

Aquinas's Christology of the *Imago* and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture

ISAAC AUGUSTINE MORALES, O.P.

Dominican House of Studies

Washington, DC

THE *IMAGO DEI* SERVES as an ordering principle of St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*), especially with respect to anthropology and the theology of redemption.¹ For the most part scholarship has tended to focus on the Trinitarian image, and understandably so.² According to St. Thomas man is made in the image not only of the Son, but also of the Trinity. Nevertheless, in focusing on the Trinitarian *imago*, scholars have overlooked some important aspects of Thomas's reading of Colossians for his theology of the image.³

¹ See, for example, Brian J. Shanley, "Aquinas's Exemplar Ethics," *The Thomist* 72 (2008): 345–69, at 347: "My purpose is to try to paint a broad connective canvas showing how the doctrine of *imago Dei* means that human action, including human freedom, can only be understood in light of the exemplar of the Trinity. The *Secunda Pars* makes sense only in the light of the *Prima Pars* and as pointing to the *Tertia Pars*."

² See Jean-Pierre Torrell, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 83–90; D. Juvenal Merriell, *To the Image of the Trinity: A Study in the Development of Aquinas' Teaching*, Studies and Texts 96 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990); Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 209–17; Michael A. Dauphinais, "Loving the Lord your God: The *Imago Dei* in Saint Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 63 (1999): 241–67; Shanley, "Aquinas's Exemplar Ethics."

³ The index of Merriell's study lists Col 1:15 and Col 3:10 one time each and offers no extended discussion of Thomas's treatment of either text. The passages from the *Summa contra gentiles* considered below do not even appear

Colossians offers the main source for his understanding of “Image” as a proper name of the person of the Son.⁴ Moreover, it provides an important basis for his distinction between the different ways Christ and man are said to be the “image of God.” This essay will consider the role that Colossians 1:15 plays in Thomas’s understanding of the *imago*, both with respect to Christ as the perfect image and with respect to man as made “to the image of God.” Thomas’s interpretation of the name “Image” vis-à-vis the Word illuminates the connection between these two dimensions of the *imago* and offers a fruitful model for the integration of theology and exegesis.

The theme of the *imago Dei* crops up repeatedly throughout Aquinas’s corpus, from his early career to his later writings, and across various genres: the Sentences Commentary, the biblical commentaries, *ST*, and the *Summa contra gentiles* (hereafter, *SCG*), among other texts. This essay focuses on two facets of Thomas’s doctrine: the character of Christ as “the image of the invisible God,” particularly as it relates to Christ’s status as the Word of God and as it is presented in *ST*, the Colossians Commentary, and the *SCG*; and the relation between Christ as the perfect image and man made “to the image of God” (*ad imaginem Dei*), as presented in question 93 of the *Prima Pars* of *ST*.⁵

in the index. Only one citation of Col 1:15 appears in Franz Dander, “Gottes Bild und Gleichnis in der Schöpfung nach der Lehre des hl. Thomas von Aquin,” in *Der Mensch als Bild Gottes*, ed. Leo Scheffczyk, Wege der Forschung 124 (Damstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), 206–59, originally printed in *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 53 (1929): 203–46. Moreover, the citation is embedded in a quotation from Thomas’s Commentary on First Corinthians. Dander devotes no space to the role of Colossians in Thomas’s understanding of the *imago*. Henri-Dominique Gardeil’s brief discussion of the image of God in St. Thomas contains not a single reference to Colossians; see Gardeil, “L’image de Dieu,” in *Somme theologique: Les origenes de l’homme; 1a questions 90–102* (Paris: Desclée, 1963), 380–421, with treatment of Thomas on 398–418. Aimé Solignac does likewise in “Image et ressemblance,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualite*, vol. 7 (Paris : Beauchesne, 1971), col. 1446–51.

⁴ Throughout I will capitalize “Image” when it refers to the name of the Son, but leave it lower case when referring to the simple idea of an image.

⁵ Latin texts of the *Summa theologiae* and the *Summa contra gentiles* are taken from the Leonine edition; the Latin text of the Commentary on Colossians is taken from the Marietti edition. Unless otherwise stated, all English translations in this article are my own work.

***Summa theologiae* I, Question 35: Christ, the Image of the Invisible God**

We begin with *ST* I, question 35, which addresses whether the title “Image” is a proper name for one of the persons of the Trinity. The first article asks the broader question “Whether image in God is said personally?” St. Thomas makes two distinctions to clarify what is meant by “image.” First, he discusses the notion of similitude, which belongs to the definition of “image.” Similarity in and of itself is not sufficient to make something an image: “Nevertheless not just any similitude suffices for the notion (*ratio*) of an image, but a similitude that is in the species of the thing, or at least in some sign of the species.”⁶ Aquinas gives the example of color: a thing cannot be called an image of another thing if the two share the same color and nothing else. As an accidental quality, color does not indicate the form or the species of a thing. An image must imitate that of which it is an image in the “sign of the species.” In material things, this sign is primarily found in the figure (*figura*). So, for example, a statue may be called an image of a man, whereas a paint swatch of flesh-tone color may not.

For a thing to be an image, derivation must be added to similarity in form. Thomas uses an example taken from St. Augustine: “One egg is not the image of another, because it is not derived from it.”⁷ So, even though one egg more closely resembles another than a painting, only the painting of an egg may be called an image because the painting is derived from the egg. On this basis, Aquinas offers the following definition of “image”: “Therefore for something to be truly an image, it is required that it proceed from something similar to it in species, or at least in the sign of the species.”⁸ From this definition (as

⁶ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 35, a. 1: “Non tamen quaecumque similitudo sufficit ad rationem imagines; sed similitudo quae est in specie rei, vel saltem in aliquo signo speciei.” On Thomas’s use of the term “species” in his discussion of the inner life of the Trinity, see the discussion in Merriell, *To the Image of the Trinity*, 177–80.

⁷ *ST* I, q. 35, a. 1: “Unum ovum non est imago alterius, quia non est de illo expressum,” a citation from Augustine, *Octoginta trium quaestiones*, q. 74.

