

St. Thomas Aquinas's Appeal to St. John the Baptist as a Benchmark of Spiritual Greatness

JOHN BAPTIST KU, O.P.
Dominican House of Studies
Washington, DC

When we think of sources of St. Thomas Aquinas's speculative theology, we rightly recall teachings given in Scripture—such as that sin came into the world through one man (Rom 5:12) or that all that the Father has belongs also to the Son (John 16:15)—as well as teachings, based on Scripture, imparted by Church councils or Fathers, such as that Christ is one person with two natures¹ or that the human nature of Christ is an instrument of his divinity.² In the project of faith seeking understanding, these teachings lead expeditiously to distinctions and clarifications concerning person and nature, habit and action, primary and instrumental causality, intellect and will, faith and reason, and the like. However, the saints themselves too serve as a source for Aquinas's speculative theological reflection. Though they admittedly constitute a less abundant source than scriptural, conciliar, or patristic teaching, the saints' contribution to Aquinas's theology merits our attention.

For instance, in “Jean-Baptiste: figure du prêcheur chez Thomas d'Aquin,” Jean-Pierre Torrell observes that Aquinas's research into the Fathers of the Church for the *Catena aurea* bore considerable influence on his subsequent works, and Torrell documents how Aquinas's treatment of John the Baptist is a precise case that shows this influence.³ More recent

¹ Council of Chalcedon (451).

² John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa* 3.15.

³ Jean-Pierre Torrell, “Jean-Baptiste Figure du Prêcheur chez Thomas d'Aquin,” in *Recherches Thomasiennes* (Paris: Vrin, 2000), 336–56, at 336.

scholarship has, fortunately, taken note of the saints' contribution to Aquinas's theology—in the figures of St. Benedict and the virgin martyrs.⁴

This article will therefore examine St. John the Baptist as just such a source of Aquinas's speculative theology. Aquinas appeals to St. John as a benchmark of spiritual greatness against which to situate other figures: Christ, angels, Mary, apostles, prophets, evangelists, priests, and the people of God. By examining these cases, we will not only observe the Angelic Doctor's appreciation of the saints as our teachers, as examples to be imitated, and as proofs of God's love in transformative grace; we will also witness aspects of the Dominican master's theological method, that is, in his manner of interpreting Scripture and his application of reason to scriptural data to make arguments and draw conclusions.⁵ For instance, in his treatment of the least in the kingdom of heaven, Scripture will definitively confirm what theological reasoning can determine concerning the knowledge of those with the beatific vision. Furthermore, his exposition on the Blessed Virgin will reveal that he reads the Bible as a whole with one divine author, in support of traditional interpretations.⁶ However, he is not naive about diverse human authorship and the literal versus the spiritual senses

⁴ See Andrew Hofer, "St. Thomas Aquinas on St. Benedict," *The American Benedictine Review* 71, no. 4 (2020): 410–34, and Innocent Smith, "St. Thomas Aquinas and the Early Christian Virgin Martyrs," *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 4 (2019): 5–36.

⁵ A more extended treatment of medieval hagiography, the development of the articulation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, and Aquinas's teaching on the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture are beyond the scope of this article. For more on those topics, see: *Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Thomas Head (New York: Routledge, 2001); Christiaan W. Kappes, *The Immaculate Conception: Why Thomas Aquinas Denied, While John Duns Scotus, Gregory Palamas, and Mark Eugenikos Professed the Absolute Immaculate Existence of Mary* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2014); Pedro Lumbreras, *Saint Thomas and the Immaculate Conception* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1923); Hugolinus Storff, *The Immaculate Conception: The Teaching of St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure and Bl. J. Duns Scotus on the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (San Francisco: St. Francis Press, 1925); Piotr Roszak, *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas: Hermeneutical Tools, Theological Questions and New Perspectives*, ed. Piotr Roszak and Jörgen Vijgen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015); Stephen E. Fowl, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 35–50; *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to His Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum (London: T&T Clark, 2005). Here I hope merely to sketch out for the reader Thomas's deployment of John the Baptist as a spiritual benchmark.

⁶ See, for instance, John P. Yocum, "Aquinas' Literal Exposition on Job," in Weinandy, Keating, and Yocum, *Aquinas on Scripture*, 27.

of Scripture,⁷ and his methodology unveils his explicit conviction that Scripture must be the basis of theological claims.⁸

My presentation will unfold in five sections. After (1) a glance at some of Aquinas's comments on the authority of various sources of theology so as to situate our conversation about the saints as a source of theology, I will review Aquinas's enlistment of John the Baptist as a standard by which to establish: (2) three simple points about Christians and Christ—that all of the articles of faith must be accepted, that prepubescent children can enter religious life, and that Christ's baptism manifests divine power—(3) the superiority of angels to wayfarers, among whom John the Baptist is the greatest, followed by apostles, prophets, and evangelists; (4) the eminence of John the Baptist and a ranking, in order, of God, angels, John the Baptist, prophets, priests, and then God's people; and (5) the holiness of Mary the Mother of God.

The Authority of Various Sources of Theology

In just a few lines in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas identifies the roles of reason and authority in theology. On one hand, “it is most proper” to theology to offer “proofs from authority,” since theology’s “principles are known through revelation”—making theological arguments dependent on “the authority of those making the revelation.” But on the other hand, theology “also uses human reason, not to prove faith . . . but to make clear things that are handed on in this teaching.” This deployment of reason in the service of theology should come as no surprise, because “grace does not destroy nature but perfects it” so that “natural reason should serve faith.” Thus, theology “uses the authority of the philosophers where they could know the truth through natural reason.”⁹

But the philosophers are the weakest authorities for theology, which “uses this kind of authority as extraneous and probable arguments.” Divine revelation and the Fathers of the Church are theology’s proper authorities, where “the authority of the canonical Scriptures [is used] to argue

⁷ See *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 1, a. 10, for instance. All translations are my own (see corpusthomisticum.org for the Latin originals used; ST translations use the text from vols. 4–12 of the Leonine edition; a full listing of the volumes of the Leonine edition can also be found on the Corpus Thomisticum website; where Leonine ed. volumes for works are still *in praeparatione*, the volumes in the other editions as stated at Corpus Thomisticum have been listed).

⁸ See ST I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2, for example.

⁹ ST I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

from necessity,” and the authority of the Fathers of the Church to argue “with probable certainty.”¹⁰ Reason is a handmaiden to revelation, then, in producing the science of theology. Scripture is an inerrant source of revelation that outranks the Fathers, who are proper authorities but are capable only of supplying probable proofs for argumentation. For this reason, biblical saints, like John the Baptist, are of special theological interest to Aquinas as figures that can contribute necessary arguments.

This appeal to the authority of divine revelation along with the application of reason in order to draw out arguments concerning dogmatic or moral teachings is familiar to any student of medieval theology. However, it is also present in Aquinas’s examination of the saints who are mentioned in Scripture, as we will see in our consideration of Aquinas’s treatment of St. John the Baptist.

John as a Benchmark for Christians and for Christ

Aquinas turns to St. John the Baptist as a sort of spiritual benchmark by which to show what is possible and what is necessary for persons in view of divine grace, and to rank certain figures in terms of spiritual greatness. John the Baptist is particularly suited to this role because Jesus has taught us that no one born of woman is greater than John the Baptist and yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John (Matt 11:11; Luke 7:28); thus, John stands as a definitive point of comparison between these two realms. Moreover, according to a traditional interpretation, which Aquinas accepts, Luke indicates that John was sanctified while still in his mother’s womb when Mary visited Elizabeth (Luke 1:41); this datum extends the reach of conclusions that the Angelic Doctor is able to draw.

