

“He That Is Spiritual” (1 Cor 2:15): Aquinas, Paul, and the Primacy of Cruciform Wisdom

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Introduction

The word “spiritual” is one that is used a great deal in Christian and other circles but which, for all that, arguably lacks any clear definition or consistent meaning relative to that frequency of use.¹ In short, the word’s popularity is disproportionate to its perspicuity. Assuming such discordance is neither inevitable nor salutary, how might one gain clarity on the grammar of the term as found within the Catholic theological tradition?²

In his commentary on 1 Cor 1–4, Thomas Aquinas, I argue, offers an

¹ Jean-Pierre Torrell is exactly right, therefore when he says: “‘Spirituality’ is one of the vaguest words in contemporary religious language. People think they know what they mean when they use it, but it does not necessarily convey the same meaning to each person who hears it. It is, therefore, useless to use the word without further qualification” (*St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003], 1).

² To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that the only proper use of the word “spiritual” is the theo-grammatical one for which I argue in this article. As Ludwig Wittgenstein makes plain, words may be used in any number of perfectly valid ways that need not necessarily align or be grounded in some universally shared, properly basic sense. I mean, rather, to argue for a theological recovery of St. Paul’s (and St. Thomas’s) epistemic use of the term, one wherein “spiritual” names a Christologically veridical standard for measuring any and all candidate truth claims. I mean to champion, that is, the Pauline use of “spiritual” as shorthand for taking every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor 10:5).

understanding of what it means to be spiritual that is biblically grounded and grammatically rich. Drawing primarily (though not exclusively) from Thomas's engagement with that text, I will show that, for Aquinas, following St. Paul, to be spiritual, firstly, is not to be anti-material, or even indifferent to the material world. Rather, secondly, the recognition of what counts as spiritual comes by way of measuring all that one knows and does against the wisdom of God's revelation in Christ, particularly as displayed on the Cross. Thirdly, and consequently, to be spiritual is always and everywhere to operate cognitively and practically according to *sapientia Christi* and not *sapientia humana*. This indicates both that there is a vitally important distinction between Christic and human wisdom, and that, in cases of their contrariety, the former is always to have epistemic and behavioral primacy for those who are "spiritual." Finally, on the basis of these considerations, I will conclude by suggesting that, for both Paul and Aquinas, the spiritual and the sapiential are ultimately of a piece, but *only* insofar as the sapiential is cruciformly conformed all the way down.³ To be spiritual, that is to say, is, at its absolute center, nothing other than "to have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16).⁴

The Pauline Situation

By way of context, the Corinthians to whom Paul writes, an unruly bunch by all accounts (e.g., 1 Cor 1:11; 5:1–5; 11:18–21), were apparently quite concerned with being perceived as truly wise and, in fact, had divided themselves into factions reflective of their differing opinions as to where true wisdom was to be found (conveniently correlated, it seems, largely with whichever individual it was who had baptized them; 1:12).⁵ Paul

³ I hope it is plain that I offer Thomas's account of Paul's letter not because it is of value simply in virtue of its coming from St. Thomas Aquinas. After all, to talk about Thomas is not yet, properly speaking, to engage in the work of theology (which is talk about God and everything else insofar as it relates to God). I offer this reading of Thomas's account rather because I think it is an especially salutary model for how we too ought to think about what it means to be spiritual.

⁴ Quotations from Scripture come from *The Didache Bible* (RSV), ed. Jeffrey Cole (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017).

⁵ See Aquinas, *Super 1 Cor 1*, lec. 12, no. 20: "There was dissension among the Corinthian believers because those who had been instructed assumed that they had received the better teaching and a better baptism and began to look down on the others." Here and throughout I am using Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Corinthians*, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012). For an extended discussion of the historical and cultural

argues in the opening four chapters of his letter, however, that the Corinthians' pursuit of status with respect to wisdom according to the standards of the world had led them to miss the unifying message of the Gospel, and with it what *truly* counts as real wisdom (1:17–31). Rather than having advanced in wisdom, in fact, the Corinthian believers had succeeded only in becoming “worldly” or “carnal,” having allowed “jealousy and dissension” to arise among themselves, both to the diminishment of their very humanity (1:28) and to the detriment of their attainment and maturation in *genuine* wisdom (1 Cor 3:1–4). For them to change course and succeed in finding the wisdom they desired, says St. Paul, they must abandon “human wisdom” as the counterfeit that it is and seek first and foremost, instead, to become “spiritual” (2:6–16).

But what does it mean to become “spiritual,” and how does spirituality lead to genuine wisdom?

