spirituality urgently in need of renewal. Far from the simple absence of sound or refusal to communicate, a special type of silence is discovered as "the language of God," both fruit of his presence in the soul and a stillness in which the believer hears his Word.¹ This essay finds solid footing for a spirituality of silence in the life and teachings of a trusted master. Although Saint Thomas never composed a treatise on the subject, I argue that a rich theology of silence can be gathered from his writings and that this spiritual doctrine in turn enlightens the silence that enveloped Aquinas's last days on earth.

Interpreting the Final Silence of Saint Thomas

It is well established that Thomas Aquinas abruptly broke off his theological work and barely spoke during the four months before his death in March 1274.² However, the *significance* of this final chapter in the life of the saint

¹ Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 22 and 238. In his postface to the German edition, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI develops interior silence as a condition for a fruitful reception of Christ's words ("With Cardinal Sarah, the Liturgy is in Good Hands," *First Things*, May 2017, firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/05/with-cardinal-sarah-the-liturgy-is-in-good-hands).

² Accounts of Thomas's final days can be found in Simon Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1988), 233–34, 265–67, and Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work* (Washington, DC: Catholic

is still debated today. While some scholars see in Thomas's final silence little more than the collapse of his physical and mental health, others view it as an eloquent testament to his mysticism. Consequently, admirers of the saint are left to wonder whether anything of real value can be learned from this final moment of Aquinas's life.

What exactly brought about this silence, according to the available historical witnesses? Already, during the last year of Thomas's life, graces of ecstasy and tears during Compline³ and Holy Mass seem to have become frequent.⁴ Brother Reginald, the saint's closest friend and faithful secretary, explained to Thomas's sister Theodora that he had "frequently experienced raptures of spirit when immersed in contemplation, but never for so long a time."⁵ Those close to Thomas described these sorts of "abstractions" as frequent, and they seem to have increased during his last months.⁶ Still, the final silence of Thomas was no such passing grace or abstraction.

On December 6, 1273,⁷ during the celebration of Holy Mass, something happened to Friar Thomas which impressed him so deeply that, from that day to his death, he spoke very little and ceased all formal teaching and writing.⁸ Bartholomew of Capua's famous testimony states that,

University of America Press, 2005), 289–95.

³ Compline was the only choral office, according to Tugwell, that Thomas attended regularly (*Albert and Thomas*, 263 and note 605).

⁴ Paul Murray, O.P., *Aquinas at Prayer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 27. Murray cites a concrete example of Holy Mass on Passion Sunday 1273, where Thomas had to be roused from an apparent ecstasy in order to continue the celebration.

⁵ William of Tocco, *Hystoria beati Thomae Aquinatis*, ch. 47, no. 120, ed. D. Prummer, in *Fontes Vitae S. Thomae de Aquino notis historicis et criticis illustrati*, quoted by Bruno Forte, *Il Silenzio di Tommaso* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1998), 23 (English translations are my own, since the English edition is not currently available.).

⁶ Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1:288–89. Such instances of Thomas lost in contemplation seem to range from intellectual problem solving (such as the famous dinner with King Louis of France) to apparently mystical favors (such as his ecstasy on Palm Sunday 1273). Still, an overly rigid division between the intellectual and spiritual seems foreign to the saint's own spirituality.

⁷ While the earliest sources merely state "around the time of the feast of blessed Nicholas" (*a festo beati Nicolai circa*), Peter Kwasniewski argues for accepting the precise date of December 6 ("Golden Straw: St. Thomas and the Ecstatic Practice of Theology," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 2, no. 1 [2004]: 61–89, at 61).

⁸ It must be pointed out that the saint was by no means totally mute after the experience of December 6. Not only did he communicate, minimally, with those caring for him, he also answered a few requests for his theological services—the papal summons to the Council of Lyons, an urgent question sent to him by the Abbot of Monte Cassino, not to mention the (unverified) meditations on Song of Songs

while Thomas celebrated the Eucharist in the chapel of Saint Nicholas, he “underwent an astonishing transformation,” and “after this Mass he never wrote nor dictated anything, and hung up his writing materials while in the middle of the third part of his *Summa* on the treatise of Penitence.”⁹ Perplexed, Reginald urged his master to continue his theological writing: “Father, how can you abandon a work so important for the glory of God and for the enlightenment of the world?” Thomas answered tersely, “Reginald, I can’t do it.” Aquinas’s final word on the matter, while discreet, casts a mystical light on his decision: “I can’t do it. Everything I have written seems but straw to me compared to what I have seen and has been revealed to me.”¹⁰ This testimony, generally accepted as credible, connects the loss of Aquinas’s ability or motivation to pursue theological work with some supernatural experience.

Thus, the historical record already provides *three arguments* in favor of a voluntary and supernatural sense to Thomas’s silence. One, the witness of Aquinas’s spiritual life: graces of ecstasy were frequent during the last year of his life. Two, Aquinas’s health: though clearly fatigued, Thomas was by no means incapable of speech or thought. He communicated with his care givers, composed a short theological treatise upon request, and is said to have uttered a fervent prayer as he received the Viaticum.¹¹ Three, Aquinas’s own reported words explain his choice to stop preaching and teaching as motivated by some private revelation.

Understandably, this mysterious event has fascinated scholars. I group their various opinions into three main positions.

Mystical. Admirers of the saint have been eager to interpret his final silence in a poetic or mystical light. For Josef Pieper, Aquinas was hushed by an experience of divine mystery:

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

for the monks of Fossanova. Thomas’s eloquent prayer before the Viaticum shows that he kept his wits and ability to speak until the end of his life.

