

Thomas Aquinas on Progress and Regress in the Spiritual Life

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Introduction: A “Spiritual” Theology

The Problem of Spiritual Stagnation

MOST RETREAT masters and parish missionaries know that it is very easy to bring back to confession people who have slipped away from the faith for many years and very difficult to motivate good people to become better. There is a very challenging sentence in Cardinal Newman’s writings that needs commentary: “What then is it that we who profess religion lack? I repeat it, this: a willingness to be changed, a willingness to suffer (if I may use such a word), to suffer Almighty God to change us. We do not like to let go our old selves.”¹ If Newman is correct, what does it mean to let God change us, and why do most of us not like to change? St. Thomas speaks to the same issue more laconically, and with warning or a challenge, when he observes, “To stay at one’s level is to go backwards.”² For Aquinas, each act of charity or the moral virtues is supposed to become more intense because it is the nature of a “habitus” to expand. Hence he uses the terminology “remiss acts” to describe acts of virtue that merit an increase of grace but not immediately when not done with their full actuality.³ This does not lead one to venial sin by necessity, but it may make it more difficult to live by the inspirations of the Holy Spirit or the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

¹ John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 5 (London: Longmans, Green and Co.), 241.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II–II, q. 24, a. 6, ad 3.

³ *ST* I–II, q. 52, a. 3; I–II, q. 114, a. 8, ad 3; II–II, q. 24, a. 6.

Newman and Aquinas require us to lean upon God. Consider the scriptural account of Jesus sleeping in the boat while a squall emerges on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples are panicky because it appears that the boat is going to sink. At a certain point, they awaken the Lord. It seems strange, in a boat bouncing up and down on waves, that anyone could sleep at all! Since it seems unlikely that one could sleep on the sea during a heavy storm, what does Jesus teach us by his sleeping during the storm?

A Trial of Faith

Jesus asks his disciples to take the boat to the opposite shore during the night, a time that most sailors normally would not want to sail because of the darkness and the difficulty of finding port. Nevertheless, they set sail. Here the Scriptures provide a symbol of what happens when Jesus calls us at times in life to transcend self and abandon self-will by giving up our control in order to lean more upon him. More importantly, however, in these instances, the Christian person is often called to a new mission within the vocation already in place. The instant this is known only compounds the problem—for he is forced to grapple with the unknown. Will the new task or situation spell success or failure, as if these were the only criteria to discern God's will?

The Need for Spiritual Theology and St. Thomas's Contribution

Before reflecting on some special insights that can enhance or dethrone the spiritual life according to St. Thomas Aquinas, it is important to be clear about the nature of spiritual theology. Jordan Aumann, O.P., of happy memory, called it, when he taught at the Angelicum, the “cream of theology” because it must take its conclusions from all areas of theology and the experience of the saints.⁴ It is both a speculative and practical science and not “theology lite.” Spirituality concerns itself with the doctrines surrounding the Trinity, because in practice growing in the life of the Spirit means getting to know each person of the Trinity since they dwell in the soul of someone in the state of grace. Likewise, spiritual theology must concern itself with incarnational, Marian, and sacramental doctrines as well since the dogmas must be known, loved, and lived, as the *Catechism* (§89) reminds us. Ignorance of these doctrines often leads to a sentimental love of neighbor and God himself.

⁴ Jordan Aumann, O.P., *Spiritual Theology* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1980), preface and chap. 1.

Origin of the Word "Spirituality"

The word "spirituality" comes from the life of the spirit that is in every person re-created by sanctifying grace. Actual grace from the Holy Spirit prompts us to dynamically grow into a whole life of virtue based upon the infused theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity together with the cardinal virtues. The precepts of God, the theological and moral virtues, together with seven sanctifying gifts of the Holy Spirit as well, become actualized with our consent to actual graces, given in particular circumstances.

Did St. Thomas Have a Spiritual Theology?

St. Thomas Aquinas was often thought to have mainly given to the Church an understanding of dogmas and morals using the light of reason. However, contemporary Thomists now agree as a result of the work of Servais Pinckaers, O.P. and Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P. that he also weaved into his writings a spiritual doctrine, even though it is now a branch of theology. Thomas gives many insights into the praxis of growing or declining in grace and virtue, not only for the beginner but also for those who want to progress in their relationship with God. The following quotation from the *Summa* is an excellent example of his spiritual theology for any student working at understanding the faith by the light of reason:

The soul is made like to God by grace. Hence for a divine person to be sent to anyone by grace, there must needs be a likening of the holy soul to the divine person who is sent, by some gift of grace. Because the Holy Spirit is Love, the soul is assimilated to the Holy Spirit by the gift of charity: hence the mission of the Holy Spirit is according to the gift of charity. But the Son is the Word, not any sort of word, but one who breathes forth Love. . . . Thus the Son is sent not in accordance with every and any kind of intellectual perfection, but according to the intellectual formation or illumination which breaks forth into the affection of love. . . .⁵

So, the sign of true insight into revelation is indicated by how much charity is given and grows in the soul of the professional or a student of theology.