⁸ *ST* I, q. 35, a. 1: “Ad hoc ergo quod vere aliquid sit imago, requiritur quod ex alio procedat simile ei in specie, vel saltem in signo speciei.” J. B. Lightfoot offers a similar discussion, including the example of two eggs, though he does not refer to Augustine; see Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 3d ed. (London: MacMillan, 1879), 145. For the notion of the imitation of an archetype, Lightfoot points to Gregory Nazianzen, *Oratio* 30 (though he does not indicate the precise location, the phrase he cites appears in section 20) and John Damascene, *De imaginibus oratio* 1.9.

well as his earlier discussion of the Trinitarian processions), he draws the conclusion that “Image” must be a personal name in God: “Now those things that introduce procession or origin in divine things are personal. Hence this name ‘Image’ is a personal name.”⁹

The second article of question 35 asks whether the name “Image” belongs to the Son. Aquinas answers in the affirmative, pointing out that Scripture applies the name to the Son alone. The only text that explicitly refers to the Son as “Image” is Colossians 1:15, but Thomas appeals also to Hebrews 1:3, a verse he frequently combines with Colossians in his discussion of Christ as Image and as Word. The reasons for this are not hard to see. The Hebrews text refers to Christ as “the figure of his substance [*figura substantiae eius*].” As we have seen, the notion of figure plays an important part in St. Thomas’s discussion of image. Add to this the fact that Aquinas, like most medievals, considered Hebrews to be a Pauline writing, and it is only natural that he would interpret the two texts together.

Thomas appeals to the connection between Image, Word, and Son toward the end of article 2 to explain why the Holy Spirit is not properly called “Image.”¹⁰ The title is bound up with the procession of the Son from the Father as the Word: “Because the Son proceeds as Word, on account of which reason it is a similitude in species to that from which it proceeds.”¹¹ In order for a word to be effective, it must be like that which it is meant to convey. By contrast, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as love. In general it is not essential that love be like that from which it proceeds, although Thomas suggests that in the case of the Holy Spirit, who is the divine love, there may be a likeness to that from which the Spirit proceeds.¹²

In the reply to objection 3 St. Thomas takes some initial steps toward explaining the different ways in which Christ and man are called “image of God.” The objection had argued that, because St.

⁹ ST I, q. 35 a. 1: “Ea vero quae processionem sive originem important in divinis, sunt personalia. Unde hoc nomen *Imago* est nomen personale.”

¹⁰ In ST I, q. 34, prol. Aquinas identifies “Son,” “Word,” and “Image” as three names proper to the second Person of the Trinity. Questions 34 and 35 discuss the latter two titles, as the first is derived from the person of the Father, which he had already discussed.

¹¹ ST I, q. 35, a. 2: “Quia filius procedit ut verbum, de cuius ratione est similitudo speciei ad id a quo procedit.”

¹² Ibid.: “Non autem de ratione amoris; quamvis hoc conveniat amoris qui est Spiritus Sanctus, inquantum est amor divinus.” Thomas’s guarded language is puzzling, but it most likely stems from his desire to safeguard “Image” as a name proper to the Son.

Paul refers to man as the “image of God” (1 Cor 11:7), the title is not proper to the Son. Thomas replies by noting two different ways a thing can be an image, drawing on some of the distinctions made in the preceding article. There he had noted that an image requires a share either in the species of the thing being imitated or in a sign of the species being imitated. That which shares in the species of the thing is by definition of the same nature, as a prince is of the same nature as his father, the king, and proceeds from him. That which shares in the sign of the species, on the other hand, does not share the same nature.¹³ So, a coin may bear the image of the king, but it is not of the same nature as the king. As the Image of God, the Son has the same nature as God the Father; man, by contrast, does not share God's nature, and so, in relation to God, he is more like the image on a coin than like a prince. It is because of this defect in man's imaging of God, Aquinas argues, that, in addition to being called the image of God in 1 Corinthians 11, man is also said to be “to the image” (*ad imaginem*), as expressing a “movement of tending toward perfection (*motus quidam tendentis in perfectionem*).”¹⁴

The Colossians Commentary: An Invisible Image

A similar discussion of the nature of an image appears in St. Thomas's Colossians Commentary.¹⁵ Given the nature of a commentary, Thomas focuses more explicitly on the text of the Colossians hymn, discussing some features not found in *ST* as well as giving a fuller discussion of certain themes briefly touched on there. In particular, the commentary teases out the relation between God's invisible nature and the Son's status as the Image of God, as well as expanding on the notion of a word as a mental image.

Since the patristic era, commentators have debated whether Christ is a visible image or an invisible image. Taking the latter position, Thomas begins his discussion of Colossians 1:15 by explaining in what sense God is invisible: “God is called invisible because he exceeds the capacity of vision of any created intellect.”¹⁶ Aquinas explains this

¹³ On Thomas's use of the term “species” in his discussion of the inner life of the Trinity, see again Merriell, *To the Image of the Trinity*, 177–80.

¹⁴ *ST* I, q. 35, a. 2.

¹⁵ On the relation between Thomas's understanding of the Image as it relates to earlier Patristic and Medieval commentators, see José Ramón Villar, “Cristo, imagen de Dios invisible (Col 1,15a). Tradición exegética y comentario de santo Tomás de Aquino,” *Scripta Theologica* 42 (2010): 665–90.

¹⁶ *Super Epistolam B. Pauli ad Colossenses* 1, lec. 4: “Deus dicitur invisibilis, quia excedit capacitatem visionis cuiuscumque intellectus creati.”

incapacity for seeing God by appealing to Scripture and to philosophy. Both Job and 1 Timothy attest to the human inability to see God.¹⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius explains the reason for this with respect to participation in existence: “All knowledge terminates at an existing thing, that is at some nature participating in being [*esse*]. But God is being itself [*ipsum esse*], not participating, but rather participated; therefore he is unknown.”¹⁸ The invisible nature of God informs Thomas’s understanding of Christ as the Image of God, because, for him, Christ, as Image, is also invisible.¹⁹ The reasons for this become clearer when we consider his discussion of the nature of an image.

Thomas’s discussion of the image in the Colossians Commentary includes the same three points as *ST I*, question 35. The three main features of an image are likeness, derivation from another thing, and derivation with respect to species or a sign of the species, and he again uses Augustine’s example of two eggs.²⁰ Since neither egg derives from the other, neither of the two may be called an “image” of the other, no matter how similar they may be. It is essential to an image, then, that it imitates, and particularly with respect to something pertaining to the species.