St. Paul's divinely inspired answer to these questions—ultimately, that they should deferentially seek wisdom by embodying cruciform love as incorporate members of the risen Lord's body—is sufficient unto itself, of course. But because St. Thomas Aquinas's own meditations on Paul's instructions to the Corinthian believers are particularly helpful in both making plain and unpacking what is given in the inspired text (as all good theology should do), we will now turn to the Angelic Doctor's Pauline reflections. Fortunately, as Aquinas engages with the above questions and St. Paul's account of spirituality in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, he tracks quite closely with the apostle's own language. It must be acknowledged that, occasionally in his biblical commentaries, Thomas takes things in a direction not obviously in mind or implied by the biblical authors whose work he engages (which is *not*, it should be noted, to accuse him of eisegesis).⁶ But here his exegesis is tight. Given our current limitations

context of the Corinthian situation, particularly as it relates to the Corinthians' quest for status, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1–22, esp. 12–16. See also James B. Prothro, *The Apostle Paul and His Letters: An Introduction*, Verbum Domini (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 99–103.

⁶ On this, I am in agreement with Nicholas M. Healy: “The limitations of his exegetical style—though not its content—must, I think, be admitted. Like many of his colleagues, Thomas uses technical and highly formal language and for the most part avoids extended metaphor. He makes careful distinctions, sometimes where none seem to be particularly required. He engages in detailed grammatical and logical analyses, and organizes the text under headings and in sections in ways that do not always help to clarify the text's larger meaning. The analytic style can be off-putting for modern

on space, this is convenient, for it allows us to focus more on Aquinas's exposition of St. Paul, rather than directly on the biblical text itself, an otherwise dangerous thing to do, whoever the theological commentator.⁷ We may assume with relative comfort for present purposes, therefore, that the intention of the apostle is faithfully and accurately represented by the Angelic Doctor in his commentary, to which we now turn (though, pausing to refresh oneself directly with the biblical passages under discussion is highly encouraged).

How, then, does Aquinas understand Paul's call to spirituality, particularly as the requisite antidote to the perils of "worldly" or "human" wisdom? What does St. Thomas take St. Paul to mean by "spiritual"?

"Spiritual" Humans as Such

Well, from the very outset of his commentary St. Thomas makes it readily apparent what, in part, "spirituality" definitely does *not* mean, the *via negativa* being an explicative method of which Thomas was always quite fond pedagogically.⁸ One might suppose, after all, that "spirituality" finds its meaning in contrast to "materiality" or "physicality" as a mutually informing binary of opposition (e.g., as "left" is to "right," "before" is to "after," or "hot" is to "cold"). As he tracks with the language of St. Paul, however, it is clear that Aquinas does not seek to define what counts as "spiritual" in opposition to what counts as "material" in any strongly disjunctive sense.⁹

This is evident, in part, because Aquinas characterizes Paul's entire letter

readers until they get used to it and begin to see within it the depth and insight of Thomas' exegesis" ("Introduction," in *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to His Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM, Daniel A. Keating, and John P. Yocum [London: T & T Clark International, 2005], 9–10). Healy's entire "Introduction" is quite helpful, as is Eleonore Stump, "Biblical Commentary and Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 252–68. See also John F. Boyle, *Aquinas on Scripture: A Primer* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), esp. 117–20; Roger W. Nutt and Michael Dauphinais, eds., *Thomas Aquinas: Biblical Theologian* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2021).

⁷ For an incredibly helpful survey and analysis of how various theologians over the ages have interpreted 1 Cor 1–4, see Steven Edward Harris, *God and the Teaching of Theology: Divine Pedagogy in 1 Corinthians 1–4*, Reading the Scriptures (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019). We are all in Harris's debt for his historically rich and theologically suggestive book.

⁸ See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 3, proem.

⁹ See Prothro's analysis of this aspect of Paul's thinking with respect to bodily resurrection and 1 Corinthians 15 in *Apostle Paul and His Letters*, 115–17.

as ultimately arising from concerns to do with sacramental grace.¹⁰ First Corinthians, as Thomas sees it, is a letter primarily to do with the Church's sacraments, the concrete, physical means by which invisible grace is made available to unite us (body and soul) to Christ and to each other. As we are hylomorphic creatures in need of holistic redemption, the sacraments, precisely in their union of both the physical and non-physical, dually provide that which is necessary for our salvation *qua* human beings, body-soul composites.¹¹ Aquinas, therefore, following what he takes to be Paul's sacramental framing of the entire Corinthian discussion (e.g., baptism in 1 Cor 1:13; matrimony in ch. 7; holy orders in ch. 9; Eucharist in ch. 11), takes spirituality to be a holistically *human* issue, not something reducible to human souls set over against human corporeality.¹² If Paul's use of the term is contextually bound up with the sacraments, "spiritual" cannot mean that which is contrastive to materiality or physicality.