St. Thomas Aquinas at first seems boring to those not familiar with his terminology. Looking at the questions he poses, his answers seem fraught with abstractions with an over-emphasis of the reasoning process. However, contemporary Thomists more clearly understand that this is a distortion. Due in large part to the theological writings of Pinckaers and Torrell, contemporary Thomists recognize that Thomas also wove into his writings on dogma and morals both a speculative and practical spiritual

⁵ ST I, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2.

doctrine. Thomas gives many outstanding insights into the practicalities of how to grow or not to grow in grace and virtue.

In his monumental work *The Sources of Christian Theology*, Servais Pinckaers indicates in chapter 15 how freedom for excellence underpins Aquinas's spiritual theology of virtue. Pinckaers uses the example of the three stages of human life (childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) to highlight Thomas's teaching on the three stages of the spiritual life, that is, beginners, progressives, and the perfect. One can also find in the last chapter of *The Pinckaers Reader* a small treatise on the role of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and their importance for growing in heroic virtue.⁶

In his masterpiece *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Torrell sums up the spiritual teaching of "The Master of Aquino," as he calls him, in the following way: "(I)t is a Trinitarian spirituality, a spirituality of deification, an objective spirituality, a realist spirituality, a spirituality of human flourishing and a spirituality of communion."⁷

St. Thomas Aquinas on the Spiritual Life

Problems Causing the Stagnation of the Spiritual Life

In the remainder of this essay, I hope to show some very important solutions of St. Thomas to spiritual problems which emerge during one's spiritual journey. I will present Aquinas's spiritual teaching in the following order: the degrees of perfection; the role of loving perfection itself; the role of vainglory as it enters into doing great works for the wrong reasons; following the pertinent counsels of Christ at the right time and circumstances for growth in perfection; and finally and most importantly, and quite unknown to many virtue theorists, the importance of the readiness of the will and mind to do certain virtuous deeds of a difficult character.

The Degrees of Charity

St. Thomas Aquinas, following many of the Fathers of the Church, instructs us that the life of the spirit has three stages in this life, one for beginners, another for those progressing in virtue, and, finally, another for the perfect in virtue. The theological virtue of charity has no golden mean between two opposite vices because God can be loved without limit. That is, one can never claim to have finished loving God in this life.

⁶ Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, ed. John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 385–95.

⁷ Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 371–76.

It is always possible to advance deeper or more intensely in a love union by grace while in this life. Thomas makes a very fine case that grace does not depend upon natural talents, but upon the generosity of God, who can give more grace to one than another for reasons not fully known to us (Mary being the exception for he prepared her without her cooperation, which enabled her to become worthy of the Son of God's presence in her womb as a man):

Part of the reason for this diversity [of grace] lies in the individual who prepares himself for grace; someone who prepares himself more for grace receives it more abundantly. But the primary reason for this diversity cannot be found here, since preparation for grace is only man's doing in so far as his free choice is moved by God. Hence the primary reason for this diversity lies in God himself, who dispenses the gifts of his grace diversely, in order that the beauty and perfection of the Church should emerge from the array of these different degrees; so too he established different degrees among created things so that the universe might be perfect.⁸

With his help, we can prepare for these graces; however, he is the primary cause of even the preparation. One might rightly recognize that much of the preparation does not seem to be a preparation at the time, but only in retrospect. Further, the depth or degree of at least initial grace if not subsequent graces, especially in one who has fallen from grace by mortal sin, is totally dependent upon God's choice. This is certainly the case for beginners, and for those who have resisted actual graces in the past. Moreover, God can overwhelm grave but repentant sinners with deeper graces than they may have originally possessed, which in turn urges them on to the life of growing in perfection and mission. Experience in the pastoral field indicates that last minute re-conversions are possible because one's past sins do not hinder the strength of God's grace with a person's consent to take them away. However, last minute rejections of final graces remind Christians not to let their relationship with God wax and wane during their lifetime, deliberately assuming that they will ultimately be saved at the end of their lives by receiving the sacraments at that time. This is not only illusion, but also a sin against hope called presumption.⁹

The Beginning of Conversion to Christ

Once someone is justified by grace, the life of following Christ goes through many movements or stages, both backward and forward for most

⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 112, a. 4.

⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 21, a. 1.

people. To continue meeting the challenges of the Christian life, and ultimately death itself, everyone needs the virtue of perseverance. This could seem strange since sanctifying grace would appear to be powerful enough to sustain someone with impeccability since it is a share in God's own life. Although one could argue that of itself grace can do this, St. Thomas explains quite brilliantly why there is a problem with such thinking, based upon analysis of the will and scrutinizing human experience:

Perseverance can be taken in two ways. . . . First as referring to the disposition itself considered as a virtue; in this sense, it needs the gift of habitual grace as do the other virtues infused by God. Secondly, it can be regarded an act of perseverance continuing till death; in this sense, it needs not only habitual grace but also the freely given help of God, who preserves man in good till the end of life. . . . Now since our free will is of itself fickle (*vertibile*), and its fickleness is not removed by the habitual grace of our present life, it has not the power even when restored by grace to keep itself immovable in the good, though it has the power to choose the good. For often the choice lies within our power, but not its realization.¹⁰

What Is a Beginner for St. Thomas?

Those in the beginning stage of spiritual enlightenment are caught up in the problem of the emotions dominating the faculty of reason so that the moral norms, which, when followed produce virtue, are overturned by the will's consenting to light and grave sin, due in large part to its fickleness. In his *Summa*, St. Thomas explains:

The second way this happens [that is, sin being caused by emotion] involves the object of the will, which is the good perceived by reason. For the perception and estimation of reason is overwhelmed by a strong and unruly imagination and a distorted judgment of the estimative power, as is clearly the case with the madman. For it is clear that the emotions of the sense appetite follow the imagination and the estimative power just as the discrimination of taste is dependent on the condition of the tongue. Thus we see that men who are emotionally aroused are with difficulty distracted from what they are doing. Consequently, the judgment of reason and the act of the will, which would normally follow rational judgment, quite frequently follows the emotions of the sense appetite.¹¹

Sin, grave or light, is the choosing of a good either of the senses (for example, food or money) or the spirit (for example, honor or revenge)

¹⁰ ST I-II, q. 137, a. 4.

¹¹ ST I-II, q. 77, a. 1.

that is not in accord with reason and faith. This ultimately results in breaking of a major or minor precept of God. Sin is often caused by weakness of will and a corresponding excessive love of self:

Properly speaking, the cause of sin is assigned by reason of man's turning to the perishable good, and from this point of view every sin presupposes an inordinate desire for some temporal good. Man's inordinate love for a temporal good comes from an inordinate love of himself, for when we love someone we wish him good. Quite clearly, then, it follows that inordinate self-love is the cause of all sin.¹²

Inordinate self-love then gives rise to unconscious or willful pride (the failure either to accept one's limitations and/or the rule of God over and for oneself) and/or avarice (the excessive desire for created things). Venial sins are due to lighter matter (small lies) involving the rejection of actual grace to resist these promptings to sin or due to good-will ignorance or diminished voluntariness where grave matter is involved. Moreover, special inspirations prompting one to do generous deeds of supererogation when prudence dictates that they can and should be done even beyond the call of strict duty, are also rejected frequently. These rejections, together with deliberate venial sins rooted in selfishness, dispose one eventually to commit mortal sin. Thomas also calls first movements of sensuality venial sins, but these sins are only analogously so since there is not deliberation.¹³

Mortal sin has the terrible effect of keeping one from meriting an increase of grace and from pleasing God by neglecting to give him due glory, among other consequences. Growing in supernatural virtue is stopped altogether since charity is no longer motivating moral virtue or the theological virtues of faith and hope. As a result, someone can remain in the beginning stages of the spiritual life for years or for a lifetime. For the many interested in the spiritual life who stay out of mortal sin, lack of progress is usually due to ignorance of the laws of the spiritual life. Further, many Catholics today are not instructed on how to grow in virtue because of a lack of learned priests, deacons, or consecrated persons and educated laity who themselves may not always understand the common-sense ways of the spiritual life. Spiritual guides often overestimate the power of free will or the mere reception of the sacraments and consequently give false guidance. The people who rely on these guides become bogged down in the emotions that dominate their lives.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See *ST* I-II, q. 89, aa. 3 and 5; II-II, q. 36, a. 3. See also *De veritate*, q. 26, a. 6, ad 17, where Thomas says that first movements do not possess the complete nature of sin.