In this section, we will consider Thomas’s application of the Baptist-standard to Christ and to Christians to make three simple points—one about Christ and two about Christians. Regarding Christians, first, John can serve as a threshold to show us what articles of the Creed we are obligated to accept, since on one hand he is the greatest among us and was the closest to Christ, but on the other hand he sent his disciples to ask Christ whether he was the promised messiah—perhaps expressing doubt;¹¹ and we lesser folk would not be expected to believe more than John did.

¹⁰ ST I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

¹¹ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 7, obj. 2: “Moreover, it is certain that John the Baptist was among the leaders [*maioribus*], and was the closest to Christ—of whom the Lord says in Matt 11[v. 11] that ‘among those born of women no one greater [*maior*] than he has arisen.’ But John the Baptist seems not to have known the mystery of Christ explicitly, since

Thus, if John did not believe in the (future) suffering of Christ, we would not be obligated to believe in it either.

Aquinas rejects the notion that John doubted the future suffering of Jesus but allows that he could have doubted “whether Christ would descend into hell in his own person.”¹² Why could he have doubted this? Because, explains Aquinas, no one was obligated to believe it before its fulfillment. Now, Jesus had not yet undergone his Passion either, so why would anyone be obligated to believe that he would suffer? Peter, significantly, even argued against the idea (Matt 16:23; Mark 8:33). Thomas asserts that John knew of the Lord’s Passion, “since the other prophets had foretold this before, as is especially clear in Isaiah 53.”¹³ By contrast, there was no explicit prophecy that he would descend into hell.

John showed his understanding of Christ’s Passion when “he himself said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world’ [John 1:29], foretelling his future immolation.”¹⁴ And when John asked, “are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Matt 11:3), he did not doubt that Jesus was the Messiah, but asked “out of piety” and for the purpose of “teaching the disciples,” whom he had sent to Christ to pose this question.¹⁵ Indeed, he manifested explicit faith in Christ’s coming in the flesh when he proclaimed, “I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God” (John 1:34).¹⁶

So, in the final analysis, we are not dispensed from any of the articles of the Creed, because if John doubted anything, it was only that Christ would descend into hell in his own person—but we, unlike John, live after the fulfillment of Christ’s descent into hell. Even so, we see that, for Aquinas, John operates as a benchmark for believers: if he had not believed in any particular article of the creed, we who are below the greatest born of woman would be excused from believing in it as well.

Regarding the second point about Christians, John, along with St. Benedict, shows that it is possible for children to enter religious life before puberty—with their parents’ consent:

he asked Christ, as we read in Matt 11[v. 3], ‘Are you he who is to come, or should we await another?’”

¹² ST II-II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 2.

¹³ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 2. And we could add Ps 22 and Wis 2, among others.

¹⁴ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 2.

¹⁵ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 2.

¹⁶ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 2; *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 11, ad 6 (Leonine ed. vol. 22); and *Super Matt* 11, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., 1951). See also *In III sent.*, d. 25, q. 2, a. 2, q. 3, obj. and ad 1 (Parma ed. vols. 6–7).

Nevertheless, although they cannot be professed before the age of puberty, they can, with the consent of their parents, be received into religion to be educated there—as we read in Luke 1[v. 80] of John the Baptist that *the child grew and was strengthened in spirit, and was in the deserts*.¹⁷

Here Aquinas deploys John as an example of what is humanly possible and even spiritually advantageous. As John was able to grow and become strong in spirit by living from his childhood in the desert, so can other children. This was not a hypothetical question: one of these other children who followed in the Baptist's path was none other than Thomas Aquinas, who at the ripe old age of five or six went to live at a Benedictine monastery with his nurse.¹⁸

Although the child John's early departure for the desert shows that more ordinary children may embrace religious life, we should not imagine that all are capable of the intensity and perfection of the Baptist's life of solitude—as Aquinas clarifies in his commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*. In reflecting on the fact that it is man's nature to be political, that is to live and participate in society, Aquinas observes that those who are not political are so either because they are better than others (godlike, according to Aristotle's categories of moral character) or worse than others (brutish). St. John the Baptist and St. Anthony were examples of the godlike:

But if someone is such that he is not political on account of nature, either he must be depraved, as when this happens from the corruption of human nature, or else he is better than man, namely, insofar as he has a more perfect nature than other men commonly have, so that he can be self-sufficient by himself without the society of men—which nature was in John the Baptist and blessed Anthony the hermit.¹⁹

We should have suspected that the greatest born of woman would enjoy such an elevated state of human perfection.

¹⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 189, a. 5, corp. See also: the sermon *Exiit Qui Seminavit*, pt. 2 (Leonine ed. vol. 44/1); *Contra doctrinam retrahentium a religione*, ch. 3 and ch. 13, corp. (Leonine ed. vol. 41C); *Super Matt* 20, lec. 1; *Quodlibet* V, q. 11, a. 1, ad obj. (Leonine ed. vol. 25/2).

¹⁸ See Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁹ *In I pol.*, lec. 1, no. 27 (Leonine ed. vol. 48).

With respect to Christ, John offers a standard against which to contrast the effects of baptism so as to reveal something about the baptizer. John's baptism was only a sign, while Christ's confers grace.²⁰ Only God can be the principal cause of the forgiveness of sins and grace in the soul. The fact that John's baptism could not forgive sin or give grace, yet Christ's baptism can do both, points to Christ's divinity. God the Son worked through his humanity to produce effects far beyond what the greatest born of woman was capable of. For Aquinas, here John serves as a benchmark to expose the divine power of his slightly younger cousin.

John as a Benchmark Establishing the Superiority of Angels to Wayfarers

In this third section, I will consider specific examples of Aquinas's appeal to St. John as a benchmark based on Matthew 11:11 / Luke 7:28, where Jesus asserts that, "truly, . . . among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist," yet "he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than [John]." Drawing on his different comparisons from various works, we can discern that, for Thomas, angels are superior to wayfarers—who of course can only be humans; and among humans—as *wayfarers*—we have the order of: John the Baptist, possibly John the Apostle, apostles and prophets, and then evangelists.

The blessed include angels and men, but during John's lifetime—before the death and resurrection of Jesus—only the angels would have been in heaven.²¹ In examining this verse in Scripture about John the Baptist's greatness, Thomas never brings Mary into the comparison. He compares John and Mary rather in the context of being sanctified in the womb, as we shall see below. The Angelic Doctor takes it for granted that more grace was bestowed on the Virgin Mother of God than on any other saint,²² and simply does not mention her or Jesus as obvious exceptions to the assertion that John is the greatest of anyone born of woman. His argument that

²⁰ *ST* III, qq. 38 and 69; *In IV sent.*, d. 2, q. 2, a. 2, and d. 5, q. 2, a. 3, q. 2, ex. text.; *Super Ioan* 1, lec. 13–14 (Marietti ed., 1952).

²¹ *ST* III, q. 49, a. 5, corp.

²² *ST* III, q. 27, a. 1, corp.: "For it is reasonably believed that she who gave birth to 'the Only-Begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth' [see John 1:14] received greater privileges of grace than all others, whence we read in Luke 1[:28] that the angel said to her 'Hail, full of grace'" (see below in the section on "Mary's Sanctification in the Womb" for the fuller quotation). See also *ST* III, q. 27, a. 2, obj. 1: "More grace was bestowed on the Virgin Mother of God than on any one of the saints."

the lowest blessed is higher than the greatest mere wayfarer (really Mary, not John) still holds. Because Christ had the beatific vision even while a wayfarer, he was never below anyone at any time.²³

In four of his works, Aquinas draws on the articulation of John's place in Matthew 11:11 / Luke 7:28 to establish that the lowest angel is above all wayfarers. The central issue in all of these cases is the superiority of the angels' knowledge of God. This will include the consequent consideration of angelic versus human speech about God, and whether angels can be taught about God by wayfarers in any way. It will be concerning our speech about God where the Angelic Doctor will take the occasion to indicate an order among different classes of wayfarers: apostles, prophets, and evangelists.