What is more, spirituality cannot simply mean something *unopposed* to human materiality, as Thomas reads Paul. It is, in fact, to be taken as providentially *complementary* (in the sense of "enhancing"). Commenting on the general resurrection as depicted in 1 Cor 15:46–47, for example, Thomas describes our future "spiritual" transformation precisely as the Christic perfection or completion of our natural human animality. "The [resurrected] spiritual state," he says, "is situated with respect to the [natural] animal state as the perfect to the imperfect."¹³ Or, as he says regarding 1 Cor 2:13, "Paul calls the same men 'spiritual' whom above he called 'perfect,' because men are made perfect . . . by the Holy Spirit."¹⁴ We will

¹⁰ See the prologue. Helpful here is Daniel A. Keating, "Aquinas on 1 and 2 Corinthians: The Sacraments and Their Ministers," in Weinandy, Keating, and Yocum, *Aquinas on Scripture*, 127–48.

¹¹ See *ST* III, q. 60, a. 4, corp.: "Now it is part of man's nature to acquire knowledge of the intelligible from the sensible. . . . Since the sacred things which are signified by the sacraments are the spiritual and intelligible goods by means of which man is sanctified, it follows that the sacramental signs consist in sensible things: just as in the Divine Scriptures spiritual things are set before us under the guise of things sensible. And hence it is that sensible things are required for the sacraments." Here and throughout, I will use Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 5 vols. (New York: Benziger Bros, 1947; repr. 1981), modifying the translation as I deem it necessary to achieve better clarity of the Latin original.

¹² Moreover, the grace of the sacraments and other spiritual gifts are, as Thomas reads Paul, given precisely for the upbuilding of "the body of Christ," again pointing to the intrinsically corporeal element of what Paul identifies as "spiritual things." See *Super 1 Cor* 1, lec. 2, no. 19; *Super 1 Cor* 12, lec. 1, no. 710.

¹³ *Super 1 Cor* 15, lec. 7, no. 994.

¹⁴ *Super 1 Cor* 2, lec. 3, no. 109.

say more in a minute on the Holy Spirit's particular role in what it means for a person to be made spiritual. For now, however, it is enough to have doubly shown that the spiritual, for St. Thomas as interpreter of St. Paul, ultimately can be a matter of neither non-corporeality nor indifference to corporeality, given both its holistically sacramental and eschatologically perfecting function for human beings as such. In light of St. Paul's emphasis on *corporeal* spirituality throughout this letter to the Corinthians, Thomas the exegetical theologian could hardly think otherwise. As St. Paul insists, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? . . . Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God with your body" (1 Cor 6:15, 19–20).

That said, it is certainly true that Aquinas, following Paul, closely links human spirituality *qua* human with the immaterial aspect of our nature. Thomas says, for example:

Man is called spiritual in two ways: first, on the part of the *intellect* enlightened by the Spirit of God, . . . because, being subjected to the Spirit of God, he knows [things about which the Holy Spirit enlightens the mind which transcend sense and human reason] with the greatest certitude and fidelity; . . . second, [a man is called spiritual] on the part of the *will* enkindled by the Spirit of God, . . . because, having the Spirit of God as its guide, it rules the soul, i.e., the sensual powers.¹⁵

Aquinas, does, therefore, connect spirituality more to the immaterial aspect of our humanity than the material.¹⁶ Nevertheless, note, firstly, that it is still "man" who is "called spiritual" in the above, even if chiefly by way of intellect and will. Christ came to save sinners, after all, not merely their rational souls.¹⁷ Notice, secondly, that the term "spiritual" in the above is most properly applied to a person only insofar as the Holy Spirit both enlightens one's intellect and enkindles one's will (i.e., not naturally merely *qua* intellect and will, but supernaturally and by way of conversion through the work of the Holy Spirit). Clearly, then, "spirituality,"

¹⁵ *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 3, nos. 113, 117

¹⁶ See, for example *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] IV, ch. 23, no. 2.

¹⁷ On the importance of this distinction, see T. Adam Van Wart, "Anima Mea Non Est Ego: Thomas, Beatitude, and the Human Person," in *Hope & Death: Christian Responses*, ed. Michael Dauphinais and Roger W. Nutt (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2022), 195–210.

for Thomas, following St. Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians, is less about non-corporeality or indifference to corporeality than it is about that which comes transformatively to human persons as such by way of the Holy Spirit, whether that be via sacramental grace, or the eschatological perfection of one's animality, or a supernatural transformation of one's intellect and will (as in the immediately preceding passage).¹⁸

"Spiritual" Versus "Carnal" Wisdom

Rather than contrasting "spiritual" with "physical" or "material," Thomas follows St. Paul's lead and instead defines the "spiritual" over against the "carnal" and the "sensual," these latter terms referring to that which hylomorphically constitutes the *mere* animality of humanity, particularly (though not exclusively) in its fallen condition.¹⁹ That is, "spirituality" is not defined over against human corporeality as created by God, so much as it is classified in contradistinction to "sin-sick" humanity and the resulting intellectual and appetitive compulsions of its corrupted "flesh."²⁰