¹⁷ For more New Testament texts referring to the invisibility of God, see Eduard Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 47n102. Lohse also describes some of the Greek and later Hellenistic uses of the idea of the “image of God.” Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 87.

¹⁸ *Super Col* 1, lec. 4: “Omnis cognitio terminatur ad existens, id est, ad aliquam naturam participantem esse. Deus autem est ipsum esse, non participans, sed participatum, ergo est incognitus.”

¹⁹ Some modern scholars dismiss this question as foreign to the text’s intention; see Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 63–64, and Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 48n110. But if, as many have suggested, the figure of Wisdom lies in the background of Col 1:15, one can legitimately deduce the invisibility of the image, even if that is not the primary point of the phrase “image of the invisible God.” See the assessment of Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. Andrew Chester (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1982), 64–66. Sumney notes that Wisdom is described as an “image” in Wis 7, but nevertheless argues that not too much should be read into the phrase “image of the unseen [Sumney’s translation] God.”

²⁰ Emery notes Thomas’s dependence on Augustine on this and other matters (*Trinitarian Theology*, 209–11).

The likeness of the Father and the Son explains the fittingness of the name "Image" for the Son. This likeness of the Son to the Father is not accidental, like the similarity between two eggs, but rather something derived from the Father. Moreover, the likeness pertains to species. Thomas describes this likeness in terms of the connection between word and image: "Moreover this similitude is according to species, because in divine things the Son is represented in some way, albeit deficiently, through our mental word. Now a word is in our mind when we form actually the form of a thing of which we have knowledge, and this we signify by an external word. And this word thus conceived is a certain similitude of the thing which we have in our mind, and similar according to species."²¹ The mental word imitates and is derived from the object with respect to species by way of abstraction. In a similar way, the Son, as the Word of God, imitates the Father in species, and thus he is called the Image of God.²²

This understanding of Christ as Image in relation to Christ as Word explains why Thomas speaks of Christ as an *invisible* image, a point he uses to address the Arian position. The Arians took Colossians 1:15 to mean that Christ is the visible expression of the invisible God. While such an interpretation is true enough of Christ's humanity, the Arians took the further step of positing an ontological difference between the Father and the Son. Aquinas ascribes this error to a narrow understanding of the concept of image: "Judging of the Image of God according to the images which they made of their ancestors, in order that they might see in these [images] their loved ones taken away from them, as we also make images of the saints, in order that those whom we see not in substance, we might see in the image."²³ Based on this analogy, the Arians asserted that the Father alone is invisible and that the Son is visible.

²¹ *Super Col 1*, lec. 4: "Item haec similitudo est secundum speciem, quia filius in divinis repraesentatur aliquo modo, sed deficienter per verbum mentis nostrae. Verbum autem mentis nostrae est, quando formamus actu formam rei cuius notitiam habemus, et hoc significamus verbo exteriori. Et hoc verbum sic conceptum est quaedam rei similitudo quam in mente tenemus, et simile secundum speciem."

²² See Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 211–12; Villar, "Cristo, imagen de Dios invisible," 684–86.

²³ *Super Col 1*, lec. 4: "Iudicantes de Dei imagine secundum imagines quae fiebant ab antiquis, ut viderent in eis charos suos subtractos sibi, sicut et nos facimus imagines sanctorum, ut quos non videmus in substantia, videamus in imagine."

Such a distinction implies a difference in nature, as well. To refute his suggestion St. Thomas appeals again to the text from Hebrews: “Who is the splendor of [his] glory, and the figure of his substance [*figura substantiae eius*].”²⁴ On the basis of this, text Thomas concludes, “And so he is not only the Image of the invisible God, but even he himself is invisible as the Father [is].”²⁵ This paragraph is crucial for understanding Thomas’s explanation of Christ as the Image of God. Whereas we typically think of an image as something visible, visibility does not enter into his definition at all. The three main features of an image (likeness, procession, and derivation in species) can all exist in an invisible being.

***Summa contra gentiles* IV: Image, Word, Equality**

Thomas discusses the notion of the Image as Word, as well as the equality of the Son with the Father, at greater length in book IV of *SCG*, where the Letter to the Colossians plays an important role.²⁶ Like the *Colossians Commentary*, chapter 7 of *SCG* IV addresses the Arian position. It should come as no surprise that Aquinas draws extensively on Colossians in this section, as this letter was one of the most disputed texts in the Arian controversy. Thomas spends considerable time contrasting the Son’s divine status with the angels, drawing on various texts from Colossians. Having argued at some length that the angels are called “sons of God” in a way qualitatively different than the way in which Christ is called “Son,” he turns to the divine essence, understood primarily with respect to the divine intellect.

In chapter 7, Thomas quotes Colossians 2:9 (“In him dwells all the plenitude of divinity”) in order to contrast Christ’s divine nature with angelic participation in some of the perfections of God. The angels receive a part of God’s goodness, but Christ has this goodness in full. Moreover, Aquinas argues, this participated goodness extends to the intellect. Even though the angelic intellect is superior to that of man, it is nevertheless inferior to that of Christ, in whom “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”²⁷ For Thomas, Colossians points in various ways to Christ’s perfection and equality

²⁴ Heb 1:3 as cited in *Super Col* 1, lec. 4.

²⁵ *Super Col* 1, lec. 4: “Et sic est imago non solum Dei invisibilis, sed etiam ipse est invisibilis sicut pater.”

²⁶ For background see Gilles Emery, “The Treatise of St. Thomas on the Trinity in the *Summa contra Gentiles*,” in *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, MI: Sapientia, 2003), 71–120, esp. 89–93 on Thomas’s use of Scripture.

²⁷ Col 2:3, cited in *SCG* IV, ch. 7.

with God, and he brings these verses to bear on the question of Christ as the Image of God.