⁹ *Processus canonizationis Neapoli*, no. 79, 376s, in *Fontes Vitae S. Thomae*, ed. M.-H. Laurent (cited by Forte, *Il Silenzio*, 15).

¹⁰ *Processus canonizationis Neapoli*, no. 79, 376s (Forte, *Il Silenzio*, 19).

¹¹ For the Viaticum prayer, see Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1:293.

which is not reached by any thought or speech.¹²

Bruno Forte compares Thomas hanging up his writing materials to the Jewish musicians in exile hanging up their harps (see Ps 137): "Could words ever express the open wound of the soul? Where in exile, there is pain, the closer one is to the homeland. As guardian of the ineffable, only silent love remains, an icon of the last farewell."¹³ Peter Kwasniewski firmly believes that the December 6 experience was "principally if not exclusively a mystical one."¹⁴

Conservative. Other scholars take a more reserved view of Thomas's last months. Jean-Pierre Torrell, for example, refers to the period as Thomas's "final illness" and thinks it "hardly probable that it had a direct link with the December 6 experience."¹⁵ A few have suggested that Thomas suffered a stroke, mental breakdown, or even a midlife crisis.¹⁶ Perhaps in favor of this position is the reported phrase: "The only thing I want now is that as God has put an end to my writing, He may quickly end my life also."¹⁷ For James Weisheipl, "The physical basis for the event could have been . . . an acute breakdown of his physical and emotional powers due to overwork."¹⁸ G. M. Pizzuti presents Thomas as "prey to increasing doubts about the value of his work" which would have sapped the theologian of "his will to finish the Summa."¹⁹

Mixed. For Giles Emery, attention to the natural conditions of Thomas's final silence need not exclude all supernatural influence.²⁰ Simon

¹² Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. John Murray and Daniel O'Connor (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), 38. Pieper's book is not a monograph on the silence of Aquinas, but rather a collection of three essays none of which treats Thomas's final silence as their main subject.

¹³ Forte, *Il Silenzio*, 17.

¹⁴ Kwasniewski, "Golden Straw," 65.

¹⁵ Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1:293.

¹⁶ As reported by Robert Barron, *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 23–24.

¹⁷ Reported by Bernardo Gui (Kwasniewski, "Golden Straw," 64).

¹⁸ James Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 322 (cited by Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 27). Tugwell confirms that Thomas was a "workaholic," very reluctant to take time off (*Albert and Thomas*, 261). Torrell also reports the opinion of E. Colledge, who sees signs of "a serious cerebral stroke" (*Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1:294).

¹⁹ Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1:294. Torrell simply reports this opinion of Pizzuti without passing judgment.

²⁰ Giles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York:

Tugwell indicates signs of a physical collapse while at the same time describing December 6 as a “rapture” caused by an overwhelming experience of divine love and the mystery of the Eucharist.²¹ Torrell, after careful review of the evidence, concludes that a *combination* of both fatigue and intense mystical experiences “may be the most plausible” explanation.²² Paul Murray similarly considers Thomas’s final silence to be *both* physical and mystical.²³

Robert Barron closes the debate with careful reserve: “Whatever explanation we offer, the simple fact of his remarkable silence remains.”²⁴ The stunning power of whatever Thomas experienced at Mass, coupled with his characteristic discretion about his own spiritual life, would seem to leave the saint’s final silence forever cloaked in mystery.

Thesis: Thomas’s Spiritual Doctrine on Silence Enlightens his own Personal Experience

Without excluding a physical component from the December 6 event, I find a mystical interpretation of Thomas’s silence convincing and instructive from a perspective of spiritual theology. Behind the *historical question* (What happened and which interpretation best fits the evidence?), I see a valuable *spiritual question*: What can we learn about the spiritual life from Thomas’s silence? What experience of God can provoke such silence in a preacher? What is the value of the believer’s silence before God as a positive act of faith, hope, and charity? This passage from the *historical* to the *spiritual* requires some theological labor but promises to unlock the lasting, exemplary value of this event for students of spirituality.

In this essay, I offer a new avenue for exploring the meaning of Thomas’s silence. None of the scholars cited above chose to examine *what Thomas himself says* elsewhere about silence, in the context of the moral and spir-

Oxford University Press, 2007), 395: “It should probably be ascribed to an extreme nervous and physical fatigue; but the last year of Thomas’s life is marked by deep spiritual experiences.”

²¹ Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas*, 266–67.

²² Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1:295. Torrell describes the December 6 experience as an “ecstasy” (1:287).

²³ Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 27. Murray supports his opinion with interesting quotes from Johannes Tauler: “A man may die of a broken heart because God works in him so vehemently that it is more than he can bear. . . . Many a man has died of this, giving himself up so utterly to these wondrously great works that his nature could not endure it and collapsed under the strain” (28).

²⁴ Barron, *Thomas Aquinas*, 24. Torrell concludes in similar fashion: “Before these attempts at explanation, the reader can only suspend judgment” (*Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1:295).

itual life, as a possible means to understanding his decision to stop teaching.²⁵ Only Murray indicates the path I wish to pursue, referring to a short text of Thomas on the silence which honors God as an interpretive key to his own final silence.²⁶

Here, I argue that Thomas's teaching indicates *a positive, spiritual sense* of the believer's silence before God. Though not systematic or well developed, this doctrine is valuable, independently of the historical question about Thomas's last days. It represents Aquinas's contribution to a spiritual theology of silence. In addition, this work offers a more solid foundation for a mystical interpretation of Thomas's final act. I do not pretend to explain Thomas's personal experience by these texts alone. But if my work is compelling, it not only offers a *fourth* argument in favor of a mystical understanding of Aquinas's final silence but also allows this last, spiritual "word" of the Angelic Doctor to speak to students and admirers alike.