Certainly, the most obvious of these disordered impulses accompanying the "carnal" and "sensual" deficiencies of post-lapsarian humanity are the

¹⁸ See *Super 1 Cor 3*, lec. 2, no. 159: "It should be kept in mind that those who tend after spiritual things cannot be altogether freed from caring for temporal things, any more than those who tend after temporal things from a duty of charity are altogether free of spiritual things. The difference is one of emphasis." See also *Super 1 Cor 15*, lec. 7, nos. 999–1000: "What we must not think, as some heretics say, is that flesh and blood will not rise according to substance, but rather that the whole body will be changed into spirit or into air. This is heretical and false. For the Apostle says that our body will be conformed to [Christ's] body of radiance. Therefore, since Christ after his resurrection, has body and blood, . . . it is certain that we too will have flesh and blood in the resurrection. We must not think that by 'flesh and blood,' [Paul] means that the substance of the flesh and blood 'cannot possess the kingdom of God,' but rather 'flesh and blood,' i.e., those devoting themselves to flesh and blood, namely, men given to vices and lusts, cannot inherit the kingdom of God. And thus is flesh understood, i.e., a man living by the flesh: 'but you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you (Rom 8:9).'"

¹⁹ When Thomas *does* occasionally contrast spirituality with human physicality/materiality *sans* any sinful corruption, he does so, for instance, in reflections on the possibilities of what humanity's glorification will entail. "But in the resurrected state the animal activities by the body will cease, because there will be no more generation, or growth or nourishment, but the body without any impediment and weariness will unceasingly serve the soul in its spiritual activities" (*Super 1 Cor 15*, lec. 6, no. 987).

²⁰ I borrow the term "sin-sick" from Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2000), 189–99.

numerous sinful behaviors and vices for which the Corinthian believers were notorious (e.g., 1 Cor 5:1, 11:21), and both St. Paul and St. Thomas are careful to address such practices.

But more fundamentally, time and again in his commentary, Thomas goes out of his way to show that the opposite of what it means to be spiritual *principally* involves trusting (by way of the intellect) in the “wisdom of the world” and living (by way of the will) in light of its faulty principles, thereby rendering oneself “carnal” or “worldly”—as opposed to spiritual. For example, Thomas comments on 1 Cor 2:14 that “men are called ‘sensual’ in two ways: first, on the basis of the perceptive power, where a man is called sensual in his perception, *because he judges about God in terms of bodily images or the letter of the law or philosophical reasons*, all of which are interpreted in accordance with the sense-powers. Second, on the basis of the appetitive power, which is *attracted only to things that appeal to the sense appetite*.”²¹ The opposite of “spirituality” is not “materiality” in Thomas’s reading of 1 Corinthians, therefore, but “foolishness.”²² The contrastive accent to “spirituality,” that is, falls on the fool’s misidentification of and/or failure to live in accordance with authentic wisdom.

Indeed, for Aquinas, following Paul, this deep connection of spirituality to wisdom, whether authentic or imitation, is basic.²³ Thomas opines: “Insofar as [the human form and soul] is concerned with knowledge, namely, understanding, willing, and the like, it is called ‘spirit.’”²⁴ Given what it means to have been made in the divine image, it is chiefly by virtue of human knowing and willing that human beings may be said to have “spirit.” For Aquinas, enlivened by the senses, these rational human capacities serve as the uniquely important conditions for the realization of wisdom and, with it, spirituality.

The difficulty, however, as Aquinas makes plain, is that “the wisdom

²¹ *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 3, no. 112 (emphases mine).

²² See *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 3, no. 114: “When a person rejects wise statements as foolish, it is a sign that he does not understand them. Consequently, since the sensual man regards things of the Spirit of God as foolish, it is obvious that he does not understand them. This is what he says, namely, ‘for it is foolishness to him,’ i.e., the sensual man, for he judges things inspired by the Holy Spirit to be foolish.” There’s an argument to be made here that perhaps St. Thomas underestimates the power of the will and overestimates the power of the intellect when it comes to the rejection of inspired truths, but that is a conversation for another time.

²³ See, for example, *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 1, no. 85: “‘We speak the wisdom of God,’ i.e., which is God and from God. For although all wisdom is from God (Sir 1:1), this wisdom which is about God, is from God in a special way, namely by revelation.”