They are thus disposed to overturn or ignore the principles of the natural law or supernatural law either deliberately or in ignorance. It is clear and evident that those who know the teaching of the Church are poignantly aware that one cannot become either morally good or holy without the help of Jesus Christ. The way to that help of Christ is through the sacraments, prayer to the indwelling of the Trinity and Blessed Sacrament, prayer to the saints, especially to Mary, Joseph, and the angels, contemplation, and fidelity to the responsibilities of one's state of life—for the glory of God, not one's own glory. To seek to progress in grace and virtue relying on *oneself* alone is the practical heresy of Pelagianism. The only "self-made" persons in the next life are those in the hell of the damned who chose to live life "their way," without a dependency upon Christ and his holy Church.

Growing Up in the Spiritual Life to the Progressive Stage

Regardless of the difficulties of growing out of the beginner's stage of the spiritual life, progress is possible and potentially easier than one would think, if one frequents confession and Mass, prays regularly, and does daily meditation (also called mental or contemplative prayer). Growth in the theological virtues occurs in proportion to receiving the sacraments, praying, and doing or surrendering to God's manifest will. Growth in the moral virtues occurs by applying the theological virtues to one's daily life, for living the commandments is meant to be faith actions and not merely human acts producing only human or natural virtues. Thomas also warns us that

all persons, both religious and laity, are obliged to do whatever good they can, for it is said to all, *Whatsoever thy hand is able to do, do it earnestly* (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Yet there is a way of fulfilling this precept and avoiding sin, namely, if one does all he can according to the demands of his state of life, as long as there is no contempt of doing better, for this would set the mind against spiritual progress.¹⁴

If one refuses to make spiritual progress, Aquinas further warns his readers:

One is not permitted to put limits to charity such that one deliberately refuses to advance in charity when prudence dictates you can easily do such and such but you refuse.¹⁵

St. Thomas notes that as the believer grows in moral virtue, a personal self-identity emerges. *Per accidens*, however, this love of self can become

¹⁴ ST II-II, q. 186, a. 2, ad 2.

¹⁵ ST II-II, q. 184, a. 3.

somewhat excessive. Thomas assures us that it is reasonable to love oneself, for the great commandment is to love neighbor as one's self. Yet when vigilant prudence does not govern the person, it is natural to feel somewhat fulfilled and so become inflated with one's abilities, and to rest, if not rely, in and on one's self. A strong faith will prevent one from judging that one's excellence or gifts are due to oneself rather than the grace of God. A strong sense of one's self-worth and identity may not always be easily moderated, however, because one's personhood becomes so strengthened by virtuous activity that anyone can at least unconsciously exaggerate or bask in one's self-worth. Often many personal trials permitted by God are meant to cure one of such egoism.

Becoming Self-Satisfied or Self-Dissatisfied?

It is at the stage of advancing to a higher degree of charity that difficulties emerge and that resistance grows. This is due in part to the fact that one is accustomed to achieving virtue along certain lines and patterns. For the gifts of the Holy Spirit to work within the human person more than in an episodic manner, newer trials are necessary to lay the groundwork for newer inrushes of sanctifying grace. This in turn prepares for a more stable onrush of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The ground of the soul is readied by trials that can come upon us in many ways: the demands of religious obedience, a major illness, a sense of frustration and failure at particular tasks, even in the wake of a civil divorce for the married person. From the lives of the saints we learn that when they look back at the trials they endured, they are convinced that these crosses were the occasions of new dimensions of grace to their lives, or simply speaking, a deeper conversion.

To grow in the spiritual life requires numerous conversions, or turnings, throughout life. At first, these conversions require giving up a life of sin, but eventually they mean giving up the exercise or mode of certain virtues temporarily for doing newer ones. This was the great difficulty experienced by many sisters, brothers, and priestly groups that failed to survive throughout history. Sometimes God demanded that some members cease doing certain heroic deeds and return to a simpler and easier lifestyle to find him, but they refused. Ascetical practices often became ends in themselves to keep up appearances, and not helpful means at certain junctures of one's personal life or the collective life of a religious community. In a strange and perverse way, many loved the cross more than they loved God, the inverse of loving the consolations of God rather than the God of all consolations! On the other hand, some preferred a simpler or easier lifestyle, as a result of resisting the cross.