Silence Is Not a Formal Theme of Thomas's Moral or Spiritual Doctrine

Turning to the systematic theology of Aquinas in search of an elaborate doctrine on silence, the spiritual enthusiast is quickly disappointed. Silence is not conceptualized as a formal theme of his dogmatic or moral teaching, with no specific question or article devoted to it, and the term itself appears rarely in the *Summa theologiae*.

In the *prima pars*, Thomas does compare the procession of the Eternal Word to the formation of an interior "word of the heart" (*verbum cordis*), which was not expressed "out loud" until the Incarnation.²⁷ This metaphor, linking the interior formation of the human word to the procession of the Word in God, suggests a promising analogue for man's spiritual silence in the very mystery of the Trinity. However, Aquinas does not pursue this reflection and silence is never formalized as an explicit theme in Aquinas's theology of the Godhead.

²⁵ Interestingly, Kwasniewski adopts a similar thesis from the opposite angle: Thomas's silence, he thinks, provides the interpretive key to his writings. Here, I argue that Thomas's writings help to interpret his silence.

²⁶ Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 28. Emery, in a subtler way, suggests that Thomas himself had an ineffable experience of the indwelling God about which he had written (*Trinitarian Theology*, 395). I develop this point below.

²⁷ See: Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 27, a. 1, ad 2; *Super Matt* 1, lec. 4, no. 112, and *Super Heb* 1, lec. 1 and lec. 3. Aquinas describes three stages of human communication—conception in the heart, words formed into speech, and the written word—in *In I sent.*, d. 27, q. 2, a. 1 (cited by Kwasniewski, "Golden Straw," 70).

In Aquinas's presentation of the moral life in the *secunda pars*, silence does not appear as a positive virtue where we might expect, neither as a fruit of charity alongside peace, nor in the domain of justice as an act of discretion, nor among the external acts of religion as a form of reverence, nor as an act of fortitude alongside patience or an act of temperance such as modesty of speech or humility. While certain types of immoral speech are denounced among the various vices (blasphemy, lying, boasting, etc.), one form of silence, taciturnity, is also identified as a vice, the fruit of harbored anger.²⁸

Elsewhere, it is the spoken word, not silence, that Thomas often highlights as an integral part of the Christian life. Vocal prayer is useful for encouraging other members of the assembly and for exciting one's own interior devotion.²⁹ Special charisms of speech are given for the edification of the Church, such as prophecy or the gift of tongues.³⁰ Preaching and teaching are noble services of the active consecrated life.³¹ And finally, Christ himself did not choose a solitary life of silence, but rather to "converse with men" so as to manifest divine truths through his example and teaching.³²

Silence Was a Language Familiar to Thomas the "Mystic"

This brief survey of the *Summa* might compel us to conclude that Saint Thomas does not accord any positive place to silence in the spiritual life. Moreover, the composed prayers of Aquinas which have survived contain no expansive imagery of silence or solitude.³³ On the contrary, the saint prays for eloquence in teaching (*Prayer Before Study*) and exhorts his own tongue to "sing the Savior's glory" (*Pange lingua*).

Yet, to anyone familiar with the life of Aquinas, something here seems missing. The rather prosaic picture of silence which emerges from a cursory study of his *Summa* and written prayers contrasts starkly with what we

²⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 48, a. 4.

²⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 12. However, Aquinas acknowledges here that vocal prayer is unnecessary when "the mind is sufficiently prepared for devotion without recourse to such signs" and that devout persons often speak to God in the "heart." Thomas elsewhere comments the "inexpressible groanings" of the Spirit (*Super Rom* 8, lec. 5) and describes prayer as a "cry from within" the heart (*Super Psalmos* 33).

³⁰ *ST* II-II, qq. 171–77.

³¹ *ST* II-II, q. 181.

³² *ST* III, q. 40

³³ Below I will return to two prayers which refer to an ascetic sort of silencing the senses as a form of modesty (*Prayer for Acquiring Virtue*) and of silencing the passions (*Long Prayer after Communion*).

know about Aquinas's own personal life and demeanor: he regularly avoided conversation and social encounters, preferring private prayer, study, and solitary walks.³⁴ His quiet reserve earned him the nickname "dumb ox" from his fellow university students.³⁵ In reality, Aquinas's exterior silence was the fruit of a rich intellectual and mystical life. It is amply attested that Thomas was frequently "caught up in the things of heaven."³⁶ His ardent devotion for Holy Mass, while expressed in splendid hymns and prayers, often moved him to silent ecstasies and holy tears such that he had to be roused in order to continue.³⁷ I have already noted Reginald's testimony of the saint's frequent raptures.³⁸

So, if a spiritual silence seems familiar to Thomas the mystic, can it be entirely absent from the works of Thomas the theologian? Some think not. Murray suggests that a devout form of silence before God, "can be detected between the lines and words of almost everything he wrote," suggesting a few avenues for a spiritual reading of Thomas's silence:

It is a silence, first and last, of attention to the Word of God, the silence of the grace of listening, the silence of a mind continually amazed at the radiant fullness of truth revealed in Christ. It is a silence of willing obedience to the will of the Father, and to the least movement of the workings of the Spirit. It is a silence of love, of Trinitarian communion, a silence of day-to-day intimacy and friendship. . . . It is a silence which, though contemplative of the fact that God is beyond all human thoughts, all human words, is never for a moment disdainful of the humble words we use when we try to speak of God. It is the silence of a mind utterly at rest in the contemplation of the truth, and yet ever restless in its search for deeper understanding. . . . It is the silence of a man, living for years in the midst of the ordinary squabbles and conflicts of [academia], who was yet able to be somehow at ease, and to live a quite extraordinary interior life.³⁹

³⁴ Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas*, 261–63.