The *Summa theologiae* will contribute four cases for us to examine, and the commentaries on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and Dionysius's *On the Divine Names*, will each supply one. We now proceed to these seven passages.

The first passage appears in the commentary on the *Sentences* (the *Scriptum*): where he considers whether angels learned of the Incarnation through men, Thomas sets John the Baptist before us as a standard for the greatest of anyone born of woman, in order to establish the superior place of angels according to nature:

According to condition of status, any angel is absolutely greater than any human wayfarer, whence Matthew 11:11 says that "he who is lesser [*minor*] in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he," namely, John the Baptist, than whom nevertheless no one greater among those born of women has arisen. But as far as the cause is concerned, it can be said that some man is relatively greater than some angel insofar as through the grace that he has, he merits a level higher than certain angels.²⁴

We are immediately confronted here with a distinction between being greater by condition of status and being greater, only relatively, by grace. As Thomas clarifies later in the *Summa*, any angel (even the least in the kingdom of heaven) is *actually* greater than any wayfarer (even the greatest born of woman), although a wayfarer may be *virtually* greater than an

²³ Christ alone was a beatified wayfarer. See, for instance, *ST* I, q. 62, a. 9, ad 3; II-II, q. 174, a. 5, ad 3; and III, q. 7, a. 8, ad 3.

²⁴ *In II sent.*, d. 11, q. 2, a. 4, ad 2.

angel in that the wayfarer could have more charity through grace than the lowest angel, so that when the wayfarer enters the kingdom of heaven, he will be greater.²⁵ Thus, in the *Scriptum*, “greater by condition of status” can be interpreted as *actually greater* and “relatively greater by grace” as *virtually greater*.

In the *Scriptum*, Thomas's point is that angels are never taught by humans about God. Angels can learn about certain effects of a mystery as it unfolds through human actions, but here God would be teaching them through human activity.²⁶ For Aquinas, no wayfarer teaches any angel; and the scriptural revelation about John the Baptist confirms this. Now, Aquinas might seem to have provided an imperfect analysis here, since he establishes that the angels are superior in knowledge but he concludes that they are greater simply—not only in knowledge. That is, he determines that they are not only relatively greater—in intelligence, for instance—but actually greater. However, for Aquinas, this is the right criterion for ranking, because men and angels can be said to be created in the image of God on account of their rationality. Man is not in God's image on account of his body, but rather his intellect;²⁷ man is most his mind.²⁸ Revealed as the greatest born of woman, John serves as a divinely established benchmark to ground this theological conclusion.

In our second passage of this section, Aquinas restates his position about the angels' intellectual superiority in the first part of the *Summa theologiae*, where he sorts out the angels' hierarchy:

The lower (*minor*) angel is higher than the highest man of our hierarchy, according to Matthew 11: “He who is lesser in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”—namely, John the Baptist, than whom no one greater among those born of women has arisen. Whence the lower angel of the heavenly hierarchy can not only cleanse but also illuminate and perfect, and in a higher way than the orders of our hierarchy can.²⁹

²⁵ ST I, q. 117, a. 2, ad 3: “Some men, even in the state of a wayfarer, are greater than some angels—however, not in act but in virtue, insofar namely as they have charity of such strength [*virtutis*] that they can merit a greater level of beatitude than certain angels have: as we could say that the seed of a great tree is virtually greater than a small tree, although it is actually much smaller.”

²⁶ In II sent., d. 11, q. 2, a. 4, corp.; ST I, q. 117, a. 2, ad 1.

²⁷ ST I, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2.

²⁸ ST I-II, q. 29, a. 4, corp.

²⁹ ST I, q. 108, a. 2, ad 3.

Our third passage is found a few questions later in the *Summa*, where Thomas adds the clarification that man cannot teach angels:

But it is manifest that in the same way in which inferior angels are subject to superior angels, the highest men are subject even to the lowest angels. This is clear from what our Lord says in Matthew 11: “No one has arisen among those born of women greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is lesser in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Therefore angels are never enlightened by men about divine things.³⁰

As was the case in the *Scriptum*, the authority that Aquinas relies on here for his doctrine is the revelation that John is the greatest born of woman but below the least in the kingdom of God.

In two objections from questions in the *Summa theologiae* dealing with oaths and *dulia*, this same Scripture passage appears, making the same point, here in service of objections that will ultimately be dismissed. One of these is our fourth passage, where concerning oaths, the objection argues:

Moreover, in this world no living man is of such dignity as is an angel, for Matthew 11 says that “he who is lesser in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he,” namely, John the Baptist while he was living in the world. But it is fitting to an angel to swear, for it says in Revelation 10 that the angel “swore by Him who lives for ever and ever.” Therefore no man ought to be excused from swearing, on account of dignity.³¹

In reply to this objection, Thomas observes that the angel does not swear on account of a defect in his credibility—which would indicate that less credible man should then swear—but because his message “proceeds from God’s infallible disposition.”

In the second of these objections, our fifth text, where he treats *dulia*, Aquinas quotes Matthew 11:11 more loosely, supplying “John the Baptist” for “he”:³²

³⁰ ST I, q. 117, a. 2, corp.

³¹ ST II-II, q. 89, a. 10, obj. 4.

³² The Leonine critical edition has *Ioanne Baptista* (“than John the Baptist”) instead of *illo* (“than he”).

It seems that honor is not properly owed to superiors. For an angel is superior to any human wayfarer, according to Matthew 11: "He who is lesser in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist." But an angel prohibited John [the Apostle] from honoring him when John wanted to, as is clear at the end of the Book of Revelation. Therefore honor is not owed to superiors.³³

Aquinas offers two possible answers to the objection. First, the angel did not mean to decline honor altogether, but only the adoration of *latria*. Second, at the risk of undermining his own principle of ordering, the Angelic Doctor opines that perhaps the angel did not regard himself as superior, because Christ had made John the Apostle equal to the angels.

While Thomas might appear to suggest here that the John of Revelation is John the Baptist, not John the Apostle, that idea is explicitly ruled out in *De Veritate*, q. 13, a. 2, ad 9, where Thomas writes that, in the Book of Revelation, it is John the Apostle who is lifted out of his senses to an imaginary vision. Although these two objections in the *Summa* do not consider the angels' intellectual superiority, Aquinas's analysis here is consistent with the cases we examined above in appealing to John the Baptist as a benchmark in the order of spiritual beings.

Our sixth passage comes from the commentary on Ephesians, where the Dominican master clarifies that perhaps fallen angels could be taught by men, here invoking the Gospel of Luke:

Therefore it is not fitting from any perspective to say that the blessed who are in heaven are taught by a wayfarer, however perfect. For although among those born of women there has arisen none greater than John the Baptist, nevertheless "he who is lesser in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he," as Luke 7:28 says. But to say that demons are taught by men is plausible.³⁴

Although no human intellect can compare to an angelic intellect on the natural level, considered absolutely, mere wayfarers could receive revelations from God about divine mysteries and teach them to demons, who could be ignorant of them. By contrast, the blessed—whether angelic or

³³ *ST* II-II, q. 103, a. 2, obj. 1.