Other times, there was great delight in doing heroic deeds because it led to creating a great ego or enjoying popularity or vainglory and its outcomes. Still other times, an easier status quo was maintained and the harder climb to perfection was refused. Why these problems?

The Desire for Great Works Gone Awry

Those who are enthralled with doing great works often find themselves depending more on themselves for excellence, or loving their personal excellence for its own sake. Paradoxically, the problem with possessing one virtue imperfectly, such as chastity, is that once it exists, it consequently strengthens the self-will. But an overly strong self-will can make one less amenable to direction either from higher ecclesiastical authority or from the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Of course, it does not follow from this that one should sin in order to maintain humility, nor does it follow that doing virtuous deeds is a false road, because good works are necessary for salvation. Rather, the conclusion is that pride can enter all virtues, as St. Augustine reminds us.¹⁶ People can seek to become virtuous as a love of their own excellence without reference to seeking the glory of God. In this case, virtue is then primarily sought for one's personal fulfillment alone. Personal happiness or fulfillment is not *per se* evil, but it is not the ultimate end of the spiritual life. Rather, personal fulfillment is subordinate to the search for the glory of God. "Not to us, O Lord, but to your name give the glory" is not quite the theme song of this personality desiring personal honor and glory. How often in the confessional are people upset because they do not seem to be patient; as if they could be patient without the help of God's grace.

Preparatio Animi

Another very important theme in St. Thomas Aquinas for growing in virtue concerns the idea that one must develop what he calls a "preparation of mind and heart."¹⁷ An example of Thomas's notion of preparation is seen in his discussion of Jesus' correction of the Scribes' and Pharisees' ideas of justice:

For they believed that the desire for revenge was licit because of the precept about retaliatory penalties. Now this precept was made so that justice might be preserved, not that man should seek revenge. And so to exclude this, the Lord teaches that man's mind ought to be prepared even to endure much if necessary.

Thomas next refers to another counsel when he says:

¹⁶ *Rule of St. Augustine*, chap. 1, §7.

¹⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 108, a. 3, ad 2.

They supposed that the motion of greed was licit because of the judicial precepts which laid it down that restitution for something taken away was to be made together with something extra. . . . The law did in fact lay this down so that justice might be observed, not to leave room for greed. And so the Lord teaches that we are not to act out of our greed to seek a return, but be ready if need be *to give more*.

Aquinas concludes with reference to another error of the Scribes and Pharisees:

They believed that the motion of hatred was licit because of the precept concerning the slaughter of enemies. The Law did in fact prescribe this so that justice might be fulfilled . . . , not that hatred might be sated. And so the Lord teaches us to have love for our enemies, and to be ready in case of need to do good to them. For these precepts are to be understood *as a matter of inward readiness*, as Augustine shows.

As we can easily see, these precepts of being ready to do certain deeds are similar to other precepts forbidding lust or murder; however, positive precepts do not always oblige or bind. The actual performance of the latter will depend on particular circumstances, requiring discernment from the virtue of prudence.

Following the Counsels Here and Now and Growth in Perfection

From another section in the *Summa*, Thomas shows that this “inward readiness of mind,” when exercised out of generosity and not from obligation, can lead to greater perfection:

What the Lord says in *Matthew* 5 and *Luke* 6 about true love for enemies and the like is necessary for salvation, if it is taken to refer to inward readiness of mind; in the sense that one would be ready to do good to enemies and so on when necessity demands. And so these matters are put among precepts. But that someone should readily put this into effect to enemies, when no special necessity arises, belongs to the particular counsels. . . . The sayings in *Matthew* 10 and *Luke* 9 and 10 were disciplinary precepts meant for that time, or concessions. . . . And so they are not meant to be taken as counsels.¹⁸

In the body of the same article, Thomas teaches that counsels are concerned with “better and more expeditious ways by which man can

¹⁸ ST I-II, q. 108, a. 4, ad 4. What is Thomas referring to? The other counsels of Jesus found in *Matthew* 10 and *Luke* 9 and 10 were time-conditioned for those disciples who were sent on a particular mission such as not taking certain items with them or greeting people in a certain manner.

reach this end" (eternal blessedness). So, if a person brings some benefit to an enemy when necessity does not oblige, or forgives an injury without asking for a recompense, these acts are of the counsel and when accomplished are the occasions of great grace.