²⁴ *Super 1 Cor 15*, lec. 7, no. 992.

of this world, which considers the things of this world in such a way that it does not reach divine truth 'is foolishness with God,' i.e., in God's judgment it is folly."²⁵ Indeed, "the wisdom of this [carnal] world, i.e., of worldly things, or the wisdom which rests on human reasons" comes by way of either "worldly potentates" with their "wisdom of human laws," or "the devils" with their "necromancy, magical arts, and the like," or the "philosophers" from whom "all human philosophy has come." Because "none of [these rulers] lasts, . . . their wisdom cannot be solid [and] therefore, should not be relied on."²⁶

Genuine wisdom, therefore, arises only as a function of one's human spirit being transformed by way of the *Holy* Spirit. This is because:

We, filled with the Holy Spirit, have not received the spirit of this world, but the Spirit of God. By the word "spirit" is understood a definite vital power, both cognitive and dynamic. Therefore, "the spirit of this world" can mean the wisdom of this world, and the love of this world, by which a man is impelled to do the things of this world [over against] the Holy Spirit, by whom their hearts were enlightened and inflamed.²⁷

Real spirituality, is fundamentally a pneumatological notion, that is, and chiefly as soteriologically applied to the anthropological within the context of 1 Corinthians. "None of the rulers of this world knew God's wisdom, 'but to us God has revealed them by his Spirit, whom he sent to us.' . . . For since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, inasmuch as he proceeds from the Son, who is the truth of the Father, he is sent to those to whom he breathes the truth; . . . wisdom has been revealed to believers by the Holy Spirit."²⁸

Consequently, Thomas interprets Paul to say that spirituality consists, firstly, in trusting (by way of the intellect) in the truths of God as revealed in Christ by way of the Holy Spirit and, secondly, through cooperating (by way of the will) with the Holy Spirit through living in light of those mysterious, divinely revealed truths.

Therefore, to avoid [self-deception], Paul says: "If any man among you seems to be wise in this world," i.e., has worldly wisdom, which

²⁵ *Super 1 Cor 3*, lec. 3, no. 179.

²⁶ *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 1, nos. 83–85.

²⁷ *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 2, nos. 10–101. See also *ST II-II*, q. 45.

²⁸ *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 2, no. 106.

in those points which are contrary to the faith is not wisdom, even though it appears to be, “let him become a fool” by eschewing that seeming wisdom, “that he may be wise,” namely, according to divine wisdom, which is true wisdom. And this must be observed not only in matters in which worldly wisdom is contrary to true faith, but also in all matters in which it is contrary to genuine morality; hence: “he is a shield to those who take refuge in him (Prov 30:5).”²⁹

These are the necessary and sufficient conditions for the human’s possession of genuine wisdom (*sapientia*), and thus are the essential ingredients for what constitutes spirituality.

“Carnal” or “worldly” or “human wisdom,” by contrast, consists in what appears and purports to be true wisdom but is not. Aquinas argues that such “wisdom” is only apparent, precisely because either (1) it fails to see beyond the world of sense perception to “grasp spiritual and intelligible things,”³⁰ or (2), if it does partially grasp these, it nevertheless consists of teaching “which rests [only] on human reasons [apart from revelation],”³¹ like the that of the Greek philosophers, or (3) it is doctrine which, if confronted by the Spirit with the cruciform wisdom of divine revelation, rejects it as foolish and absurd.³² As Aquinas reads St. Paul, only the “spiritual person” avoids these deficiencies, and therefore succeeds in attaining *genuine* wisdom.

“Spiritual” As *Sapientia Christi*

In short, spirituality, for St. Thomas, is ultimately about trusting and following the Holy Spirit ever deeper into a life that embodies the truths

²⁹ *Super 1 Cor 3*, lec. 3, no. 178. On this, also see Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2:18–21.

³⁰ *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 1, no. 81.

³¹ *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 1, no. 83.

³² See *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 3, nos. 112–13: “Men are called sensual . . . first on the basis of the perceptive power . . . because he judges about God in terms of bodily images or the letter of the law or philosophical reasons, all of which are interpreted according to sense-powers. . . . [But] the things about which the Holy Spirit enlightens the mind transcend sense and human reason, as Sirach attests: ‘matters too great for human understanding have been shown to you’ (Sir 3:23). Consequently, they cannot be grasped by a person who relies solely on sense perception.” Later in the same lectio, Thomas says: “The sensual man’s estimation that things according to the Spirit are foolish does not proceed from sound judgment but from a lack of understanding; . . . neither the senses nor human reason can judge the things of the Spirit of God” (nos. 114–15).

of divinely revealed wisdom.³³ And for St. Paul, as for Thomas, the paradigmatic test case of one's possession of authentic wisdom, and with it true spirituality, comes by way of how one assesses the Cross.