³⁵ Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas*, 209.

³⁶ *Ystoria sancti Thomae de Aquino*, 203 (cited by Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 17; see also Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas*, 262).

³⁷ Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas*, 264; Forte, *Il Silenzio*, 23; Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 27.

³⁸ See above, note 4.

³⁹ Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 29.

Spiritual Senses of Silence from the Life and Writings of Aquinas

If Aquinas does not *formalize* silence as a particular theme of his moral and spiritual doctrine, a little digging into his life and writings reveals the sort of appreciation for silence which we would expect from a theologian and man of prayer.⁴⁰ His commentary on a verse from Jeremiah, “because the Lord our God has reduced us to silence” (Vulgate Jer 8:14), indicates different types of silence:

Notice that there are different kinds of silence [*nota quod multiplex est silentium*]. The silence of stupor, “Silence fell upon every place” (Amos 8:3); the silence of security, “And the work of justice is peace, and the cult of justice is silence [*cultus justitiae silentium*]” (Isa 32:17); the silence of longanimity, “It is good to await in silence the salvation of God [*bonum praestolari cum silentio*]” (Lam 3:26); and the silence of a restful heart [*silentium quietis cordis*].⁴¹

Here, Thomas offers a few examples of “spiritual silence,” that is, positive theological acts of man before God: a silence of awe before some display of divine power, a silence of peace and security, a silence of hope, awaiting the fulfillment of divine promises, and a silence of the heart. While this list need not be considered exhaustive, it is enough to invite further study.

Word searches in the “index thomisticus” yielded 193 cases of *silentium* (and conjugated forms) in 158 places and 872 cases of *quies* in 740 places. Of these occurrences, I retained only those most relevant to this theme. In addition, I examined Thomas’s commentaries on many verses of the Bible describing the silence of the believer before God. From this basis, I propose here a synthesis of four main types of *spiritual silence* in the writings of Aquinas.

*The Silence of Reverence*⁴²

A prominent feature of Thomas’s mysticism is his acceptance of divine

⁴⁰ Bernard Gui, *The Life of St Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents* (London: Longmans, 1959), 36: “In Thomas the habit of prayer was extraordinarily developed” (quoted by Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 11).

⁴¹ *Super Jer* 8, lec. 7, no. 222.

⁴² The phrase is Pieper’s: “Man, in his philosophical inquiry, is faced again and again with the experience that reality is unfathomable, and Being is a mystery—an experience, it is true, which urges him not so much to communication as to silence. But it would not be the silence of resignation and still less of despair. It would be the *silence of reverence*” (*Silence of St. Thomas*, 110).

mystery.⁴³ The Angelic Doctor does not hesitate to acknowledge the limits of our capacity to know God: “This is what is ultimate in the human knowledge of God: to know that we do not know God.”⁴⁴ Thomas often underlines our ignorance of God, despite the gift of divine revelation: “Job rightly names it [i.e., our knowledge of God] a drop.” Again: “At the end of our knowledge, God is ultimately known as unknown.”⁴⁵ Some authors consider the incomplete state in which Thomas left the *Summa* to be an enduring monument to the inadequacy of human reason before the mystery of God.⁴⁶

However, Thomas’s apophatism should not be reduced to a negative appraisal of our capacities to know God. Rather, Aquinas presents our awareness of God’s transcendence as a positive act of reverence:

We may speak of God in two ways. First, with regard to His essence; and thus, since He is incomprehensible and ineffable, He is above all praise. In this respect we owe Him reverence and the honor of latria; wherefore Ps 65:2 is rendered by Jerome in his Psalter, “Silence is praise to Thee, O God.”⁴⁷

An insatiable seeker of truth like Thomas fittingly defends the legitimacy of rational inquiry about divine realities but stipulates that theology should be enveloped by a reverent silence:

God is honored by silence, not because we may say or know nothing about him, but because, no matter what we say or learn about God, we are told that we will never be able to comprehend him: “However much you may glorify the Lord, He will always be still greater” (Sir 43:22).⁴⁸

The objection answered here cites Dionysius, “Giving honor to the

⁴³ Affirmation from a public lecture by Murray at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas, Rome, on February 21, 2017, echoing the title of his 2013 volume, “Aquinas at Prayer.”

⁴⁴ *De veritate*, q. 18, a. 2 ad 5 (cited by Pieper, *Silence of St. Thomas*, 64).

⁴⁵ See: *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] IV, ch. 1; *ST* I, q. 13, a. 10, ad 5; *In Boethius de Trinitate*, q. 1, a. 2, ad 1 (all texts cited by Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 25, and February 21, 2017, lecture).

⁴⁶ See Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 158 (cited by Kwasniewski, “Golden Straw,” 67–68).

⁴⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 91, a. 1, ad 1.

⁴⁸ *In Boethius de Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 6.

mystery, which is above us, by silence" (*Celestial Hierarchy* 15.9), and Scripture, "Silence itself is your praise" (Ps 65:2).