³⁴ *Super Eph* 3, lec. 3 (Marietti ed., 1953: vol. 2 of 2 of *Super Epistolas S. Pauli Lectura*, containing commentaries on the whole Pauline corpus).

human—see the divine essence immediately, and thus they simply cannot be taught about God by any wayfarer.

Our seventh passage, on angels' superiority to wayfarers, occurs in Thomas's commentary on Dionysius's *On the Divine Names* where Dionysius ponders the limitation of our ability to speak accurately of God. Here Thomas places the best theologians below the lowest angel by invoking John the Baptist as the benchmark given in Matthew 11:11:

The most excellent theologians among us fall short of the lowest of the angels, as Matthew 11 says that "he who is lesser in the kingdom of heaven is greater than" John the Baptist.³⁵

Aquinas specifies further that these excellent "theologians philosophizing about divine things [are], namely, prophets and apostles, or even their assistants who produced the canonical Scriptures, like Luke and Mark."³⁶ He does not specify any order of rank between prophets and apostles here, but he does hint that, after angels and John the Baptist, prophets and apostles outrank evangelists. In two of his scriptural commentaries, as we shall see below,³⁷ Thomas asserts that New Testament figures outrank Old Testament patriarchs and that the apostles were preserved from mortal sin after Pentecost, which would place the apostles ahead of prophets.

Here the dignity of rank is based on speech about God—which follows upon knowledge. Thus, we find this verse of Scripture again invoked in connection to superiority of knowledge. And again, John serves as the standard to establish the order of angels, St. John, apostles and prophets, and then evangelists.

John's Eminence as an *Angelus* yet Still Below the Least in the Kingdom of Heaven

In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Thomas invokes the verses immediately preceding the key verse we examined just above to work out the order among God, angels, John the Baptist, prophets, priests, and God's

³⁵ *In de divinis nominibus*, ch. 13, lec. 4 (Marietti ed., 1950; Corpus Thomisticum reproduces this edition's erroneous Roman numeral II but without the printed edition's interpolated correction; there is no critical edition of this work).

³⁶ *In de divinis Nominibus*, ch. 13, lec. 4.

³⁷ See the sections below on "John's Eminence as an *Angelus* yet Still below the Least in the Kingdom of Heaven" and "The Ramification of John's Sanctification in the Womb on Mary's Sanctification" below.

people.³⁸ To explain John's position within this ranking, Thomas focuses on the word *angelus*, angel or messenger, in Matthew 11:9–10: "Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.³⁹ This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger [*angelus*] before your face, who shall prepare your way before you.'"

John is more than a prophet; he is the Lord's *angelus* (Matt 11:9–10). In view of this revelation, Aquinas ranks John, the human angel, above normal prophets on account of the immediacy of John's vision of the God-man and the role John had in going before the Lord to prepare his way. To elucidate this order, Aquinas additionally specifies the place of priests and the people, giving us the ranking of God, angels, John the Baptist, prophets, priests, and then the people:

Therefore [Matthew] says, "I said that he is more than a prophet," about whom we find in Malachi 3:1: "Behold, I send my messenger (*angelus*), who will prepare your way before you, etc." In this source, John's excelling qualities are indicated: first, because he calls him an angel. For an angel is higher than a prophet, because as a priest is midway between a prophet and the people, so a prophet is between angels and priests. But an angel is between God and prophets. Hence Zechariah says: "The angel who spoke in me" (1:9). "Angel" is the name of an office, not of a nature; hence John is called an angel on account of his office. For there is a difference between an angel and a prophet, since angels see manifestly—whence it is said below in 18:10: "For I say to you that their angels always see the face of my Father, who is in heaven." Angels always see the face of God, but prophets do not. Hence, as angels always see the face of the Father, so John saw Christ in a special way; and because of this special way, [Malachi] says "my." He also says, "before my face." When a king goes out, many go before him, but the more familiar ones go *before his face*. So, John is said to be more honorable, because he was sent

³⁸ Torrell avers that, as regards idea that the prophet is between the angel and the priest, and the priest is between the prophet and the people, John the Baptist is a unique case, and "there is no reason to think that Thomas is seeking to propose here a theology of ministry" ("Jean-Baptiste Figure," 353). This just reflects an "occasional view."

³⁹ Aquinas gives three reasons why John is more than a prophet. First, prophets foretell the future, but John showed the present also, as when he pointed out the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29); second, he was the forerunner of the Messiah, which is why he is called the Baptist; and third, he prophesied even while in the womb (*Super Matt* 11, lec. 1).

before his face—for, the closer, the more honorable. Similarly, he prepared the way because he baptized. Hence he says, “who will prepare the way before you.”⁴⁰

Thomas plays on the broader and narrower denotations of the term “angel.” On one hand, in the broader sense, it simply means messenger, and thus it applies to John perfectly without the implication that he is a separated substance. Such an application is perfectly logical, because “‘angel’ is the name of an office, not a nature,” as Aquinas observes, quoting St. Gregory the Great.⁴¹ But on the other hand, “an angel is between God and the prophets,” and “angels always see the face of God, but prophets do not.” Furthermore, as we noted above, angels are never taught by wayfarers about divine things, because angels are (intellectually) superior. So, even if the term designates an office and not a nature, it is regularly—if not almost exclusively—used to refer to separated substances.

Aquinas draws these two senses together in attributing them to John, to place John above the rest of the prophets, who were not as close to Christ as John was: “As angels always see the face of the Father, so John saw Christ in a special way,” which the other prophets did not. Aquinas follows up on this comment by explaining that Malachi, whom Matthew quotes, says “*my* angel” and speaks of the Lord’s sending John “before *my* face” to indicate the intimacy that John had with Christ.⁴² For “many go before [the king], but the more familiar ones go *before his* face.”⁴³

⁴⁰ *Super Mattheum* 11, lec. 1. Thomas does not attribute the idea of priests being between prophets and the people to any authority, and he mentions it in only one other place in his corpus: *In IV sent.*, d. 25, q. 2, a. 1, q1a. 1, obj. 1.

⁴¹ When Thomas appeals to this quotation in *In II sent.*, d. 9, q. 1, a. 4, ad 2, he attributes it to Gregory by name.

⁴² Thomas reiterates the idea that John’s closeness to Christ makes him more than a prophet, in his commentary on the Gospel of John: “When John is asked whether he is a prophet, why does he respond that he is not a prophet? . . . One answer is that John is not simply a prophet but more than a prophet. For the other prophets only foretold far off future things—as we read in Habakkuk, ‘if it should delay, wait for it’—but John announced the present Christ, as if pointing his finger, as when he says later on in the Gospel: ‘Behold, the Lamb of God.’ And therefore, the Lord says in Matthew 11:9 that he is more than a prophet” (*Super Ioan* 1, lec. 12).

⁴³ Regarding John’s intimacy with Christ, Torrell notes that Aquinas forcefully emphasizes that Jesus did not only go to John to be baptized but that he visited him regularly: “He was accustomed to come to John frequently before he was baptized” (*Super Ioan* 1, lec. 9; quoted in “Jean-Baptiste Figure,” 339). Furthermore, Aquinas beautifully develops the image of John as the best man: “For Christ is the groom of the Church, but John is the friend and best man of the groom. Now, the duty of the best man is to

It might seem curious that Aquinas would quote Malachi instead of Matthew—who reports Jesus's quotation of Malachi for the express purpose of applying his prophetic words to John—but Aquinas has a reason. Interestingly, Matthew—or better, Jesus—changes the pronoun from “my face” in Malachi to “your face,” making it sound like it is the Father speaking to the Son through this prophecy, instead of the Lord simply speaking to the people about sending his messenger to prepare for his coming. But Aquinas wishes to emphasize the connection between “my angel” and “[being sent] before my face” to indicate John's closeness to Christ. John is sent before the face of Christ the King “to prepare the way before [him],” which John did “because he baptized.”