After all, the center, source, and exemplar of real wisdom, insists St. Paul, is Christ crucified, "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24).³⁴ Aquinas concurs, saying that, while "it seemed against the nature of human reason that God should die and that a just and wise man should voluntarily expose himself to a very shameful death, . . . [those Jews and Gentiles who are called to faith in Christ] recognize the power in Christ's cross, by which devils are overcome, sins forgiven, and men saved."³⁵ Indeed, "the Word, which is the Son [who was crucified], is nothing less than begotten or conceived wisdom."³⁶

It is for this reason that, later commenting and drawing on Paul's construction metaphor in naming the Corinthians "temples" built on Christ (1 Cor 2:16–17, 6:19–20), Aquinas maintains:

He who is wise, simply speaking, considers the highest cause, namely God, and orders all other things according to God. Thus, he who is called wise in building considers the principal cause of the building, i.e., its end, and arranges what is to be done by subordinate artisans to realize the end. Now it is obvious that the entire structure of a building depends on the foundation; consequently, it pertains to a wise architect to lay a solid foundation. But Paul himself laid the foundation of the spiritual edifice for the Corinthians: . . . "for another foundation no man can lay, but that which is laid: which is Christ Jesus," who dwells in your heart by faith.³⁷

Consequently, as Aquinas says similarly in his commentary on Colossians, "In order to have true wisdom, one must inquire into its source, and

³³ Thomas tracks closely with the picture of Paul given by N. T. Wright on this point: "In early Christian thinking, especially that of Paul, the *pneuma* was associated especially with the transformation of human life" (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 1, Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013], 214).

³⁴ As Thomas says in *SCG* IV, ch, 21, no. 2: "The 'word of wisdom' (cf. Dan 1:20) by which we know God, and which God sends into us, is properly representative of the Son. And, in like fashion, the love by which we love God is properly representative of the Holy Spirit" (*Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 4*, trans. Charles J. O'Neil [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975]).

³⁵ *Super 1 Cor* 1, lec. 3, nos. 58–60.

³⁶ *Super 1 Cor* 1, lec. 3, no. 61.

³⁷ *Super 1 Cor* 3, lec. 2, nos. 148, 151.

so Paul says, 'let the word of Christ dwell in you abundantly.' . . . Therefore, you should draw wisdom from the word of Christ."³⁸ This Christological basis for the attainment of genuine wisdom is crucial for Thomas because "some people do not have the Word, and so they do not have wisdom."³⁹

For Aquinas, Christ's indispensable role in the possibility of humanity's realization of genuine wisdom, and thus spirituality, is bound up initially with the Son's Incarnation: "a condescension of the fullness of Godhead into human nature [such that] in the man Christ there was perfection of spiritual life from the very beginning."⁴⁰ It is "by means of . . . Christ [as the man of heaven]," he therefore says, "[that] spiritual life is distributed to all men."⁴¹ But "the *chief* element in the doctrine of Christian faith," argues Aquinas, the *specific* means by which spiritual life is distributed to all, "is salvation effected by the cross of Christ."⁴² This truth, which is made known only by way of the Holy Spirit, "is the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24).

"Consequently," says Thomas, "because of their lack of *sapientiae* [the falsely wise of the world] suppose that it is impossible for God to become man and suffer death in his human nature; [and] due to a lack of *prudentiae* they consider it unbecoming for a man to endure the cross, despising the shame."⁴³ Theirs is a wisdom in name only "which the wise of the world have invented for themselves against the true wisdom of God," a pseudo-prudence "that clings to the goods of this world" and "worldly affairs."⁴⁴

³⁸ *Super Col* 3, lec. 3, no. 166.

³⁹ *Super Col* 3, lec. 3, no. 166.

⁴⁰ *ST* III q. 34, a. 1, ad 1.

⁴¹ *Super 1 Cor* 15, lec. 7, no. 991. Similarly, in a sermon given on the Feast of Pentecost focusing on the Holy Spirit, Thomas begins by saying, "We must speak about him without whom no one can speak what is right and who can make or makes everyone speak abundantly. Indeed, without him we cannot correctly speak. So it is not surprising that it is said in Wis. 9:17 'Who could have known the sense,' of God's truth, 'unless he had sent his Spirit from on high?' Without a sense of the truth no one could speak what is true" (Sermon 11: *Emitte Spiritum*, in *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, trans. Mark-Robin Hoodland, C.P., The Fathers of the Church: Mediaeval Continuation 2 [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010], 138).

⁴² *Super 1 Cor* 1, lec. 3, no. 45.

⁴³ *Super 1 Cor* 1, lec. 3, no. 50.

⁴⁴ *Super 1 Cor* 1, lec. 3, no. 50. This understanding is reflected in Thomas's commentary on Rom 1, as well. Even those truths of God (i.e., wisdom) that had potential to be discovered by way of natural reason, Aquinas there argues, were and would be immediately exchanged for idolatrous lies (i.e., foolishness) upon their discovery. "Their [i.e., the 'Gentiles' whose 'wisdom arose from the Greeks'] basic guilt was not due to