It is striking that Saint Thomas welcomes the respectful silence before God urged by Scripture and the Fathers *without* resigning himself to total apophatism. Until the final months of his life, Aquinas never ceased to inquire into the nature and revealed mysteries of God.⁴⁹ At times, we see Aquinas respectfully halt a line of theological inquiry before divine things not revealed.⁵⁰ And yet such reverent silence does not stop his quest for theological truths. A telling example is found in the saint's personal prayer before study. He begins by invoking the Divine Word as the "Ineffable Creator" but goes on to praise his wonderful works and attributes, humbly asking for the graces needed for theological study and teaching.⁵¹ Similarly, before a lengthy treatment of the reasons for the Incarnation, Aquinas reflects: "If we contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation earnestly and reverently, we find there such a depth of wisdom that our human knowledge is overwhelmed by it. . . . That is why to all those who consider things reverently, the reasons for this mystery appear even more marvelous."⁵² Pieper sees in this capacity to manifest a sort of hushed wonder before divine realities a testament to "the greatness of St. Thomas as a philosophical and theological thinker."⁵³

In his scriptural commentaries, Aquinas observes a reverent silence in persons who come into close contact with the mysteries of God. Job, for example, is moved to "cover his mouth" before God's awesome power (see Job 40:3–5): "All these things show the greatness of divine wisdom and might which produce such marvelous effects. We understand that after Job had heard so many wonderful things . . . he was stunned and silent."⁵⁴ In Saint Joseph, too, Thomas sees a similar reverent silence. Joseph's decision "to divorce Mary quietly" was motivated not by the suspicion of adultery but by a respectful silence before an evident divine intervention: "And wondering at what had happened, he covered in silence that mystery which

⁴⁹ See *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 10: "When someone has a will ready to believe, he loves the truth believed, ponders over it and applies himself to that which is believed, looking to find reasons for this truth."

⁵⁰ See, for example, *ST* I, q. 20, a. 4, ad 3. After reporting different opinions on why the Lord loved Peter or John, Thomas drops the question: "It would be presumptuous to pass judgment on what belongs to God."

⁵¹ See "Prayer Before Study," in *The Aquinas Prayer Book*, ed. R. Anderson and J. Moser (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 2000).

⁵² *SCG* IV, ch. 54 (cited by Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 26).

⁵³ Pieper, *Guide to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 159.

⁵⁴ *Super Iob* 39.

he could not explain.”⁵⁵ Finally, the disciples’ silence before an act of Jesus which they did not understand (see John 4:27) was not simply due to their ignorance, but rather motivated by reverence and holy fear: “The disciples’ reverence for Christ was shown by their silence. For we show our reverence for God by not presuming to discuss his affairs.”⁵⁶

In this context of reverent silence, it seems fitting to discuss Thomas’s reception of Dionysius’s doctrine of noetic and mystical silence. For Dionysius, all the perfections we attribute to God fall short of his transcendent mystery.⁵⁷ In addition, loving union with God also takes place in a mystical “silence” or “darkness” of the mind.⁵⁸ For Dionysius, we honor “the ineffable realities” of God by observing “a chaste silence.”⁵⁹ Aquinas confirms: we revere the ineffable things of God by keeping silence and not scrutinizing them, “and this comes from the chastity and holiness of the mind which does not push beyond its proper limits.”⁶⁰ Thus, Thomas does welcome, to some degree, Dionysius’s noetic silence before God, but only considers the divine essence itself to be ineffable.⁶¹

However, Aquinas does not accept Dionysius’s call to silence without qualification.⁶² For Thomas, revealed truths come to the aide of our limited, natural intelligence, such that where the human intellect can say no more, the Word of God continues to speak: it is “only praise unenlightened by divine revelation that falls silent.”⁶³ For Aquinas, the mysteries of God do not stifle but rather invite praise, study, and preaching. Whereas for Dionysius, mystical union plunges the believer into a “dark cloud” beyond all knowing, Aquinas’s mystic gazes upon God “through Scripture, tradition, and creation, and not without them.”⁶⁴

⁵⁵ *Super Matt* 1, lec. 4, no. 117, and *Catena aurea super Matt* 1, lec. 10.

⁵⁶ See *Super Ioan* 4, lec. 3, no. 623.

⁵⁷ Jordan Aumann, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 53.

⁵⁸ Aumann, *Christian Spirituality*, 52.

⁵⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 1.3.589B, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987), 50.

⁶⁰ Aquinas, *In de divinis nominibus*, ch. 1, lec. 2, no. 44.

⁶¹ Aquinas, *In de divinis nominibus*, ch. 13, lec. 3, no. 993: “There cannot be a simple name or composite speech expressing God as he is in himself.” See also ch. 11, lec. 2, no. 895.

⁶² Bernard Blankenhorn, *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 438.

⁶³ Blankenhorn, *Mystery of Union with God*, 333.

⁶⁴ Blankenhorn, *Mystery of Union with God*, 461.