Thomas continues to contrast the likeness of angels to God with the likeness of the Son to the Father, quoting two of the Psalms to show that the angels are inferior to God: “‘Who,’ it says, ‘is like God among the sons of God?’ And in another place, ‘God, who will be like you?’”²⁸ Though the angels resemble God in some respects, none of them is a perfect likeness (*perfecta similitudine*) of God. By contrast, Christ is the perfect likeness of the Father, as is made clear in the Gospel of John: “As the Father has life in himself, so he gave also to the Son to have life in himself.”²⁹ By virtue of this life, the Son is equal to the Father.³⁰

In the next several paragraphs, Aquinas draws on Colossians 1:15–17 to explicate the nature of the Son’s likeness to the Father. He begins with the nature of revelation: “No created substance represents God in his substance; for whatever appears out of the perfection of any creature is less than that which is God.”³¹ In order for something to be a perfect image of God, then, it must be of the same substance as God, for “through no creature is it possible to know of God what he is.”³² But Colossians refers to Christ as the “image of the invisible God,” a phrase Thomas takes to mean that Christ represents the Father. If this is the case, the Son must be a perfect image, in contrast to man, whom Paul also calls the “image of God” (1 Cor 11:7). Because of the difference in substance between God and man, man is only a “deficient image” (*imago deficiens*). The Son, however, shares the substance of God, a point Thomas bases again on Hebrews 1:3: “Who is the splendor of [God’s] glory, and the figure of his substance.”³³ It is only because Christ has the same substance as the Father that he can be the perfect image.

²⁸ SCG IV, ch. 7: “*Quis, inquit, similis Deo in filiis Dei? Et alibi: Deus, quis similis erit tibi?*”

²⁹ John 5:16 (quoted in SCG IV, ch. 7).

³⁰ Lohse interprets “image” as pointing to Christ’s distinction from creation: “As the ‘image’ of the invisible God, he does not belong to what was created, but stands with the creator who, in Christ, is acting upon the world and with the world.”

³¹ SCG IV, ch. 7: “*Nulla substantia creata repraesentat Deum quantum ad eius substantiam; quisquid enim ex perfectione cuiuscumque creaturae apparet, minus est quam quod Deus est.*”

³² Ibid.: “*Per nullam creaturam sciri potest de Deo quid est.*”

³³ Heb 1:3, quoted in SCG IV, ch. 7.

Moderns might balk at the way Thomas interprets Colossians in light of Hebrews, but several points are worth keeping in mind. First, as already noted, like most medieval theologians, he attributed Hebrews to the apostle Paul, and so he saw no problem with interpreting the two texts in light of each other, particularly given the common imagery. Second, Aquinas's combination of these texts relies, ultimately, not on common human authorship, but rather on the divine authorship of the Scriptures. Based on this authorship, he takes the texts to be describing the same reality, and for this reason, he sees no problem in combining texts from Colossians, Hebrews, John, and the Psalms to make his argument. Moreover, the texts all draw upon themes relating to wisdom. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for addressing modern concerns, in the paragraphs that follow, he makes his case largely on the basis of Colossians itself.

Aquinas proceeds by reading Colossians in light of the nature of causality in creation: "Nothing that is in some genus is the universal cause of those things which are in that genus, thus the universal cause of men is not some man, for nothing is its own cause."³⁴ But according to various texts of Scripture, the Son is the cause of creation. Among these texts is Colossians 1:16, which says "In him all things were created in heaven and on earth."³⁵ If Christ is the cause of all things, then he cannot belong to the same genus as all things, and therefore, he is not created.

In the next paragraph, Thomas extends the argument to those invisible realities that also belong to the genus of created things. According to Colossians, Christ is the cause of these as well: "But the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the cause of angels, bringing them into being; for the apostle says, 'whether thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers, all things were created through him and in him.'"³⁶ Thus, since Christ is the source of both visible and invisible things, the heavenly and the earthly, he is not a creature.³⁷ As an

³⁴ SCG IV, ch. 7: "Nihil quod est in aliquo genere, est universalis causa eorum quae sunt in genere illo, sicut universalis causa hominum non est aliquis homo, nihil enim est sui ipsius causa."

³⁵ Col 1:16, quoted in SCG IV, ch. 7.

³⁶ SCG IV, ch. 7: "Sed Dei filius Iesus Christus est causa Angelorum, eos in esse produciens: dicit enim Apostolus: *sive throni, sive dominationes, sive principatus, sive potestates, omnia per ipsum et in ipso creata sunt.*"

³⁷ Cf. Schweizer, *Colossians*, 66: "The fact that Christ participates in the act of creation serves to distinguish him from a created being, and it is for this very reason that, as the 'image of the invisible God,' he is God's revelation."

uncreated Person and the source of all things, Christ perfectly images the Father in a way that neither angels nor men can, insofar as they do not have the power to create.

Aquinas proceeds to argue from another philosophical principle: “the proper action of anything follows from its very nature.”³⁸ Just as genuinely human actions are performed only by humans, so also divine actions are performed only by God. Thomas then points to three acts proper to God: creation, sustaining creation in being, and wiping away sins. Colossians ascribes at least two of these to Christ. We have already seen that Colossians 1:16 asserts that all things, both visible and invisible, were created through the Son. In addition, the following verse affirms that “all things exist in him [*omnia in ipso constant*].”³⁹ With respect to wiping away sins, Thomas again points to Hebrews: “He upholds all things by the word of his power, making purification of sins.”⁴⁰ Thus, all three activities of God are ascribed to Christ in Scripture. In order to address a possible Arian objection, that Scripture portrays Christ simply as an instrument, Thomas appeals to John 5:19, in which Christ says, “Whatsoever the Father does these things the Son also does similarly.”⁴¹ Thus, for Thomas, the Son is equal in divinity to the Father, and it is because of this equality that he is the perfect image of the invisible God.

In chapter 11 of SCG IV, Aquinas draws out the connection between Christ as Image and Christ as Word, a connection only hinted at in chapter 7. The key to this link is the nature of an interior word. For Thomas, an interior word is “a certain account and similitude of a thing understood.”⁴² As we have seen, similitude does not suffice to make something an image. Thomas thus describes two different relations between things bearing a likeness of one another. In the thing that is the principle from which a likeness is derived in another, the first thing is an exemplar. That which is derived from the principle, by contrast, is an image. For Thomas, the Word assumes both of these roles in different ways.⁴³

The Word is God's act of understanding. As such, the Word func-

³⁸ SCG IV, ch. 7: “Propria actio cuiuslibet rei sequatur naturam ipsius.”

³⁹ Col 1:17, quoted in SCG IV, ch. 7.

⁴⁰ Heb 1:3 quoted in SCG IV, ch. 7. It is a bit puzzling that Aquinas cites Hebrews rather than Col 2:13–14. Presumably he does so because of the importance of the Hebrews text in his understanding of Christ as the Image.