Enduring Violence

What about the counsel of turning the other cheek? When and how does it apply in the spiritual life? Using the wisdom of St. Thomas we discover what this counsel really means:

Patience is as necessary in respect of what is said against us as in respect of what is done against us, and we have to bear the precepts of patience in mind in the sense of being ready to put them into practice, as Augustine explains *apropos* of the saying of the Lord, *But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also*. He says that man should be ready to do this if and as the occasion arises without needing to go about doing this all the time, since even the Lord did not do this; what John reports is that when he was struck he asked, *Why do you strike me?* And we have to apply the same principle to defamatory words uttered against us, for we have to be ready to endure defamatory remarks when that seems the fitting thing to do.¹⁹

We can notice that turning the other cheek is not a moral absolute, nor is one to become a doormat for people's insults. At times, answering someone back when he is not disposed to listen does no good. Also, returning an insult can get someone killed as happened in the era of Nazi war camps. Like all other virtues, one needs prudence in order to discern when to retaliate or remain silent.

Readiness of Mind and Heart When Undermined

Beginning with the *secunda secundae* in the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas further develops the notion of "readiness of soul." This is first found in a negative way in the example of the heretic who chooses to disbelieve an article of the faith. Because of this, he is then prepared in mind to disbelieve all the other articles because he no longer accepts the authority of the Church.²⁰ Then in the tract on charity, especially the love of one's enemy, Thomas will introduce the notion that in cases of necessity one must have the attitude in mind to show love in a particular way to an enemy.²¹

¹⁹ ST II-II, q. 72, a. 3, trans. Marcus Lefebure, O.P., vol. 38.

²⁰ ST II-II, q. 5, a. 3.

²¹ ST II-II, q. 25, aa. 8 and 9.

Several vices come to mind but one vice in particular that plagues the West today and makes preparation in mind and heart for doing certain more difficult deeds of charity or justice problematic is what St. Thomas calls “softness” or soft living. He clearly explains what he means in the body of the article following Aristotle’s description:

Also, pleasure itself moves one more strongly by attraction than does sorrow for the lack of pleasure by holding one back. Therefore, according to Aristotle, someone is rightly called a soft-liver who withdraws from what is good on account of sadness caused by lack of pleasures, giving in as it were to a feeble influence.²²

In the answer to the third objection, Aquinas concretizes his meaning:

In amusement there are two things to be considered: first, pleasure—and in this context to be inordinately devoted to amusement is against the true idea of play; second, a certain relaxation or rest, which is opposed to hard work. So, just as inability to endure exacting work is characteristic of softness, so also is excessive desire for amusing games or for any other kind of relaxation.²³

Adults and children alike who are used to watching television shows and movies, or surfing the Internet for entertainment, or listening to music for five and seven hours a day cause this problem within themselves, blocking out the time needed for proper reflection to face difficult challenges of the spirit.

Another difficulty which gets in the way of a certain readiness of mind that will lead to spiritual progress is called by St. Thomas “pusillanimity,” which is opposed to the magnanimous spirit, in the same way that small mindedness is opposed to greatness of mind. Here in Thomas’s treatment of courage, he delineates what he means:

For as the magnanimous man because of his magnanimity strives for great aims, so the pusillanimous man because of his pettiness of mind withdraws from such aims. Secondly, pusillanimity can be considered in relation to its cause, which is both the intellect’s ignorance of a man’s quality and the will’s fear of failure to attain what it wrongly reckons to be beyond his ability. Thirdly, pusillanimity can be considered in its effect, which is holding back from the greatness of which a man is worthy. . . .²⁴

²² *ST* II–II, q. 138, a. 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, ad 3.

²⁴ *ST* II–II, q. 133, a. 2.

If everyone is called to holiness and not only religious and priests, then everyone is called to fulfill a “great aim.” This is why magnanimity must accompany humility, lest the humble person think too badly of himself without striving for the divine gifts that God wants to give the person. Progress in the spiritual life can be curtailed when individuals falsely assume that humility means thinking ill of oneself simply speaking, which is clearly an inferiority complex leading to self-pity. However, some saints felt that way temporarily through the sanctifying gifts of the Holy Spirit because they had such a powerful experience of God. They also experienced their own nothingness, as in the case of St. Catherine of Siena.²⁵ However, more often than not, as Aquinas has shown, progress can also be attenuated because of a lack of magnanimity due simply to fear of failure and thus failure even to aim at the “heights” of holiness.