Thus, a question of speculative theology concerning angels and prophets is answered authoritatively with the help of Scripture, and in this case, John the Baptist provides a convenient yardstick. Here Thomas ties together passages from Malachi and Zechariah, as well as another from Matthew, because they all employ the term *angelus*; while not naive about sources behind texts and weaknesses of translations, the Dominican master read Scripture as a coherent revelation with one primary author.⁴⁴ Admittedly, today many might not adopt his method of scriptural argumentation, but it is not so far from how the scriptural authors themselves argue. In any case, it should be clear that, for Aquinas, Scripture is the normative authority, which makes scriptural saints a source for theology.⁴⁵

Naturally, in his commentary on Matthew, Thomas offers his most extended treatment of the verse that asserts that John is the greatest among

deliver the bride to the groom, and, by speaking, to deliver the agreements. But the duty of the groom is to be silent, as if because of respect, and to make arrangements as he wills for the bride he now possesses. Thus, the disciples are delivered to Christ by John as if espoused through faith. John speaks, Christ is silent; but once he has received them, Christ instructs them carefully” (*Super Ioan* 1, lec, 15).

⁴⁴ For instance, Aquinas was the first to identify the author of the *Book of Causes*, long attributed to Aristotle, as an Arabic philosopher who borrowed from Proclus (see Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 1:222). Also, in the introduction to his commentary on the Psalms, Aquinas speaks of three translations of the Psalter, an old one that was corrupted over time by copyists, a correction of this version by Jerome, and a second version corrected by Jerome against the Septuagint. Although not all of the details he reports are accurate, he was correct in identifying three versions, where two were corrections by Jerome, one closer to the Greek and one based on the Hebrew.

⁴⁵ Torrell (“Jean-Baptiste Figure,” 344) describes Aquinas's exegetical style as concerned with the smallest literal details but above all attentive to their theological significance, and to demonstrate this, he adduces the explanations of several Fathers of the Church regarding John the Baptist's revelation that “among you stands one whom you do not know” (“Jean-Baptiste Figure,” 344).

those born of woman.⁴⁶ When we come to the key verse itself, Thomas asserts that the evangelist “shows that he [John the Baptist] is excelling among earthly beings” and “lesser among heavenly beings.”⁴⁷ And he explains that Matthew writes, “no one greater *has arisen* among those born of women,” because “whoever can attain the state of grace *arises*.”⁴⁸

Aquinas then explains that John is not greater by nature, but on account of the vocation he received from God. This is different, observes the Angelic Doctor, from the situation of angels. Being immaterial, each angel must be individuated not by matter, but by its form, or act of being; thus, each angel is its own species. And therefore, each angel is by nature distinct in greatness; they are naturally arranged in a hierarchy. Humans, by contrast, all have the same nature and are by nature equal. It is God’s gift of grace to each human being that distinguishes greatness:

Therefore, according to the first point [whether John excelled among all humans], I say that the argument—that he than whom no other is greater is the greatest—would have merit concerning angels, where there is order; but among men it is not true, because among men there is no order according to nature but only according to grace. Similarly, if he is said to be greater than all the fathers of the Old Testament, it is not unfitting, for he is greater and more excellent who has been chosen for a greater office. For Abraham is greater among the patriarchs with respect to proving one’s faith, but Moses is greater with respect to the office of prophecy, as it says in Deuteronomy 34:10: “Since then there has not arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses.” All of these were precursors of the Lord, but none was of such excellence or favor. Therefore, he was chosen for a greater office: “He will be great in the presence of the Lord” (Luke 1:15).⁴⁹

Aquinas places great weight on the effect of grace here. He maintains that, according to nature, all men are equal, even though clearly some have more natural ability than others. Thus, although St. John the Baptist and St. Anthony qualify as the godlike (according to Aristotle’s categories of

⁴⁶ Aquinas wrote commentaries on the Gospels of John and of Matthew. The commentary on Matthew stands in for all three synoptic Gospels. To the ancients and medievals, Matthew enjoyed a certain primacy. For instance, St. Dominic was known to carry with him the epistles of Paul and the Gospel of Matthew.

⁴⁷ *Super Matt* 11, lec. 1.

⁴⁸ *Super Matt* 11, lec. 1.

⁴⁹ *Super Matt* 11, lec. 1.

moral character) in being able to adopt a life of the most intense solitude without society, which we noted above,⁵⁰ that does not suffice to make them “greater” than other humans. By contrast, grace distinguishes men in greatness to such a degree that Aquinas compares this distinction to difference in species—which we find among angels. The Angelic Doctor manifests great respect for the Baptist here. While among the precursors of the Lord Jesus, Abraham was greater in a certain respect (i.e., faith), and Moses was greater in another respect (i.e., prophecy); John simply excelled them and was more favored: “Therefore, he was chosen for a greater office” and would be “great in the presence of the Lord.”

Aquinas next reprises his explanation from the *prima pars* of the *Summa*, which we quote above, concerning the comparison of the least in the kingdom of God to the greatest wayfarers.⁵¹ The blessed, whether human or angelic, are higher than any wayfarer at this moment; but a current wayfarer could well be greater than any particular blessed once the wayfarer himself becomes a blessed:

[One explanation of this verse is] that by “kingdom of heaven” the order of the blessed is understood, and he who is lesser among them is greater than any wayfarer. . . . And this is to be understood of actual greatness; for the one who has the beatific vision is actually greater. [But this is not the case] according to virtual greatness, as one small herb is said to be greater in power, although another is greater in size.⁵²

Thus, John was below the least in the kingdom of heaven while a wayfarer, but once in the kingdom himself, John was clearly no longer the least.

Aquinas includes another analogy for grasping the application of this verse to the Baptist, albeit with a confusing example. He notes that one can be in a higher state of life but lower in merit than a particular individual in a lower state of life. Thus, as Thomas outlines just above, John can be in a lower state as a wayfarer but in fact have more merit—which will ultimately give him a higher place as a *comprehensor*. This, says Aquinas, gives John a middle place.

⁵⁰ See the section on “The Authority of Various Sources of Theology” above.

⁵¹ See the section on “John as a Benchmark Establishing the Superiority of Angels to Wayfarers” above. The First Part of the *Summa* was completed in 1268—the year that he left Rome and returned to Paris for his second regency—and the commentary on Matthew was begun in 1269.

⁵² *Super Matt* 11, lec. 1.

The confusing example Thomas will proffer is his illustration of how an Old Testament patriarch can be superior to certain New Testament figures, with the case of Abraham's marriage being better than John's celibacy—a fact Thomas accepts on the authority of a Father of the Church, St. Augustine of Hippo. So, was Abraham greater as a wayfarer than John was as a wayfarer? No. That thesis would contradict what Aquinas clearly articulates later in this very passage, as well as in a number of other places about John that we have already reviewed. We can only conclude that this is a clumsy example simply evidencing the general principle that one can be in an objectively lower state but actually be higher according to the more definitive criterion of merit. For instance, some Old Testament patriarchs are greater than some New Testament figures, a married person could be greater than a particular consecrated celibate, and a wayfarer could be virtually greater than a given *comprehensor*:

Or it can otherwise be explained that someone is said to be greater in two ways: either as to merit—and thus many patriarchs are greater than some the New Testament figures, as Augustine says that John's celibacy is not preferred to Abraham's marriage—or by comparing one state to another, as virgins are better than the married, but nevertheless not every virgin is better than every married person. Hence John has the dignity of being on a certain boundary, because he is greater than wayfarers but less than *comprehensors*, and so he holds a middle place.⁵³

John is not even classified among wayfarers; he is above them.