⁴¹ Cited in SCG IV, ch. 7.

⁴² SCG IV, ch. 11: “Quaedam ratio et similitudo rei intellectae.”

⁴³ Ibid.

tions as exemplar to all of creation: "His understanding is the principle of things understood by him, since they are caused through his intellect and will."⁴⁴ On the other hand, the Word is related to the Father as to a principle: "But [the act of understanding] is compared to that intelligible thing which he himself is as to a principle, the emanation from which is the Word conceived."⁴⁵ This twofold relation to things created and to God the Father accounts for the title "Image": "It is therefore necessary that the Word of God be compared to other things understood by God as an exemplar; and to God himself, whose Word he is, as his Image. This is why it is said of the Word of God that he is 'the Image of the invisible God.'"⁴⁶ With this understanding of the Image in terms of the Word, Aquinas clarifies the distinction between the Son as the perfect image and other images. If the Son were an image in some way related to the senses, he would be only an imperfect image, since the senses attend only to accidents. By contrast, the intellect penetrates to the interior dimension of a thing. Because the Son is the Image of God with regard to understanding, he is a perfect image, an image of the Father's very essence: "Since therefore the Word of God is the Image of God, as has been shown, it is necessary that he be the Image of God as to his essence."⁴⁷ Thomas ties this point to Scripture, once again drawing on the language of Hebrews 1:3, "the figure of the substance of God."

In the next paragraph Thomas brings the titles Image and Word together with the third proper name of the second Person of the Trinity, "Son." As he has made distinctions between two kinds of similitude (exemplar and image), he makes a further distinction between two kinds of image: an image that is not of the same nature as that whose image it is and an image that shares the same nature.⁴⁸ Thomas points again to the example of the son of a king, who both images the king and shares the king's nature. Aquinas has already established that the Word is of the same nature as the Father, and so

⁴⁴ Ibid.: "Eius intelligere principium est rerum intellectarum ab ipso, cum ab eo causentur per intellectum et voluntatem."

⁴⁵ Ibid.: "Sed ad intelligibile quod est ipse, comparatur ut ad principium; est enim hoc intelligibile idem cum intellectu intelligente, cuius quaedam emanatio est Verbum conceptum."

⁴⁶ Ibid.: "Oportet igitur quod Verbum Dei comparetur ad res alias intellectas a Deo sicut *exemplar*; et ad ipsum Deum, cuius est Verbum, sicut eius *imago*. Hinc est quod de verbo Dei dicitur . . . quod est *imago invisibilis Dei*."

⁴⁷ Ibid.: "Cum ergo Verbum Dei sit imago Dei, ut ostensum est, necesse est quod sit imago Dei quantum ad eius essentiam."

⁴⁸ Ibid. Cf. the discussion of *ST* I, q. 35, above.

he draws the logical conclusion: "Therefore it follows that the Word of God is not only the Image, but also the Son."⁴⁹

Aquinas returns briefly to the relationship between Image and Word in chapter 42, a passage that serves as a fitting transition to the anthropological consequences of his understanding of Christ as Image and Word.⁵⁰ In this chapter, Thomas comments on the suitability of the Word becoming incarnate. Since, according to Thomas, the salvation of men consists in the perfection of the human intellect, it is only fitting that the Word should be the one to take on human nature.⁵¹ The Word shares a certain "affinity" (*affinitas*) with human beings insofar as the specific difference of the human race is reason.⁵²

***Summa theologiae* I, Question 93: Man in the Image of God**

Given this affinity between the Word and man, it is not surprising that the *imago Dei* plays a central role in Thomas's anthropology. The prologue to question 93 of *ST* I describes man's end in these terms: "Next it is to be considered concerning the end or the term of man's production, insofar as he is said to be made to the image and likeness of God."⁵³ Two points will be the focus of our consideration of this question: the distinction between the perfect image and the imperfect image and his understanding of the image of God in terms of reason. This latter point rests in part on another key text from Colossians. In the *sed contra* of article 6, Thomas appeals to Colossians: "But at Colossians 3, he says, 'putting on the new man, who is being renewed in the knowledge of God, according to the image of him who created him,' where the renewal, which is according to the garment of the new man, he attributes to the image of God."⁵⁴

⁴⁹ SCG IV, ch. 11: "Relinquitur igitur quod Verbum Dei non solum sit imago, sed etiam Filius."

⁵⁰ See Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 216.

⁵¹ SCG IV, ch. 42.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *ST* I, q. 93, prologue: "Deinde considerandum est de fine sive termino productionis hominis, prout dicitur factus *ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei*." Torrell suggests that "the theme of the image of God organically links the First and Second Parts [of the *Summa*]" (*Spiritual Master*, 82). Dander notes that the phrase *ad imaginem* excludes an emanationist interpretation ("emanatistische Deutung") of Thomas's teaching on the *imago* (Dander, "Gottes Bild und Gleichnis," 208–09).

⁵⁴ *ST* I, q. 93, a. 6, sc: "Sed *ad Col. III* dicit: *Induentes novum hominem, qui renovatur in agnitionem Dei, secundum imaginem eius qui creavit eum*: ubi renovationem quae est secundum novi hominis indumentum, attribuit imagini Dei."

In article 1, Thomas again touches briefly on the definition of “image,” pointing once more to Augustine’s example of two eggs to underscore that similarity does not suffice to make something an image.⁵⁵ He then makes a further distinction with respect to the question of equality. Drawing on Augustine again, he notes that equality does not belong to the definition (*ratio*) of “image.”⁵⁶ To take but one example, the image of a person reflected in a mirror is not equal to the person whose image it is. Equality is, however, an essential part of a *perfect* image, and herein lies the distinction between man, who is made “to the image of God” (*ad imaginem Dei*), and Christ, who simply *is* “the Image of the invisible God.”

In the reply to the second objection, Thomas elaborates on this distinction. Because Christ is the perfect image of God, “he is called ‘Image,’ and never ‘to the image.’”⁵⁷ The reason Christ is the perfect image of the Father is that he has the same nature. Thus, using a by now familiar example, Christ is the Image of God in a way analogous to the son of a king. By contrast, man, because he does not have the same nature as God, is more akin to the image of a king on a coin. For this reason, man is said to be both “image” and “to the image.” The logical question, which takes up most of the remainder of question 93, is in what sense man is “to the image of God.”