Silence of Recollection and Prayer

A second form of spiritual silence discussed by Saint Thomas is the silence of recollection which disposes to prayer. For Aquinas, prayer is above all an “ascent of the mind toward God,” a surrendering and submission of the intellect prompted “by the will of charity.”⁶⁵ This elevation of the mind requires a certain freedom from interior and exterior agitation. In his “Longer Prayer after Communion,” Thomas asks that the Eucharist “perfectly quiet my passions, physical and spiritual.”⁶⁶ A favorite psalm verse of Thomas, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 45:10), inspires him to discuss a peace that is ordered to contemplation.⁶⁷ Elsewhere, this verse speaks to Thomas of a certain “rest or stillness of the mind” as one of four conditions required to experience the indwelling of God in the soul.⁶⁸ Explaining the superiority of the contemplative life over the active life, Aquinas explains that contemplation consists “in a sort of rest or quiet,” citing again the same psalm.⁶⁹

Other texts further explore this stillness of the mind that disposes to prayer. Thomas thinks that silent petitions are more effective than spoken ones: “Mystically, we may understand that one more efficaciously calls upon Christ silently than by the exterior voice alone: ‘In silence and hope will be your strength’ (Isa 30:15).” However, the “quiet” in question here is more than just physical solitude or the absence of speech. In order to see God, explains the saint, “one must take the time to look, for spiritual things cannot be seen if one is absorbed by earthly things: ‘Take time and see that the Lord is sweet’ (Ps 34:8).”⁷⁰ “Christ is not easily found,” Aquinas clarifies, “in the midst of men, or in the whirlwind of temporal cares; rather, he is found in spiritual seclusion: ‘I will lead her into the wilderness, and there I will speak to her heart’ (Hos 2:14); ‘Words of wisdom are heard in silence’ (Eccl 9:17).”⁷¹ Thomas interprets Jesus’s precept to “retire into your room and shut the door” (Matt 6:6) as an invitation to silent, interior

⁶⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 1, and a. 3.

⁶⁶ *Aquinas Prayer Book*, 83.

⁶⁷ *Super Psalmos* 45, no. 8.

⁶⁸ *Super Ioan* 1, lec. 15, no. 293.

⁶⁹ *ST II-II*, q. 182, a. 1. However, Thomas is careful to not oppose the two states of life. For Aquinas, the active life disposes to the contemplative life by rightly ordering the passions according to charity, and the contemplative life, in turn, nourishes works of the active life such as preaching. The sort of exterior silence observed by contemplative religious, evidently, is incongruous with active ministries (*ST II-II*, q. 185, a. 8).

⁷⁰ *Super Ioan* 14, lec. 6, no. 1941.

⁷¹ *Super Ioan* 5, lec. 2, no. 728.

prayer: “By the chamber can be understood the secret interior of the heart . . . [and] the ‘door’ is the mouth: ‘Make doors and bars to your mouth’ (Sir 28:28) as though he said, pray silently.” Private prayer is generally silent and can be hindered by the presence of others.⁷² Silent prayer is a strong act of faith, manifesting our trust that God knows our hearts before express petitions. While Aquinas recognizes that “words help to raise the heart up to God,” personal prayer tends to a certain sobriety favored by silence: “In private prayer, when the affections are not excited to devotion by words, then no words need be uttered and the affections should be shut up. For, just as heat is diminished by evaporation, so are affections emptied out by words . . . and [it is helpful] to shut out the exterior senses and imagination.”⁷³

The silence of recollection, then, is a voluntary effort of interiority, a sort of quieting of the sensible faculties, ordered to the contemplation and love of God, as we see in Thomas’s own prayer: “restrain my tongue, . . . keep my eyes from wandering glances, shelter my ears from noise, lower my gaze in humility, lift my mind to thoughts of heaven, above all that will pass away” in order to “love you and you alone.”⁷⁴

Silence of Rest and Union

Among the forms of spiritual silence listed above, Thomas included “the rest of the heart” (*silentium quietis cordis*). Aquinas calls “enjoyment” the delight and fulfillment experienced when we attain our true good and the will can “rest” in its desired end.⁷⁵ God is supremely blessed, because the divine will rests in the possession and enjoyment of the most perfect good, the contemplation of himself.⁷⁶ For the human person, our appetite will only find its full rest in heaven, but saints learn to rest in God, as the object of their desires, already here below.⁷⁷ Union with divine things is attained not only by knowing them with the mind but also by loving them with the heart.⁷⁸ The will cannot fully rest in earthly goods or works but only in

⁷² *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 2, nos. 575–76.

⁷³ *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 2, nos. 582 and 578. See also *ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 12 (see note 29 above for more on this passage in *ST*).

⁷⁴ From “To Acquire the Virtues,” *Aquinas Prayer Book*, 37.

⁷⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 11, a. 1; a. 3; q. 12, a. 2, ad 3.

⁷⁶ *ST* I, q. 26, a. 2, ad 2.

⁷⁷ *In I sent.*, d. 1, q. 4, a. 1, ad 5. See also *ST* I, q. 12, a. 7, ad 1: “The blessed possess these three things in God: because they see Him, and in seeing Him, they possess Him as present, having the power to see Him always, and possessing Him, they enjoy him as the ultimate fulfillment of desire.”

⁷⁸ Aquinas, *In de divinis nominibus*, ch. 2, lec. 4, no. 191.

God himself, and this rest (*quies in Deo*) is experienced on earth primarily in prayer.⁷⁹ Thus, in the rest of contemplation (*quiete contemplationis*) we have a foretaste of the spiritual rest of the heart that we will experience in heaven (*quiete futurae gloriae*).⁸⁰

Elsewhere, Thomas explains that the indwelling presence of divine persons in the soul is the underlying source of this spiritual rest and enjoyment. By the grace of indwelling, the divine persons give themselves to the believer so that they may be known and loved, possessed and enjoyed.⁸¹ Writing on this enjoyment of the indwelling God, Emery speculates that this sort of experience is the likely source of Thomas's final silence: "How can one fail to imagine that it was this which St Thomas experienced in December 1273 when he ceased to write, leaving the *Summa* unfinished?" Emery points to the "deep spiritual experiences" of Aquinas's last year as "evidence" that "Thomas had come to the same reality of which he had spoken," and that theological speech became insufficient to express the mystery he had encountered. In a delightful commentary on Jesus's invitation to the first disciples to "come and see" (John 1:38–39), Aquinas explains that "the dwelling of God, whether of glory or of grace, cannot be known except by experience; for it cannot be explained by words."⁸² Some graced experience, then, can bring the believer to a restful communion with the indwelling God, but this experience, for Aquinas, remains ineffable.⁸³ Saint John of the Cross confirms that "the most appropriate language for persons receiving such favors" is silence.⁸⁴

Hence, the spiritual silence "of the heart" is the rest of the soul in God, which can be experienced already in prayer until its perfection in eternal beatitude.