Consequences of Not Having This “Readiness of Soul”

More importantly, without a due preparation in mind to grow in the counsels, advancing in virtue and even being in virtue is problematic for Thomas when he says:

The virtues are all connected with one another, not materially, but formally, namely by their life drawn from practical wisdom and charity; . . . There is nothing to stop a person having at hand the material for one virtue but not for another; for instance, if he is in the state of poverty his way of life provides opportunities for him to be temperate, but not magnificent.²⁶ Likewise the material for other virtues may be present while the material for virginity, namely bodily intactness, may be absent. Yet the form may be present in preparedness of mind, namely the resolution to maintain this reserve, were it called for. So also a person in poverty may have a spirit prepared to spend magnificently were his condition to allow it, and so also a person in prosperity may have a spirit prepared to bear adversity with equanimity. Without such readiness of spirit nobody can be virtuous.²⁷

Readiness of Mind for All the Commandments

Thomas remarks that a willingness of mind is necessary for all the commandments of the divine law:

²⁵ See Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. and ed. Conleth Kearns, O.P. (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980), 85–93.

²⁶ The virtue of magnificence presupposes great wealth spent well for the common good.

²⁷ *ST* II–II, q. 152, a. 4.

The law gives directions for acts of virtue. Now it was earlier remarked that certain commands of the divine law have been given to ensure willingness of mind [*animi*], so that a man may be ready to do this or that should the occasion present itself. Consequently certain things are connected with an act of virtue as implying a willingness, namely that given the situation he is prepared to act in accord with reason. This seems especially noteworthy in the case of martyrdom, which is the right endurance of sufferings unjustly inflicted. Now people ought not to provide each other with opportunity for unjust action, but if someone does treat us unjustly, we ought to endure this in a balanced way.²⁸

More often than not affirmative laws have a latitude of due circumstances, but there must be a certain dedicated readiness in a person to accomplish them when the circumstances are right:

[A]ffirmative precepts, although always binding, nevertheless do not bind universally, but according to circumstances of time and place. Thus, just as the affirmative precepts concerning other virtues are to be taken as referring to preparation of mind—that a man should be ready to fulfill them when occasion arises—so also the precepts of patience.²⁹

Such preparedness of mind and will (*animi*) can be found in many of the saints:

Merit is weighed less by the deed than by the spirit in which it is done. Abraham's was such that he would have remained a virgin had that been his divine vocation. His marital continence and John's virginal continence were equally deserving with respect to the substance of the reward, though not to certain accessory enhancements. And so Augustine remarks that *John's celibacy and Abraham's marriage fought Christ's battle according to the historical context of each; what John did in fact Abraham was prepared to do.*³⁰

Though virginity is better than conjugal continence, a married person can be better than a virgin . . . from very chastity itself, as having a spirit more prepared to be ungrudging about virginity, were it called for, than some who in fact are virgins.³¹

Clearly, such judgments of particular individuals' virtue and merits are, in the final analysis, only found in the justice and mercy of God.

²⁸ ST II-II, q. 124, a. 1, ad 3.

²⁹ ST II-II, q. 140, a. 2, ad 2.

³⁰ ST II-II, q. 140, a. 4, ad 1.

³¹ Ibid., ad 2.

How Does One Go about Preparing One's Inner Dispositions?

If such preparedness of mind and heart is so essential for progress and growth in the spiritual life, how does one achieve this readiness to act? We cannot presuppose that one will have experienced these difficulties and then learn from one's blunders. Moreover, can one avoid the moral blunders at all?

Thomas, unfortunately, does not give us much detail on the praxis which would keep us ready or steady to do what is right or fitting in particular circumstances or would be helpful for growing in divine love. But hidden away in one article, there is a suggested solution. When Thomas confronts the question of courage in the face of unforeseen emergencies arising from menacing threats to one's life, he says:

When a person acts virtuously without forethought, under the inescapable threat of sudden danger, this above all else reveals the existence of a *habitus* of courage deeply seated in the soul. Yet even a man who has no courageous disposition can by long forethought [*diuturna praemeditatione*] prepare his soul against dangers. And the brave man too avails himself of this preparation at the right time.³²

The best teacher for the preparation of mind and heart is meditation done over a period of time. It is here in the quiet of one's intellect that resolutions are made, difficult virtuous deeds are born and nourished, and one's relationship with Christ is intensified when meditation turns into mental or contemplative prayer.³³ Prolonged meditation enables one to be ready to do certain difficult deeds when obliged or even when only counseled. The notion of meditation signifies the ability to ponder lovingly the concepts derived from authors of the spiritual life or Sacred Scriptures, conferences, homilies or the arts, and thus will stimulate the desires to practice the ordinary and, in this context, the more difficult virtues.