Not surprisingly, for Aquinas, man is understood to be “to the image of God” based on the power of reason. Thus, in article 2, he argues that, since rationality distinguishes man from the other creatures (and, it would seem, angels), among physical creatures, only man is made to the image of God.⁵⁸ Aquinas returns again to an element of his basic definition of an image: not every likeness is an

⁵⁵ ST I, q. 93, a. 1. Merriell notes the priority of exemplar causality when it comes to images (*To the Image*, 174). For another helpful exposition of this question, see Jaroslav Pelikan, “*Imago Dei*: An Explication of *Summa theologiae*, Part 1, Question 93,” in *Calgary Aquinas Studies*, ed. Anthony Parel (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), 27–48. Toward the end of this essay, Pelikan briefly notes the significance of Col 1:15 for Thomas’s distinction between the perfect and the imperfect image.

⁵⁶ ST I, q. 93, a. 1.

⁵⁷ ST I, q. 93, a. 1, ad 2: “Ideo dicitur *Imago*, et nunquam *ad imaginem*.” Merriell argues that Thomas sees this likeness of man to God as present from the moment of creation (*To the Image*, 176).

⁵⁸ Again, Merriell emphasizes that man’s being made in the image of God is a present reality, not just something toward which he is oriented, though it is that as well (*To the Image*, 180). Of course, angelic rationality is analogous to human rationality and not discursive.

image. Thus, while animals bear some resemblance to God insofar as all creation in some way bears a vestige (*vestigium*) of God, they cannot be called images: "For if the similitude is according to genus alone, or according to some common accident, something is not on this account said to be to the image of another."⁵⁹ Toward the end of the *corpus* of article 2, Aquinas describes three different ways creatures are like God: because of existence (all creatures), because of life (only animate creatures), and because of understanding (only human beings and angels). Because this last faculty is closest to God, "intellectual creatures alone, properly speaking, are to the image of God."⁶⁰

In article 6, Thomas again takes up the question of whether the image pertains to the mind only. Here we see once again the significance of Colossians for his understanding of the image. As already noted, in the *sed contra*, Aquinas appeals to a text from Colossians describing the renewal of the mind.⁶¹ Thomas thus argues that the image of God is found in the rational creature only in the mind. In order to make his case, he further explicates the different kinds of likeness. All creatures resemble God "through the mode of a vestige" (*per modum vestigii*). Even the rational creature, at least with respect to his corporeal existence, also bears a vestige of God. A vestige differs from an image in that the latter resembles its source in likeness of species, whereas the former "represents through the mode of effect, which so represents its cause that it nevertheless does not attain to likeness of species."⁶² Aquinas clarifies this distinction by giving three examples of a "vestige": the footprints of an animal, the ashes of a fire, and the remnants of a land destroyed by an army. None of these bear a likeness according to species, but they all give evidence of the source that caused them.

⁵⁹ ST I, q. 93, a. 2: "Si enim similitudo sit secundum genus tantum, vel secundum aliquod accidens commune, non propter hoc dicitur aliquid esse ad imaginem alterius."

⁶⁰ Ibid.: "Solae intellectuales creaturae, proprie loquendo, sunt ad imaginem Dei." As Merriell puts it, "Thomas locates the ground of the image of God in man in the formal cause of man, his soul, inasmuch as by his soul man participates the divine quality of intellectuality, which in a way specifies the essence of God" (*To the Image*, 181).

⁶¹ Thomas also cites a related text from Ephesians in the same passage. Merriell notes that Thomas draws on these texts because of their prominence in book 14 of Augustine's *De Trinitate* (*To the Image*, 204).

⁶² ST I, q. 93, a. 6: "Vestigium autem repraesentat per modum effectus qui sic repraesentat suam causam, quod tamen ad speciei similitudinem non pertingit."

On the basis of this distinction, Thomas argues that only rational creatures are made in the image of God: “For as it pertains to the likeness of the divine nature, rational creatures seem in some way to attain to the representation of species, insofar as they imitate God not only in this, that he exists and he lives, but also in this, that he understands.”⁶³ Animate creatures have a vestige of the divine intellect to varying degrees, but because they do not have the power of reason, they cannot be said to be made in the image of God.

Aquinas and Modern Exegesis: Confluences

Having sketched some of the key features of Thomas’s theology of the *imago Dei* both with respect to Christ and with respect to human beings, we turn now to consider how this theology compares with modern readings of Colossians. It goes without saying that Aquinas came to the text of Colossians and the question of the image of God with different presuppositions than modern exegetes. Questions of authorship play little role in his discussions of the text, even in the Colossians Commentary, and the typical questions of historical context that still drive much exegetical work were not even on the radar for him, in part because many of the texts available to modern scholars were not available in his day. Given these differences, it is all the more remarkable how many convergences one can detect between Aquinas’s interpretation of Colossian 1:15 and those of modern scholarship.

To take one example, Thomas’s reading of the image language in light of the Son’s status as the Word finds resonance with wisdom readings of Colossians 1:15. Many see the traditions reflected in the Wisdom of Solomon and the writings of Philo of Alexandria as an important background for understanding this verse. Wisdom 7:26 speaks of personified Wisdom as “the image [εἰκών] of God’s goodness.” Moreover, the broader context of the passage speaks of Wisdom as the one through whom God created the world (see Wis 7:17–24).⁶⁴ In a later chapter, the text also seems to identify Word

⁶³ Ibid.: “Nam quantum ad similitudinem divinae naturae pertinet, creaturae rationales videntur quodammodo ad repraesentationem speciei pertinere, inquantum imitantur Deum non solum in hoc quod est et vivit, sed etiam in hoc quod intelligit.”