⁷⁹ *In II sent.*, d. 15, q. 3, a. 3.

⁸⁰ *Super Ioan* 11, lec. 3, no. 1495. See also *Super Rom* 13, lec. 3 In *ST* I-II, q. 4, a. 3, Thomas describes eternal life in terms of three principal acts: seeing, embracing, and enjoying, i.e., resting in the Beloved.

⁸¹ *ST* I, q. 43, a. 3. On the divine indwelling as object of fruition, see Antonio Royo Marín, *The Theology of Christian Perfection* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 51.

⁸² *Super Ion* 1, lec. 39, no. 292 (cited by Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 395). Tugwell makes a similar claim, proposing that Thomas had a strong experience of rapture about which he had written (*Albert and Thomas*, 267).

⁸³ It seems that for Thomas the experience of the indwelling divine persons is ineffable, because the experiential knowledge or awareness of their presence is not a conceptual kind of knowledge; see Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 394.

⁸⁴ See *The Living Flame of Love*, stanza 2, no. 21, as quoted by Kwasniewski, "Golden Straw," 69.

Silence of Modesty and Humility

A fourth type of spiritual silence, which may also shed light upon Thomas's last days, is the silence of modesty and humility. In his prologue to the study of the particular virtues related to modesty,⁸⁵ Thomas announces a question on "modesty as affecting words and deeds" but never, in fact, returns to the subject. We do have a request for modesty in the saint's prayer "For Acquiring Virtue": "Grant that I may always observe modesty in the way I dress, the way I walk, and the gestures I use, restrain my tongue from frivolous talk." Modesty includes the refusal to disclose or unveil what should remain hidden, protecting the intimate dignity of the person from intemperance, curiosity, or vulgarization.⁸⁶

In the life of Saint Thomas, the virtue of modesty takes the form of a self-effacing sobriety in his theological work and a noble privacy about his own spiritual life. Scholars have noted the impersonal character of Aquinas's scholastic writing "His style is measured, austere, and impersonal, . . . decidedly reserved, plain-spoken, and ontological."⁸⁷ Aquinas almost never refers to himself or his own experience in his formal writing. According to his biographers, Saint Thomas was no stranger to such mystical phenomena as private revelations, divine locutions, visitations from the saints, holy tears, prophecy, miracles, and levitation⁸⁸ and yet showed great reserve when asked about such favors.⁸⁹ Yves Congar sees in Thomas's self-effacement "an unprecedented example of purity, of priestly detachment and virginity." This silence of modesty is the mark of a true servant: "The purity of his service of truth shines out from the fact that he scrupulously refrained from intruding himself into what he had decided to serve. . . . In this service he was pure by aiming to become, as far as possible, a pure instrument."⁹⁰

Occasionally, Aquinas's systematic and scriptural works contain affirmations about the spiritual life which seem to be based, at least in part, on

⁸⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 161, prol.

⁸⁶ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§2521–22.

⁸⁷ Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 6 (similar remarks can be found on 15–17).

⁸⁸ Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, 18. Murray provides detailed references to Tocco's biography for each phenomenon named here.

⁸⁹ Murray shares an anecdote of Reginald pestering Thomas until he finally admitted to having been visited and instructed on one occasion by Saints Peter and Paul (*Aquinas at Prayer*, 98). According to Tugwell, Thomas confided to Reginald, under a promise of secrecy, that he had often received theological insights from God in prayer (*Albert and Thomas*, 342).

⁹⁰ Yves Congar, "St. Thomas: Servant of the Truth," in *Faith and Spiritual Life*, trans. A. Manson and L. C. Sheppard (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 67–85, at 77 (as cited by Kwasniewski, "Golden Straw," 77).

his own personal experience. This is pure speculation, but the surety with which Thomas speaks about certain favors suggests some first-hand knowledge. When discussing the Annunciation, for example, Aquinas speaks with an authority about supernatural visions that would seem implausible without some personal experience.⁹¹ He speaks with similar authority when describing graces of rapture.⁹² According to contemporaries of the saint such as William of Tocco, Thomas had experienced both visions and rapture. Hence, it seems justified to hear something of Aquinas's own silence of modesty in his praise of Saint Paul's discretion:

Although he could have done so, the Apostle did not wish to say about himself certain things which went beyond his life and doctrine. Consequently, I refrain, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me, i.e., in my outward conduct, or hears from me, i.e., from the doctrine of my preaching . . . and instruction, because they might perhaps think me immortal or an angel: "A man of understanding remains silent" (Prov 11:12).⁹³

The silence of modesty also takes the form of humility.⁹⁴ It is expressed at times by a quiet surrender to whatever the believer recognizes as coming from God. Meditating upon Christ's silence during the Passion, Aquinas contemplates Christ's humble submission to the divine will through suffering: "Jesus, because he chose to, did not give an answer, so that he might show that he was unwilling to overwhelm by words and to make excuses, since he had come to suffer. When Christ was silent, he was silent like a lamb." Jesus's silence before Pilate or Caiaphas is, then, a silence of obedience and humility before God. Silence manifests Christ's meekness.⁹⁵ Aquinas observes a silence of humility similar to Jesus's in the attitude of the suffering believer before God. Thomas uses the verses "It is good to await in silence the salvation of our God. . . . He will be seated alone and in silence" (Lam 3:26, 28) to praise patient suffering and waiting without complaint. "Seated alone" manifests a depth of contemplation even in the midst of turmoil, while "in silence" shows that one awaits the gifts of God

⁹¹ *ST* III, q. 30, a. 3, ad 3.