Devotion

In his treatment on devotion, Thomas gives the main insight into the "why" of meditation when he says:

God is the extrinsic and principal cause of devotion. . . . Clearly, however, the intrinsic or human cause of devotion is contemplation or meditation. Devotion is an act of the will by which a man promptly gives himself to the service of God. Every act of the will proceeds from some consideration of the intellect, since the object of the will is a known good. . . . Consequently, meditation is the cause of devotion

³² ST II-II, q. 123, a. 9.

³³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2654.

since through meditation man conceives the idea of giving himself to the service of God.³⁴

But the service of God is ultimately the whole life of virtue, not simply liturgical acts, which can only be achieved by depending upon the grace of God. While meditation on the very nature of the Triune God can awaken love for him, a person can also consider his or her weaknesses so as to banish presumption of personal strength and submit to God's help almost out of necessity.³⁵ But to look to God, one needs the virtues of humility and magnanimity, which in part depend on meditation as well.

The Role of Humility and Magnanimity

St. Thomas reminds thinkers of the spiritual life that humility holds back one's immoderate desires for high things when someone does not have the talent for certain kinds of actions.³⁶ On the other hand, given certain gifts from God, magnanimity "stiffens the spirit against hopelessness in the pursuit of great things in accordance with right reason."³⁷ Now to be humble and magnanimous requires an act of the will. However, "it is necessary that he should recognize where his abilities fail to match that which surpasses them. And therefore the knowledge of one's own deficiency is a condition of humility as a rule and criterion moderating one's appetite. . . ."³⁸ Like humility, magnanimity needs intellectual perception because, as Thomas says, "In man there is a quality of greatness possessed by God's gift, and a characteristic defect which comes from the weakness of his nature. Magnanimity therefore makes a man esteem himself worthy of great things through considering the gifts which he has from God. . . ."³⁹ In both virtues, the intellect needs to be activated by meditation, which can come through mental prayer, spiritual reading, and even infused contemplation. These insights of Thomas show how important the intellectual life is for growth in virtue as well as readiness of mind and heart to engage in certain positive precepts when called for by the virtue of prudence.

A Few Words about the Perfect Stage of the Spiritual Life

In two places of the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas describes those few persons who have achieved perfection of charity in this life when he says that they

³⁴ ST I-II, q. 82, a. 3.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ ST II-II, q. 161, a. 1.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ ST II-II, q. 161, a. 2.

³⁹ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 3, ad 4.

devote all [their] zeal to the consideration of God and divine things, leaving aside everything else except what the demands of this present life impose.⁴⁰

The third stage is when a man applies himself chiefly to the work of cleaving to God and enjoying him, which is characteristic of the perfect who *long to depart and to be with Christ* (Phil 1:23). . . .⁴¹

Thomas's description of the perfect stage of virtue in this life includes not only those in the religious state but anyone of the laity. These are the ones who have lived the various counsels even when not strictly obliged, together with the precepts of God. It is also interesting to note that Thomas in no way suggests that those in the perfect stage receive private revelations or apparitions or an extraordinary phenomena at all.

Conclusion

Holiness in practice consists primarily in exercising the three theological virtues, with divine love being the most important of them. Secondly, everyone is also called to accomplish and embody the moral virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance according to his circumstances. Both the theological and infused moral virtues⁴² are assisted not only with the help of actual grace but also with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, so necessary for heroic virtue according to St. Thomas.⁴³ While this article could not treat the positive thrusts of all the virtues, given the problems of the spiritual life we have analyzed here, it is evident that undermining or ignoring the very important law of the spiritual life concerning the *preparatio animi*, among the other problems treated in this article, leads one to mediocrity and failure to achieve one's human and divine potential and destiny. The demise of many religious and priestly vocations after the Second Vatican Council can be laid at the door of the failure to meditate and pray, which, Aquinas assures us, does prepare individuals for more difficult deeds of the spirit. Following the Second Vatican Council, many heroic changes were demanded of religious and priests. Judging from the many defections, those committed to perfection were not prepared in mind and heart to endure the new challenges and departed for marriage, or the single life of the layperson in the world. N V

⁴⁰ ST II-II, q. 24, a. 8.

⁴¹ ST II-II, q. 24, a. 9.

⁴² A teaching of St. Thomas found in the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, but seemingly abandoned in the present *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

⁴³ ST I-II, q. 68, aa. 1-8.