⁶⁴ See Sumney, *Colossians*, 65: “These poetic statements about Christ and his role in creation echo what other writers say about God’s hypostatic Wisdom. Among Jewish authors, Wisdom is a manifestation of God and a means through which God created the world (Prov 8:22; Wis 7:17–24; 9:9; Philo, *Quaestiones et solutiones in Genesin* 4.97; *De cherubim* 125), and even God’s

and Wisdom: “God of our fathers and Lord of mercy, who made all things by your word [ἐν λόγῳ σου] and by your wisdom [τῇ σοφίᾳ] prepared man that he might govern all the things created by you” (Wis 9:1–2). Surprisingly, Aquinas does not cite any of these texts, but he does appeal to similar ones. For example, in chapter 7 of SCG IV, he quotes the words of personified wisdom in Proverbs 8: “I was with him forming all things.” Thus, though he does not draw the link between Word and Wisdom based on the Wisdom of Solomon, he does see the connection. His reliance on Proverbs 8 can be explained by its prominence in the Arian debates.⁶⁵

Modern commentators also see connections between the image language of Colossians, the prologue of John, and Hebrews. Douglas Moo, for example, points to some of the very same texts to which Aquinas appeals in explaining the image in a broader biblical context: “In this respect, Colossians 1:15 is similar to John’s depiction of the ‘Word’ in 1:1–18—the Word was ‘with God’ and ‘was God’ (v. 1) and thus has ‘made him known’ (v. 18)—and to Hebrews 1:3—‘the Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.’ The opening line of our hymn may, then, identify Christ as that original image in accordance with which human beings were created.”⁶⁶ The difference between Aquinas’s use of these texts and that of many modern scholars is the rationale behind it. Whereas modern scholars typically cite these texts as an important part of the historical context of Colossians, Thomas sees the texts as pointing to a common reality beyond the texts and to which each of the texts points.

Perhaps the most intriguing convergence between Aquinas and modern scholarship is the recent proposal of George van Kooten, who argues that Paul’s understanding of the *imago* makes sense in

‘firstborn’ (Philo, *De confusione linguarum* 62). In many ways, the poetic material in Colossians has Christ fulfilling the functions others had Wisdom perform.” Douglas Moo also notes connections between word and wisdom, as well as between these two and image, in the works of Philo of Alexandria, a point to which we will return. See Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MN: Eerdmans, 2008), 118. See also David Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 94–95; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 47–48; Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 88–89.

⁶⁵ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971), 191–97.

⁶⁶ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 118.

light of some of the parallels with Philo of Alexandria.⁶⁷ Van Kooten highlights three elements of Philo's account of man's creation in the image of God: its emphasis on the intellect, its connection with the Logos, and the distinction between the Logos as the true image and man, who is made "after the image."

For Philo, man is made in the image of God on the basis of reason. So, in the *De opificio mundi* he writes:

But what is the relationship [with their first father]? Every human being with respect to his intellect is closely associated with the divine word [λόγῳ θείῳ], having come into being as an impress or a fragment or a reflection of that blessed nature; but according to the constitution of the body he [is closely associated] with the whole world; for he is composed of the same things, of earth, and water, and air, and fire, each of the elements bringing in its appropriate part for the completion of the most sufficient materials, which it was necessary for the creator [δημιουργόν] to take in order to fashion this visible image. (*De opificio mundi* 146)⁶⁸

Thus, for Philo, it is only with respect to the mind that man is made in the image of God because it is the intellect that sets man apart from the rest of the corporeal world.

This emphasis on the intellect stems from Philo's understanding of the one true image, the Logos. In *Quaestiones in Genesim*, the Alexandrian writes of the contrast between the Logos and human beings: "Most excellently and veraciously this oracle [Gen 9:6] was given by God. For nothing mortal can be made in the likeness of the most high One and Father of the universe but (only) in that of the second God, who is His Logos. For it was right that the rational (part) of the human soul should be formed as an impression by the divine Logos, since the pre-Logos God is superior to every rational nature" (*Quaestiones in Genesim* 2.62).⁶⁹ For Philo, human beings are made

⁶⁷ For further analysis of the following texts from Philo, see George van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God, and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity* Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, WUNT 232 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 50–53.

⁶⁸ Translation adapted from F. H. Colson and G. H. Whittaker, *Philo*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library 226 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1929), 115–17.

⁶⁹ Translation taken from Ralph Marcus, *Philo*, supplement 1, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1953), 150–51.

not directly in the image of God the Father, but rather in the image of the Logos, the “second God,” and this is fitting because it is in the intellect that the image is found.

Finally, Philo elsewhere makes explicit the distinction that remains implicit in *Quaestiones in Genesim*. In *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, he delineates the relationship between man, who is made *after* the image of God, and the Logos, *the* image of God: “Now Moses calls the one who is above us the image of God, but the one among us the impress of the image, *for he says, ‘God made man,’ not the image of God, but ‘according to the image* [κατ’ εἰκόνα].’ So that the mind in each of us, which indeed is the man in a true and full sense, is a third model [τύπον] [coming] from the Creator [τοῦ πεποιηκότος]. But *the intermediate one is a pattern of the one and a copy of the other*” (*Quis rerum divinarum heres sit* 231, emphasis added).⁷⁰ The one true image, then, is the Logos; human beings are made “after the image”—that is, the Logos. Moreover, the image has a dual relation to God and to human beings: he is a pattern (one could say exemplar) for human beings, but a copy of God.

Van Kooten suggests that this twofold Philonic understanding of the image illuminates Paul’s account of the image. His description is worth quoting in full:

Although in 1 Cor 11.7 Paul indeed identifies man with the image of God (man *is* the image of God), in all other occurrences of the “image of God” in the Pauline writings, properly speaking, the image of God is Christ (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15). Man is only said *to bear*, not *to be* this image (1 Cor 15:49). He is not so much transformed *into the image of God* (although this translation is grammatically possible), but rather *in accordance with the image of God* (2 Cor 3:18). He becomes *of the same form as the image of God* (Rom 8:39). He is indeed renewed κατ’ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν, according to the image of his Creator (Col 3:10). This is in tune with what we have seen in Philo who, time and again, emphasizes that man is not created as the image of God, but *after* the image of God.⁷¹

The similarities with Aquinas’s account of the *imago* are striking: the acknowledgement of the need for nuance in understanding Paul’s

⁷⁰ Translation adapted from F. H. Colson and G. H. Whittaker, *Philo*, vol. 4, Loeb Classical Library 261 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1932), 399.