This middle place signifies another boundary, according to Aquinas, namely, the boundary between the Old and New Testaments:

"But from the days of John the Baptist until now, etc." Here he is commended regarding the distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament. And John's excellence is noted, because he is the beginning of the New Testament and the end of the Old Testament. Therefore [Matthew] said that "he who is lesser in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he," and this pertains to the fact that he is the beginning of the New Testament.⁵⁴

⁵³ *Super Matt* 11, lec. 1.

⁵⁴ *Super Matt* 11, lec. 1.

This is a unique grace, given to the Baptist.

In this section, we learned that, for Aquinas, spiritual greatness among men is determined by grace, not nature. For, according to nature, all men are equal. And a certain individual in a less perfect state of life could be greater than a given individual in a more perfect state of life, on account of excelling in grace. More importantly for our consideration of sources for theology, we have seen that Thomas can appeal to the biblical saint John the Baptist to establish a ranking of office: God, angels, John the Baptist, prophets, priests, and then God's people. Incorporating Thomas's conclusions from the previous section yields this order: God, angels, John the Baptist, apostles, prophets, evangelists, priests, and the people. For Aquinas, scriptural data about saints can serve as a source of speculative theology; Holy Writ confirms what can be known by reason alone and reveals to us mysteries that human reason could never discover.

The Ramification of John's Sanctification in the Womb on Mary's Sanctification

In this section, after a brief introductory detour to document scriptural verses that Thomas applies to Mary in connection with her purity and fullness of grace, we will consider the consequences of John's sanctification in the womb for Mary, the mother of God—followed by a glance at a relevant tangent about the apostles' sanctification. The point of the detour will be to demonstrate Aquinas's reliance on a biblical saint as an elucidating source for theology.

Mary's Holiness, Stainlessness, Strength in Grace, and Purity in the Bible

Aquinas finds the affirmation of Mary's holiness, stainlessness, strength in grace, and purity in at least seven verses in the Scriptures. The key verse that establishes Mary's unrivaled holiness—apart from that of her Son—is Luke 1:28: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" Thomas makes explicit reference to this verse in connection with Mary's singular gift of grace in the *Summa theologiae* and in his 1273 Lenten sermon *On the Hail Mary*.⁵⁵ Luke 1:48 ("[the Lord] has looked with favor on his lowly handmaid") and Sirach 24:25 ("In me is all grace of the way and of the truth, in me is all hope of life and of virtue") appear in the Dominican master's

⁵⁵ ST III, q. 7, a. 10; *Expositio de Ave Maria*, a. 1, corp. (Marietti ed., 1954; also in *Omnia Opera*, vol. 27, opusculum VI [Paris: Vives, 1875], 198–202).

sermon *Germinet Terra* to make the same point.⁵⁶ And in his commentary on Ephesians, Thomas associates the Virgin's singular dignity and grace with Romans 8:23: "We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit."⁵⁷

In his sermon *On the Hail Mary*, Thomas invokes Song of Songs 4:7—"You are all fair, my love; there is no flaw in you"—to express Mary's stainlessness.⁵⁸ And in his commentary on Isaiah, Aquinas observes that Mary is called a rock on account of the strength of her grace, applying Sirach 26:24 to her: "As everlasting foundations upon a solid rock, so the commandments of God in the heart of a holy woman."⁵⁹

On account of her purity, in the *Summa theologiae* and the disputed question *De veritate*, Aquinas links the Mother of God to the loftiest characterizations of the feminine figure of divine wisdom in the Book of Wisdom: "For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her" (Wis 7:25).⁶⁰

Aquinas's approach here clearly deviates from a historical-critical method of examining Scripture. However, these passages should leave no doubt that, for the Common Doctor, Scripture is normative of hagiography. The lives of the saints exemplify Scripture, and Scripture speaks prophetically and poetically about them.⁶¹ The Bible and hagiography go together. We now turn to Thomas's treatment of John the Baptist's sanctification in the womb and its theological implications for the Blessed Virgin.

Mary's Sanctification in the Womb

John's serving as a measure for ranking excellence, which we have covered above, has a significant consequence for Mary, the mother of Jesus. Because Mary is the purest of all saints, if John was sanctified in the womb, it should not be doubted of Mary:

The Blessed Virgin was sanctified in the womb before her birth, which can be gathered from the fact that above all other saints she was purer from sin . . . as the mother chosen by divine wisdom, in whom "nothing impure invades," as is said in Wisdom 7. Thus since

⁵⁶ *Germinet Terra*, pt. 2 (Leonine ed. vol. 44/1).

⁵⁷ *Super Eph* 1, lec. 3.

⁵⁸ *Expositio de Ave Maria*, a. 1, corp.

⁵⁹ *Super Isa* 16 (Leonine ed. vol. 28).

⁶⁰ *De veritate*, q. 24, a. 9, ad 2.

⁶¹ *Super Ioan* 18, lec. 4: "Thus, sacred Scripture ought to be understood as Christ and other saints lived it."

a purity is found to be in certain saints whereby they were cleansed of sin in the womb before birth—like John the Baptist of whom we read in Luke 1:15, “and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, from his mother’s womb,” and like Jeremiah, of whom we read in Jeremiah 1:5, “Before you came forth from the womb, I sanctified you”—it ought not to be doubted that this was conferred on the much more excellent Mother of God.⁶²

This argument from the *Scriptum* is repeated in the *Summa theologiae* and the *Compendium theologiae*; thus it is a position that the Angelic Doctor had from the beginning to the end of his career.⁶³

In the question from the *Summa*, we find Aquinas invoking a Father of the Church with an explicit reference to making arguments from reason in defense of Tradition where Scripture is silent:

Nothing is handed down in the canonical Scriptures concerning the sanctification of the Blessed Mary, namely, that she was sanctified in the womb; there is not even mention of her birth. But as Augustine argues reasonably, concerning the assumption of the Virgin, that she was assumed bodily into heaven, although Scripture does not hand this teaching down, so can we argue reasonably that she was sanctified in the womb. For it is reasonably believed that she who gave birth to “the Only-Begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth,” received greater privileges of grace than all others—whence we read in Luke 1 that the angel said to her, “Hail, full of grace.”⁶⁴

⁶² *In III sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 1, q. 3, corp.

⁶³ *ST III*, q. 27, a. 1, corp.: “But we find that this was granted in a privileged manner to certain others to be sanctified in the womb, such as Jeremiah, to whom it was said [Jeremiah 1]: ‘Before you came forth from the womb, I sanctified you,’ and such as John the Baptist, of whom it was said [Luke 1]: ‘He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb.’ Thus it is reasonably believed that the Blessed Virgin was sanctified in the womb before she was born.” *Compendium theologiae* I, ch. 224, corp.: “For some are cleansed of original sin after birth, as are those sanctified in baptism. But we read that others were sanctified even in the wombs of their mothers by a certain privilege of grace—as about Jeremiah, Jeremiah 1:5 says, ‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you came forth from the womb, I sanctified you,’ and about John the Baptist, the angel says: ‘He shall be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb.’ But it ought not be believed that what was granted to Christ’s precursor and to the prophet was denied to his own mother. And therefore it is believed that she was sanctified in the womb, namely, before she was born” (Leonine ed. vol. 42).

⁶⁴ *ST III*, q. 27, a. 1, corp.