For Aquinas, however, the crucifixion of Christ and what it achieves, while appearing foolish to worldly wisdom, in fact, perfectly embodies the deep wisdom of God, and accordingly is the heart of genuine spirituality.⁴⁵

ignorance. . . . For they knew God in two ways: as the supereminent being to whom glory and honor were due, [but] they failed to pay him due worship or [denied] certain aspects of his power and knowledge. Secondly, they knew him as the cause of all good things [and] deserving of thanks, which they did not render. Paul mentions the ignorance which followed . . . by the fact that their foolish heart was darkened, i.e., *deprived* of the light of wisdom, through which man *truly* knows God. For just as a person who turns his bodily eyes from the sun is put in darkness, so one who turns from God, presuming on himself and not on God, is put in spiritual darkness” (*Super Rom* 1, lec. 7, nos. 127–30, in *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012); emphasis mine). Here as elsewhere, Thomas’s acknowledgement of the theoretical potential for pagans to acquire genuine wisdom with respect to God by way of natural reason is characteristically ordered by Aquinas towards showing not natural reason’s self-sufficiency regarding wisdom, but the inevitable corruption and devolution of its deliverances into anti-Christian foolishness, instead. Contrary to many modern Thomists, that is, whatever Thomas is willing to grant in principle with respect to natural reason’s power to attain genuine wisdom about God, he immediately takes back practically in light of human finitude and fallenness. As he says in the opening question of the *ST*, “Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors” (*ST* I q., 1, a. 1, corp.). And, by Thomas’s lights, to know a simple thing imperfectly isn’t really to know it at all: “There cannot be false knowledge of simple things: because they are either perfectly known inasmuch as their quiddity is known; or they are not known at all, if one cannot attain to a knowledge of them. Therefore, since God is absolutely simple, there cannot be false knowledge of him in the sense that something might be known about him and something remain unknown, but only in the sense that knowledge of him is not attained. Accordingly, anyone who believes that God is something that he is not, for example, a body, or something like that, does not adore God but something else, because he does not know him, but something else” (*Super Ioan* 4, lec. 2, no. 603, in *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1–8*, Latin–English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas [Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2013]). On this, see David B. Burrell, CSC, *Aquinas: God and Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979); Bruce D. Marshall, “*Quod Scit Una Uetula*: Aquinas on the Nature of Theology,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 1–35; Eugene F. Rogers Jr., *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God*, Revisions (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

⁴⁵ To be clear, I do not mean to suggest (according to Thomas or in terms of what anyone else ought hold) that the Cross is an essential feature of divine wisdom such that the contingency of human history is necessary for the realization of divine wisdom, i.e.,

It is the Holy Spirit's enabling an individual holistically to receive the reality of Christ crucified for the wisdom that it is that makes such a one simultaneously wise and spiritual.

Indeed, the core of Thomas's grammar of "spiritual" or what counts as spirituality as flowing along these lines is nicely encapsulated by what he says regarding St. Paul's language about "the spiritual human being" in 1 Cor 2:15. The "spiritual person," St. Paul says, "he that is spiritual," is one who judges all things while not being subject to another's judgment oneself. For Aquinas, precisely what justifies the spiritual person as an unjudged judge *qua* spiritual is that her *wisdom* comes cruciformly by way of the Holy Spirit, granting it superlative epistemic adjudicative status among all things known and knowable, and her *behavior* follows suit, exempting her from being subject to judgment on the basis of moral failure.

For the things about which the Holy Spirit enlightens the mind transcend sense and reason; . . . consequently, they cannot be grasped by a person who relies solely on sense perception. Again, the Holy Spirit inflames the affections to love spiritual goods and despise sensible goods. Hence a person whose manner of life is sensual cannot grasp spiritual goods of this sort. . . . Spiritual things

that the Lord could not be wise absent the crucifixion of Christ. On the contrary. After all, Thomas rightly maintains, firstly, that God is simple (*ST I*, q. 3); the Lord's wisdom is identical to his essence, to his existence, to his goodness, to his infinitude, etc. And Aquinas correctly insists, secondly, that the mystery of creation (Heb 11:3) and the resulting contingencies of its providentially ordered history are wholly gratuitous, and therefore not strictly necessary for the Lord (*ST I*, q. 19, aa. 3–4). It cannot be the case, therefore, that *any* event taking place within creation is somehow constitutive of divine wisdom. Besides, even granting God's free determination to create a universe and to permit the tragic (un)reality of sin, Aquinas—again, rightly—holds that the Lord could have pursued creation's restoration and humanity's redemption through means other than those enacted by Christ in history (*ST III*, q. 1, a. 2; q. 3). When I say that divine wisdom is cruciform all the way down, therefore, I mean only to say that, contingent as it is, the Cross uniquely displays a deep truth about God's character as sovereign, loving and wise. God does not require the Cross for him to be what/who he is essentially. We, however, have no more perfect indicator of God's wisdom and love than this, necessitating that this event carries superlative epistemic and behavioral primacy for us. On this, contrast Bruce L. McCormack, "Divine Impassibility or Simple Divine Constancy? Implications of Karl Barth's Later Christology for Debates over Impassibility," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 150–86, and Bruce D. Marshall, "The Dereliction of Christ and the Impassibility of God," in Keating and White, *Divine Impassibility*, 246–98.