⁹² *ST* II-II, q. 175, aa. 1–2.

⁹³ *Super I Cor* 12, lec. 2, no. 469.

⁹⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 161, prol.: "We must consider next the species of modesty: first, humility, then . . ."

⁹⁵ *Super Ioan* 19, lec. 2, no. 2391. See also: *Compendium theologiae* I, ch. 227; *Super Psalmos* 38, no. 7; *Super Matt* 26, lec. 7, no. 2280; ch. *Super Matt* 27, lec. 1, no. 2328; and *Super Heb* 12, lec. 1, no. 667.

with humility.⁹⁶ If Aquinas's own last days were marked by some illness or physical breakdown, this silence of humility in suffering is highly suggestive—a saint does not simply endure such trials but welcomes them in a spirit of surrender to God.⁹⁷

Conclusion: The Message of Aquinas's Final Silence

So, what has this short study accomplished? First, I began by summarizing the scholarly debate over the interpretation of Saint Thomas's final silence, making a case for a mystical meaning of the event: Upon the impact of a powerful, supernatural experience, the saint freely chose to abandon his theological work and to embrace silence until his death. I contributed a new argument in favor of this mystical interpretation: The saint's act is fully coherent with his own spiritual doctrine of silence as a profound theological attitude of the believer before God.

Second, I demonstrated that, even though the theme is not formalized as such in his systematic treatment of the moral life, Aquinas does, in fact, have a rich spiritual theology of silence. Inspired by the insights of two scholars who point to the saint's own teaching as a possible avenue for understanding his final silence (Murray and Emery), I gathered together Thomas's doctrine on the subject. From this work emerged four types of "spiritual silence," elevating the debate from a physical impediment⁹⁸ or simple renunciation to a theological act expressive of faith, hope, and charity.

Third, Aquinas's teaching on silence should prove valuable for spiritual theology, both at the practical level, providing attractive depth to ascetical and mystical silence, and at the speculative level, offering a framework for the theologian to compare and appreciate the silence of other saints. Each of the four silences are worthy of imitation and can be admired in any number of spiritual masters.

Finally, what Thomas wrote about silence in the context of our relationship to God clarifies why he freely chose to stop his own theological labor. The work of Thomas the theologian enlightens the life of Thomas the mystic, as it well should. Thus, the "final silence" of Saint Thomas should

⁹⁶ *Super Lam* 3, lecs. 9–10, nos. 108–10.

⁹⁷ Kwasniewski writes: "If this is right [i.e., that Aquinas was simply no longer capable of such work], Thomas was burdened with a cross to which he had to resign himself in humility and faith" ("Golden Straw," 68).

⁹⁸ As stated above, I do not deny that some physical illness or fatigue could have contributed to the saint's final silence (see the "mixed" position), but I affirm that this physical substrate did not remove Thomas's ability to think, speak, or engage in theological reflection.

be understood as a *silence of reverence*, a religious respect and deference before the awesome mystery of God greater than what we can think or say about it; a *silence of recollection*, a quieting of the sensible faculties and stillness of the mind as the soul is drawn to the interior presence of God; a *silence of rest*, the rest of the will in God, tasted in passing graces and cleaved to in prayer, while eagerly awaiting the final rest to come in heaven; a *silence of modesty and humility*, as the saint declined to share what he had seen and humbly surrendered himself to God through the new weakness which had befallen him.

The fact that Aquinas's labor as theologian and preacher ended in silence possesses a unique eloquence all its own: "In St. Thomas, a Dominican vowed to communicate to others the fruits of his contemplation, we see language consummated in adoring silence."⁹⁹ Without wishing to profane Thomas's final "word" with commentary, my work has sought to let it "speak." By this his final *lectio*, the Angelic Doctor offers a lasting testament to the transcendence of God, "silence itself is your praise" (Ps 65:2), and to the ultimate goal of the theologian, nothing less than the vision of and union with the Object of his studies: "God inspired him to teach us in a final way: after teaching through his extraordinary writings, in the end he taught us also what the true goal of these writings is, namely, union with God."¹⁰⁰ This mystical end of theological labor finds an echo in the prayers of Aquinas: *Nil nisi te, Domine. . . Oro fiat illud, quod tam sitio. . . Te per cuius amore studui, vigilavi et laboravi.*¹⁰¹ N.V

⁹⁹ John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 83 (as quoted by Kwasniewski, "Golden Straw," 67).

¹⁰⁰ Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, *Knowing the Love of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 4 (as cited by Kwasniewski, "Golden Straw," 75).

¹⁰¹ "Nothing but you, Lord. . . May it become reality, that for which I am so thirsty. . . You, for love of whom I studied, kept vigil, and toiled" (this is my own compilation of excerpts from Aquinas' prayers: the reported reply to an apparition of the Lord, *Adoro Te Devote*, and prayer before the Viaticum, respectively).