If Augustine, who should be accepted as one who teaches with probable authority,⁶⁵ can conclude without explicit scriptural data that the Virgin Mary was assumed into heaven, then it seems like a much more modest claim to assert that she was sanctified in the womb. After all, lesser saints like John and Jeremiah were sanctified in the womb, and they did not “[give] birth to the Only-Begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” and were not greeted by an angel with the salutation “Hail, full of grace.”

Moreover, it is believed, we learn from Aquinas, that John’s and Jeremiah’s mothers were also sanctified, on account of their sons. Much more then would Mary, the mother of God, be sanctified—and more perfectly—for all of these sanctifications were ordered to Christ’s most holy conception:

As God did not bind his power to natural things so that he could not act beyond them—since he willed to act in miraculous deeds—so he did not bind his power to the sacraments so that he could not sanctify something without ministers of the sacraments. And therefore we read that he sanctified some outside of the common law as if miraculously in the wombs of their mothers—those chiefly who were ordered more immediately to [Christ’s] most holy conception. And therefore it is believed that the mother was sanctified, both of John the Baptist, who gave testimony to him while in the womb, and of Jeremiah, who predicted his own conception by direct prophecy: “a new thing,” he said, “will the Lord do upon the earth. A woman will surround a man” (Jer 31:22). And therefore there was an ampler sanctification in the Blessed Virgin, in whom the tinder to sin was weakened to such a degree or extinguished that she was never inclined to actual sin; but in the others tinder inclined to venial but not mortal sin. And sanctification was in John the Baptist more visibly than in Jeremiah whose [John’s] interior sanctification came by a certain leaping into the knowledge of men, because it was said, “the infant leapt in her womb” (Luke 1:41), as a step toward Christ is a step of sanctification.⁶⁶

Thomas finds that, as Mary compares to the prophets’ mothers, so does she compare to the prophets themselves. John the Baptist’s and Jeremiah’s

⁶⁵ See the section above on “The Authority of Various Sources of Theology” and *STI*, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

⁶⁶ *In IV sent.*, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, q. 2, corp.

sanctifications are superior to the sanctification of an ordinary baptism, and Mary's sanctification is more necessary and superior to theirs:

The sanctification of the Blessed Virgin was more excellent than the sanctifications of others. For, in the sanctification that comes through the common law in the sacraments, sin is taken away, but tinder inclining to mortal and venial sin remains. But in those sanctified in the womb, tinder inclining to mortal sin does not remain but the inclination of tinder toward venial sin does remain, as is clear in Jeremiah and John, who had actual venial sin but not mortal. But in the Blessed Virgin, the inclination of tinder was removed altogether, both with respect to venial sin and to mortal sin.⁶⁷

Indeed, her sanctification is so efficacious that it radiated out to protect others from lusting after her:

And what is more (as it is said), the grace of sanctification not only suppressed illicit movements in her but also had effectiveness in others, so that although she was physically beautiful, she could be coveted by no one at any time.⁶⁸

This is a powerful grace. This is to be full of grace. This is to be like Christ, her Son, who did not become unclean by coming into contact with the unclean, but rather made them clean.

In reply to objections that Mary and John were sanctified before they had souls, Thomas appeals to Scripture, which reveals that God sanctified John "not before he was formed but before he came forth from the womb."⁶⁹ It would be easy to rule out this objection philosophically

⁶⁷ *In III sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 2, q.la. 1, ad 4. Thomas confirms this opinion in *ST III*, q. 27, a. 6, ad 1: "The blessed Virgin, who was chosen by God to be his mother, obtained an ampler grace of sanctification than John the Baptist and Jeremiah, who were chosen as special prefigures of the sanctification of Christ. A sign of this is that it was granted to the Blessed Virgin that she would thenceforth not sin mortally or venially, while it is believed to have been granted to the others who were sanctified that they thenceforth not sin mortally, by divine grace protecting them." In *ST III*, q. 27, a. 6, corp., Aquinas also notes that only Mary, John, and Jeremiah were sanctified in the womb.

⁶⁸ *In III sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 2, q.la. 1, ad 4.

⁶⁹ *ST III*, q. 27, a. 2, ad 1. Thomas handles the same objection in *In III sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 1, q.la. 2, ad 1. On a related point, Aquinas states in *ST III*, q. 27, a. 6, corp. that John did not enjoy the use of reason while in the womb. This suggests that neither would the Holy Innocents have had the use of reason (see *In IV sent.*, d. 49, q. 5, a. 3, q.la. 2,

by arguing from the Aristotelian-Thomistic hylomorphic account of substances. Namely, before a body is ensouled, it is not a body—that is, it is not anyone’s body—but simply matter, an aggregate of substances that is apt to be informed by a soul. But here the Angelic Doctor simply enlists the authority of Scripture.

These objections call to mind the potentially controversial point that the Common Doctor of the Church rejected the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which was later solemnly and infallibly declared by Pope Pius IX *ex cathedra*:

The sanctification of the Blessed Virgin could not appropriately be before the infusion of the soul, because she was not yet capable of receiving grace, and neither in the instant itself of infusion, as then she would be preserved by the grace infused in her so that she would not incur original guilt. For Christ has this singularly in human nature so that he does not need redemption, because he is our head. But it is fitting to all to be redeemed through him, and this cannot be if another soul is found that was never infected by the original stain. And therefore this is conceded neither to the Blessed Virgin nor to anyone besides Christ.⁷⁰

The Angelic Doctor’s reasoning is transparent here. As a descendent of fallen Adam and Eve, Mary needed a savior, and therefore she could not have been conceived simply without sin. The articulation Thomas was missing was that her preservation from sin altogether would be effected through Christ, so that Mary would indeed need to be saved no less than the rest of us.

On this point, we find a compelling defense of Aquinas in Aquinas himself on account of his sublimely coherent epistemology. In *ST* I, q. 32, he explains under what conditions one may innocently hold an erroneous position that has not yet been ruled out by the Church:

ad 12). And that raises the question whether they were martyrs in the fullest sense, e.g., whether they had halos. Thomas notes that John was a true martyr: “The prophets were not killed because they refused to deny the faith, but because they proclaimed the truth. John the Baptist was killed because he proclaimed the truth, and he was a martyr” (*Super Matt* 5, commentary on v. 10); “he suffered death not for refusing to deny the faith, but for reprimanding adultery” (*ST* II-II, q. 124, a. 5, corp.).

⁷⁰ *In III sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 1, q1a. 2, corp.

Something pertains to faith in two ways. In one way, *directly*, such as those things that are divinely handed on to us primarily, such as that God is one and three, that the Son of God became incarnate, and this kind of thing; and to opine a falsehood about these of itself introduces heresy, especially if obstinate opinions are held. But [in the second way], those things *indirectly* pertain to the faith, from which something contrary to the faith follows, such as if someone said that Samuel was not the son of Elkanah, for it would follow from this that divine Scripture is false. Concerning things of this kind, therefore, someone may opine a falsehood without danger of heresy before it is considered or determined that something contrary to the faith follows from this, and especially if he does not adhere to it obstinately. But after it is manifest, and particularly if it is determined by the Church that something contrary to the faith follows from it, to err on the matter would not be without heresy. And on account of this, many things are now considered heretical that were not so considered before, on account of the fact that what follows from them is now more manifest.⁷¹

Thus, it is not difficult to imagine that, had the Church defined the Immaculate Conception in Thomas's time, this obedient friar who truly believed in Christ and his Church would have had no difficulty accepting it.

