

***Tolle, Lege*: Commencement Address at the Dominican House of Studies, May 13, 2022**

MICHAEL ROOT
Catholic University of America
Washington, DC

Tolle, lege. Tolle, lege. “Take up, read.” Few such simple words have had such a crucial impact on the history of Christian theology. In the summer of 386, Augustine of Hippo was a torn man. He had come to believe the Gospel, but he could not bring himself to break with sinful habits, habits so ingrained he called them “necessities.” His soul was torn between two wills within him, he said, each pointing in a different direction. Nothing seemed able to be able to break the interior logjam. He says that he willed that he would will the good, but not with a complete will, and so he remained paralyzed. After hearing a friend and mentor describe the conversion of Victorinus, a famous Roman teacher of rhetoric, and another friend speak of the monastic retreat of St. Anthony, the spiritual conflict within Augustine reached a fever pitch and he retreated to a corner of the garden in the house he was staying at. Suddenly, from over the wall, he heard a child chanting the words *tolle, lege*: “take up, read.” He could not think of any childhood rhyme or chant that involved those words—they must be a sign from God. So, he rushed over to where a copy of St. Paul’s letters was lying, opened it, and read at random. His eye fell on Romans 13:13: “Let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.” As he himself puts in his *Confessions*: “No further wished I to read, nor was there need to do so. Instantly, in truth, at the end of this sentence, as if before a peaceful light streaming into my heart, all the dark shadows of doubt fled away” (8.12.29).

You who are graduating are now coming to the end of a process that has involved a great deal of taking up and reading. I trust that the taking up and reading has not been to cure you of reveling and drunkenness, not to mention the rest of St. Paul's list, but rather to form you, most immediately within the discipline of theology and for many of you, within the vocation of the priesthood and the Dominican Order. Some of what you have taken up and read has, I hope, been inspiring. I hope that at least on occasion you felt as if a peaceful light was streaming into your hearts. Some of what you read, I would guess, you found mind-numbingly boring. But it is all part of the process.

Of course you did more than just take up and read. You thought about what you were reading. You compared it with other things you had read. You related it to your own experience. You discussed it with other students. You wrote about it in papers and on exams. The medieval university master had three tasks: *legere, disputare, praedicare*—read, dispute, and (in this context) present. You have done much the same thing—reading, arguing, presenting.

Reading with this kind of attention does not leave us unaffected. We do not just learn new information; we come to inhabit a different world, with a different landscape and a different population. It makes a difference whether one's effective world includes only places like Washington, New York, and Elizabeth, New Jersey, or also Jerusalem, the old Jerusalem and the new Jerusalem, the North Africa of Augustine, and the Paris of Thomas Aquinas. The person whose imaginative world is mostly populated by characters from *Friends* and *Game of Thrones* will be a different sort of person from the one whose imaginative world includes Abraham, David, St. Paul, Dominic, and Alyosha Karamazov. It is as much an exaggeration to say you are what you read as to say you are what you eat. But at least for some of us (and if you are graduating from Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception, you are probably in this group), at least some of what we read changes not only what we think, but who we are. Granted, I am a bookish nerd, but I think I could write my autobiography in terms of a small number of books I read at certain decisive points in my life: Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*, Luther's *On the Freedom of the Christian*, the treatise on grace in Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*, the writings of my teachers in graduate school. Just as providence drew Augustine to that passage in Romans at the precise moment when it would provide the salutary splash of cold but cleansing water he needed, so providence has placed certain books in my way at certain important times, and that is probably true for many of you also.

There is an old debate within Catholic theology and between Catholic

and Protestant theology on whether theology is a contemplative or a practical discipline. Good arguments can be made for both perspectives. In the Lutheran tradition within which I worked for many years, the standard argument was that theology is a practical discipline: its primary task is to guide the evangelical preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. That answer is not simply wrong. Theology is called to help in the enterprise of guiding the Church's preaching and sacraments (though in the end, that task, thank goodness, is in the hands of bishops, not theologians). But even as a Lutheran, I argued against a merely practical understanding of theology. If I were stranded on a desert island and, by chance, a box of books was stranded with me, and if, even better, it included works of Aquinas and, to make matters a bit more interesting, works of John Duns Scotus (if I may mention his name here), I would study them, try to think along with them, take notes on the laptop that washed ashore with me. I would not do it just to occupy my time or just because that is the sort of thing I like doing. I would do it because thinking about God, reading about the Gospel, its meanings and its implications, is an inherently good thing to do. It is a praise of God with the mind and an intellectual form of contemplation, not the highest contemplation, not infused contemplation, but contemplation nonetheless. Contemplation is an end in itself, but it is also formative, it moves we who are pilgrims, *viatores*, closer to our end. When one takes up and reads under the influence of grace, in the context of the theological virtues, one grows in conformity to Christ.