are examined in a spiritual way. For the lower can never examine and judge things that pertain to the higher, just as the sense cannot examine things that are strictly intellectual. Similarly, neither the senses nor human reason can judge the things of the Spirit of God.⁴⁶

This, St. Paul says, is what it means “to have the mind of Christ,” or to have “the wisdom of Christ,” in Aquinas’s terms.⁴⁷ It is to reject worldly wisdom for the foolishness that it is, giving epistemic primacy to the truths which the Father has made known in the Son through the Spirit, and all this so as to become cruciformly, and therefore truly, wise in word and in deed as a function of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. This is what the Cross makes plain. This is what it means to be spiritual. This is what realizes *sapientia Christi*.

Conclusion

Whatever confusion or disagreements there may be at present as to what counts as spiritual, therefore, for St. Thomas, following St. Paul, the essence of spirituality is crystal clear. For the Apostle and the Common Doctor alike, spirituality consists in nothing other than having the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16): recognizing and affirming the ostensive foolishness of the Cross as the deep and matchless wisdom of God and living cruciformly in the world as a result of that superlative wisdom.⁴⁸ Spirituality, a concept

⁴⁶ *Super 1 Cor 2*, lec. 3, nos. 113, 115.

⁴⁷ It is not difficult to imagine that Thomas would agree with N. T. Wright when he says: “God’s folly . . . creates its own new genres of ‘wisdom.’ . . . That, in a measure, is the story of the two letters to Corinth: a firm denial that Paul’s gospel owes anything to human wisdom, coupled with a careful construction of an alternative ‘wisdom’ which, hidden for long ages, has now been revealed. . . . There is, then, an *epistemological* revolution at the heart of Paul’s worldview and theology. It isn’t just that he now knows things that he did not before; it is, rather, that *the act of knowing* has itself been transformed” (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:1355–56). This is not to say that Paul had *no* room for extra-Christian truth claims. As Wright makes clear, “precisely because this spirit was the spirit of the one God who had made the whole world Paul expected that there might be points of overlap, of congruence” (2:1359). But the absolute primacy of Christ’s divinely revealed wisdom with respect to measuring any and all candidate truth claims is unquestionably paramount for both St. Paul and St. Thomas Aquinas.

⁴⁸ Given this, I think there are many respects in which the current theological academy might find itself in a similar position to the Corinthian Christians, and therefore in need of similar Pauline admonition. I will only gesture to two of them here, but at least among Catholic theologians, mission-inhibiting divisions along similar lines as those described by Paul are evident. Having each been intellectually “baptized” by

which, for us, is often conceptually amorphous and fuzzy around the edges, is for them as sharply defined and concrete as the wood of the Cross itself. May we, like them, cooperate with the indwelling Holy Spirit and ever seek the principal source of our wisdom and spirituality there.⁴⁹ N·V

different heroes in our training as theologians, that is, we frequently seem to overestimate the theological significance of our variously resulting refrains of “I am of St. Thomas,” “I am of Balthasar,” “I am of Gutiérrez,” etc. Consequently, many of us are functionally Thomists, Balthasarians, etc. first and Catholics second, to the detriment of us all. Additionally, in response to a rapidly changing cultural landscape and the call for a “new evangelization,” many of my well-meaning Catholic colleagues ostensibly feel compelled to adopt apologetic/evangelical strategies that appeal primarily to the merely preamble, the least common denominators of universal human nature (e.g., natural law and/or the metaphysics of being), rather than prioritizing, with Paul, the scandalous beauty of the Cross. Taking St. Paul’s (and St. Thomas’s) instructions seriously, however, suggests that we need not operate as if conversion to the Gospel of Jesus Christ were ultimately contingent upon a prior conversion to the metaphysical gospel of Aristotle. The admonition of St. Paul (and St. Thomas) is first and foremost to champion the *deeper* of those two wisdoms, however foolish and ineffective for evangelism it may appear. As Chrysostom says in paragraph 6 of his fourth homily on 1 Corinthians, “For that which philosophers were not able by means of reasoning to accomplish, this, what seemed to be foolishness did excellently well” (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1 [ed. Schaff], 12:19). See too Bruce D. Marshall, “The Flesh of the Logos: Faith and Reason Reconsidered,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 16, no. 2 (2018): 587–99.

⁴⁹ Various aspects of this essay were work-shopped at both Ave Maria University’s Aquinas Center for Theological Renewal conference and Villanova’s PMR conference in 2022. I am grateful for the constructive comments and questions received in those sessions from Andrew Hofer, O.P., David Mahfood, Taylor Payne, Mike Root, Wojciech Giertych, O.P., Danny Houck, Alex Erickson, and others whose names I missed.