Moreover, it could be argued that Thomas's rejection of this doctrine is oblique and undeveloped. Examining Aquinas's opinion in the context of his understanding of original sin, redemption, and ensoulment forty or eighty days after conception, Basil Cole and Francis Belanger arrive at this assessment:

There is thus some justification for saying that Thomas never really treats of the immaculate conception, if one means by this that he did not directly, in a self-consciously central argument, address whether Mary was sanctified from the first moment of her existence as a human person.⁷²

⁷¹ *ST I*, q. 32, a. 4, corp. (emphasis mine).

⁷² Basil Cole and Francis Belanger, "The Immaculate Conception, St. Thomas and Bl. Pius IX," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 4, no. 3 (2006): 473–494, at 481.

The Apostles' Sanctification

On a relevant tangent, in the *De malo*, Thomas asserts that, while not sanctified in the womb, the apostles too enjoyed freedom from mortal sin:

We can say that there is a state in which there could not be mortal sin but venial sin, as in those sanctified in the womb—namely, in Jeremiah and John the Baptist—and in the apostles, of whom it is said, “I have strengthened his pillars,” who are believed to have been strengthened through grace so that they could not sin mortally but only venially.⁷³

Aquinas’s phrasing here could make it sound like he is including the apostles among those sanctified in the womb. But he dismisses that idea explicitly in *ST* III, q. 27, a. 6, obj. and ad 2, where he explains that, while some saints may have been closer to Christ than John the Baptist and Jeremiah in certain respects, they were not closer as regards their prefiguring of Christ’s sanctification—and he notes that “we do not read anywhere that [the apostles] were sanctified in the womb.”⁷⁴

Furthermore, in his commentary on Galatians, Aquinas confirms that this freedom from mortal sin came after the apostles’ conversion at Pentecost:

It ought to be said that, after the grace of the Holy Spirit, the apostles in no way sinned mortally, and they had this gift through divine power which had confirmed them [according to] Psalm 74:4: “I have strengthened his pillars.”⁷⁵

Thomas does not mention Pentecost by name here; however, in an objection in the *Summa*, he invokes Luke 24:49: “And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high”:

For it should not be believed that, after having received the Holy Spirit, the apostles would have sinned mortally, for by his fullness, they “were clothed with power from on high” as is said in the last chapter of Luke.⁷⁶

⁷³ *De malo*, q. 7, a. 7, ad 8 (Leonine ed. vol. 23).

⁷⁴ *ST* III, q. 27, a. 6, obj. 2.

⁷⁵ *Super Gal* 2, lec. 3 (vol. 1 of 2 of *Super Epistolas S. Pauli Lectura*, Marietti ed., 1953).

⁷⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 103, a. 4, obj. 1.

Thus, Judas Iscariot did not benefit from this grace; and there is no difficulty admitting that the apostles' abandonment of Christ at the Cross, and Peter's denial in particular, are not merely venial sins. And if Aquinas includes Paul, whom he calls "the Apostle," in this group, then, according to the same principle, this elevated sanctified state would naturally have to have come after Paul's personal conversion. This grace was thus given to them much later than it was given to John the Baptist and Jeremiah; and it is not as full a grace as the Blessed Virgin received.

The apostles' condition fills out the spectrum of human possibilities within the Church. We have Mary, who was sanctified in the womb and preserved even from the inclination to venial sin. We have John the Baptist and Jeremiah, who were sanctified in the womb and preserved from the inclination to mortal sin, but not to venial sin. We have the apostles, who were sanctified as adults at Pentecost and preserved from the inclination to mortal sin. And then there are the rest of us, who have received "the sanctification that comes through the common law in the sacraments [which] takes away sin, but [leaves] tinder inclining to mortal and venial sin."⁷⁷ Whereas Aquinas does not distinguish the status of apostles from prophets in his commentary on Dionysius's *On the Divine Names*, and only hints at the apostles' superiority as New Testament figures in his commentary on Matthew, here we approach a confirmation of their superiority: the Holy Spirit did not descend visibly on the prophets as a group, having been sent by the risen Christ, giving birth to the Church, preserving them from all mortal sin.

In this section, we explored the ramifications of the doctrine of John's sanctification in the womb for the articulation of Our Lady's special prerogative. We demonstrated Aquinas's reliance on Scripture as an elucidating source of Mary's hagiography and unpacked his argument that, since the mother of God was greater in grace than John the Baptist, who was sanctified in the womb, she too must have been sanctified in the womb. Whereas John and Jeremiah were preserved from mortal sin after their sanctifications, Mary was even preserved from venial sin as well. We also recalled the Common Doctor's understanding of our theological certainty and articulation to suggest that the Dominican Master would have had little difficulty accepting the affirmation of Mary's immaculate conception had it been taught definitively in his time. And finally, by way of contrast,

⁷⁷ *In III sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 2, q1a. 1, ad 4. See the quotation in main text at note 67 above for the fuller text.

we reviewed Aquinas's teaching on the status of the apostles, who were sanctified at Pentecost and preserved from mortal sin thereafter.

Conclusion

Although the lives of the saints understandably receive less recognition as source for Aquinas's speculative theology than scriptural, conciliar, or patristic teaching, the saints' contribution as a source should not be overlooked. This article therefore examined St. John the Baptist as just such a source of speculative theology for St. Thomas. We read in the Bible that no one born of woman is greater than John the Baptist and yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John (Matt 11:11; Luke 7:28), and also, according to Thomas's interpretation, that John was sanctified by the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb (Luke 1:41). With these data of revelation, Aquinas is able to use John as a benchmark against which to assess various figures in a hierarchy of greatness.

My presentation comprised five sections. After (1) a glance at some of Aquinas's comments on the authority of various sources of theology to situate the conversation about saints as a source of theology, I reviewed Aquinas's enlistment of John the Baptist as a standard by which to establish: (2) three simple points about Christians and Christ (that all of the articles of faith must be accepted, that prepubescent children can enter religious life, and that Christ's baptism manifests divine power); (3) the superiority of angels to wayfarers, among whom John the Baptist is the greatest, followed by apostles, prophets, and evangelists; (4) the eminence of John the Baptist and a ranking, in order, of God, angels, John the Baptist, prophets, priests, and then God's people; and (5) the holiness of Mary the Mother of God.

Thomas establishes that the lowest in heaven, an angel, is higher than the greatest wayfarer, a human. Angels, who see God face to face, are not taught anything about God by wayfarers. Among wayfarers, we have a hierarchy according to grace: the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, apostles, prophets, evangelists, priests, and then the people of God. Since the Blessed Virgin Mary is more full of grace than John, and John was sanctified in his mother's womb, Thomas argues that Mary was sanctified in her mother's womb also. After John the Baptist and Jeremiah were sanctified, they were protected from falling into mortal sin and committed only venial sins; this was true of the apostles too, but they were sanctified at Pentecost, not in their mothers' wombs. After her sanctification in St. Anne's womb, however, Mary was protected from falling even into venial sin.

By probing these cases, we not only observed the Angelic Doctor's appreciation of the saints as our teachers, as examples to be imitated, and as proofs of God's love in transformative grace; we also noted aspects of his theological method in his manner of interpreting Scripture and his application of reason to scriptural data to make arguments and draw conclusions. For instance, in Aquinas's exposition on of the least in the kingdom of heaven, Scripture definitively confirms what theological reasoning can determine concerning the knowledge of those with the beatific vision and the sanctification of newly conceived children. Furthermore, his exposition on the Blessed Virgin reveals that he reads the Bible as a whole with one divine author, in support of traditional interpretations. All of this indicates the importance of biblical saints as a source for Thomas's speculative theology—and in particular of St. John the Baptist, who can serve as a benchmark against which other saints are measured. N·V