What all this means is that I cannot say some things that are often said in commencement addresses. I cannot say that what you have been doing for the last years you are now to leave behind and, with this training completed, start something quite new. It cannot quite be like the old elementary school vacation-time chant: "no more pencils, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks." Not just because no teacher on this faculty ever bestowed on a student what might be called a "dirty look," but because beyond graduation, you will still need to take up and read, because a certain amount of taking up and reading is central to the calling you have been working toward. This need is especially pertinent to the charism of the Dominicans, the Order of Preachers. Taking up and reading in the Dominican tradition are at the service of preaching, of sharing and proclaiming what has been taken up and read. In question 188 of the *secunda secundae* of the *Summa*, Aquinas addresses the different sorts of religious life: active orders, orders oriented to preaching or hearing confessions, contemplative orders, and even (rather odd to our ears) military orders. In article 6 of the question, he asks whether an order devoted to the contemplative life is better than an order devoted to

the active life. In general, he affirms the superiority of the contemplative life. But, as so often in Aquinas, important qualifications follow. Contemplation is higher than external works, such as almsgiving or receiving guests. But there is another kind of activity, activity that arises from the “fullness of contemplation, such as teaching and preaching.” This work, he says, “is more excellent than simple contemplation. For even as it is greater to enlighten than merely to shine—*maius est illuminare quam lucere solum*—so it is better to give to others the fruits of one’s contemplation than merely to contemplate. Thus, the highest place in religious orders is held by those which are directed to preaching and teaching.” Now, the cynic might say that it is no surprise that a member of the Order of Preachers would say this. He ranks the orders, and—surprise, surprise—the vocation of his own order is the highest! He does nuance his answer. For example, external works that end in martyrdom, a possibility for those in military orders, can in some cases take precedence over contemplation. The degree of charity embodied in an act makes a great difference. But, even if we finally want to say comparisons of this sort are of limited usefulness, it is hard to deny Aquinas’s basic point. Simple contemplation has a kind of eschatological priority: it is closest to heaven. My closest friend in college became a Trappist monk. Our teachers tried to persuade him to go to graduate school in biblical studies, but he knew that was not his vocation. I remember one night arguing with him about this, saying he should go to grad school like me, and he finally responded: “Fine, you will know about God and I will know God.” Beyond this eschatological priority, however, for us who are pilgrims, who are on the way, not yet home, contemplating and sharing is a high vocation, whether or not it is the highest. To illumine is indeed better than merely to shine.

We should note, though, just what Aquinas says. He commends activity that proceeds from the fullness of contemplation. I do not think he meant contemplation as something one did at some time in the past, in your graduate program. He meant the ongoing contemplation of Christian truth. The task of preaching in all its forms, of sharing the fruits of contemplation, must be rooted in a continuing engagement with the object of contemplation, Christian truth as presented by the Gospel.

Which brings me to a question of great importance I have so far postponed. Take up and read, but take up and read what? Well, lots of stuff. There certainly is much not worth reading, even material that is truly corrupting. But there is much more that is profitable. But what is necessary; what *must* one take up and read? When Augustine heard the chant *tolle, lege*, he took up the book that he had at hand, the letters of Paul. He sets us an example. One should take up and read many things, but one is never done with

taking up and reading the Bible. The Bible is in a sense inescapable in the theological life. It is present in every Mass; much of it is read in the yearly cycle of the Office of Readings. Theological work is constantly mentioning the Bible. The temptation—though a temptation I am not sure I have always overcome—is to let that wash of bits and pieces of Scripture that is always sloshing around theology suffice for our attention to the Bible, to depend only on our limited vocational attention to Scripture. That was certainly not the attitude of Augustine or Dominic or Aquinas. None of them were, as John Wesley claimed to be, “a man of one book,” the Bible and nothing else. One cannot imagine Aquinas without Aristotle. But there can be no doubt that Aquinas was a man of the Bible, as one can see by reading his scriptural commentaries. A mistake I made when I first studied the *Summa* and other similar Scholastic texts was to skip quickly over the *sed contra*s, which are often biblical quotations. I wanted to move on to the meat of the “I respond.” That is not, I think, the way the Scholastics understood what they were doing. The brief biblical quotations operate something like tent pegs that determine how the tent of theological exposition is then set up in the context of some particular question. The tent can be pitched various ways, some better than others, but the tent pegs are set. Nor are they proof texts taken out of context, but their context is often the total canon of Scripture as interpreted by the Church. To switch metaphors, I have come to see the biblical citations in Scholastic works as forming a network of guide posts pointing the theologian to where the treasure is buried.

When I was in graduate school, many years ago, about when the ice was receding from the last ice age, more traditional modes of reading the Bible were being rediscovered in Protestant theological circles. An important point made by my teachers was that, traditionally, the Bible was not read so that it could be fit into the world we know, but the Bible was the world into which all else we knew was to be fitted. Put so crudely, that is certainly too simple; there was always a back-and-forth between secular knowledge and Scripture, but there was no doubt about who had the last word. There was a fundamental conviction that the world we lived in was the world described in Scripture. As George Lindbeck put it, the Bible absorbed the world, not vice-versa. History begins with creation and ends with the descent of the New Jerusalem, and its decisive axis runs from Abraham’s call to leave the land of his fathers, through Moses, David, and the prophets, to Jesus and the Church. The world spins on *that* axis, anchored by *those* poles. I mentioned earlier the way reading shapes the landscape we live in and people who live there. The Christian life and theological reflection on that life means living and thinking in the landscape and among the people of the Scriptures. For

that, there is no substitute for taking up and reading the Bible, attentively and, in a sense, objectively, that is, not so much with the subjective question of its relation to me and my life, a dangerous question when it is asked too insistently and often, but with the question of what it tells me about the Christian life, the world, and God.

We know nothing about the child who was providentially chanting *tolle, lege* on the other side of that garden wall in Milan over sixteen hundred years ago. Augustine himself says he did not know if the voice was that of a girl or a boy. But the voice still says something we must hear. For the last few years, you who are graduating have been following the lead of that voice and will need to go on following its lead. We must continue to take up and read until that day when reading will be over, the eternal day on which we will simply see. N.V