⁷¹ Van Kooten, *Paul’s Anthropology in Context*, 216–17 (emphasis original).

doctrine and the contrast between Christ, who *is* the image, and man, who is made “in accordance with the image.” Aquinas’s interpretation, though coming at the question from a very different angle, presents a remarkably similar picture of the theology of the *imago*. Of course, Thomas would differ from Philo in that he would never refer to Christ as a “second God.” But it is important to emphasize that his position is based not solely, or even primarily, on philosophical principles, but on Scripture itself.⁷²

Aquinas, the *Imago*, and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture

Colossians plays an important role in Aquinas’s multifaceted theology of the *imago Dei*. Though presented in a largely Aristotelian idiom, Thomas’s account is rooted in the texts of Scripture, as he seeks to make sense of the various ways the New Testament applies the language of the *imago* to Christ and to human beings. As we have seen, his approach entails a combination of close attention to the text of Colossians itself and a nuanced and responsible inner-biblical exegesis.

Thomas explicates the nature of Christ’s status as the Image through a close reading of Colossians, affirming Christ’s divinity on the basis of his role in creation. At the same time, he also fills out this picture by appealing to related texts from Hebrews and the Gospel of John, as well as the wisdom literature and the Psalms. In partic-

⁷² See especially the discussion of SCG IV, ch. 7, above. Noting some of the parallels between Philo and Paul, Joachim Gnilka offers an assessment similar to that of Aquinas: “Als Bild Gottes bleibt Christus nicht hinter dem Abgebildeten zurück wie die platonische Eikon, wird er nicht zum minderen Ersatz Gottes, mit dem wir uns begnügen müßten, wird er auch nicht zum Urbild für die geschaffene oder zu schaffende Welt wie der philonische Logos, sondern steht er ganz aufseiten Gottes. Zöge man die an sich richtige Konsequenz und sagte, man kann jetzt nicht mehr von Gott reden, ohne von Christus reden zu müssen, wäre es doch zutreffender, es umgekehrt und positiv zu formulieren: Wer von Christus spricht, spricht von Gott [As the image of God, Christ does not remain behind the one imaged like a platonic eikon; he does not become a lesser, ersatz god, with whom we must content ourselves; he also does not become a prototype for the created world or the world to be created like the philonic Logos, but rather he stands completely on the side of God. If one were to draw the implication, correct in itself, and say that one can now no longer speak about God without necessarily speaking about Christ, it would be more appropriate to formulate it conversely and positively: Whoever speaks about Christ speaks about God]”; see Gnilka, *Der Kolosserbrief*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 10 (Freiburg: Herder, 1980), 61.

ular, his appeal to the theology of the Word serves as a key to the connection between the different applications of the name "image" to Christ and to man.

Despite his lack of access to the discoveries of modern biblical scholarship, his account of the *imago* measures up favorably vis-à-vis more recent accounts. This is not to suggest that modern scholarship has not offered us new insights into the biblical texts. It is, however, to suggest that we should not be so quick to dismiss pre-modern readers like Aquinas who, despite working with translations and different preconceptions, arrived at genuine insights into the biblical text.

Given the similarities we have noted between Thomas and modern readings of Colossians, a logical question arises: does Aquinas offer anything distinctive that might further the project of integrating exegesis and theology? I suggest three areas in which we have something to learn from Thomas's treatment of the *imago*: the relationship between theological interests and the close reading of texts; the responsible combination of biblical texts based on the theological *res* to which they point; and the interconnectedness of Christology, anthropology, and soteriology. I will treat each of these briefly by way of conclusion.

It is sometimes suggested that approaching the biblical texts with a theological agenda can skew our reading of Scripture. At least with respect to Thomas's understanding of the *imago*, we have seen quite the opposite. To be sure, Aquinas appeals to a wide variety of texts, and by no means does he limit himself to Paul. Nevertheless, as we saw in our discussion of chapter 7 of SCG IV, the Arian question pushed him to look at the text of Colossians more closely. In fact, Aquinas in some ways draws closer connections between Colossians 1:15 and other parts of the letter than some modern commentators. Aquinas's theological questions actually generate insight into the text. The reason for this is not hard to find: Aquinas's reading is true to the aims of the text in a way that much modern scholarship is not.⁷³ The not uncommon practice of reading against the grain of a text with a hermeneutic of suspicion works against the task of offering a sympathetic reading. But a sympathetic reading—which need not be the same as affirming everything that a text says—is precisely what is needed to arrive at genuine understanding. Thomas's sympathy with the sacred writer leads him to penetrate more deeply into the text.

⁷³ On this point, see Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, §29.

As already noted, Aquinas does not limit himself to Paul, not even to the broader Pauline canon of the Middle Ages, which included Hebrews. In several cases, he appeals to the same texts that many modern scholars point to in describing the historical context for the image of God language in Colossians. His reason for appealing to these texts, however, differs from common modern approaches. Though not explicitly stated in the passages we have considered, Thomas's approach assumes that Scripture truly reveals God. Thus, he does not appeal to Scripture simply along the lines of literary and historical criticism. Rather, the biblical texts point beyond themselves to the God who reveals himself through them. Aquinas thus reminds us that, if our approach to Scripture is to be truly theological, we cannot settle for a description of what the text says. We must take it seriously as revelatory of who God is.

Finally, Aquinas's theology of the *imago* brings out the close connection between Christology, anthropology, and soteriology, both in general and in the text of Colossians in particular. We have seen that Thomas relies on both Colossians 1:15 and 3:10 in his explication of the *imago*, especially as regards the role of the intellect. The intellect is the primary faculty whereby man is made in the image of God, but it was damaged in the Fall. Thus, redemption necessarily entails a noetic healing brought about by Christ, the Image and Word of God. Though Thomas leans primarily on the two verses just noted, a soteriology of noetic healing pervades Colossians, with its emphasis on knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and the mind.⁷⁴

This emphasis on knowledge and wisdom appears almost from the very beginning of the letter, in Colossians 1:9–10, which contains no fewer than four references to knowledge, wisdom, and understanding: “Therefore we, too, from the day we heard, have not stopped praying on your behalf and asking that you be filled with the knowledge of his will [τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ] in all wisdom and spiritual understanding [ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ καὶ συνέσει πνευματικῇ], to walk worthily of the Lord in every desire to please, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God [τῇ ἐπιγνώσει τοῦ θεοῦ].”⁷⁵ Paul's desire for the Colossians is knowledge of God's will, wisdom, and understanding, and ultimately knowledge of God himself. This knowledge, moreover, is bound up with good works, and Paul's prayer for this knowledge leads into the

⁷⁴ See Col 1:9–10, 21, 28; 2:2–3; 3:2; 3:10.

⁷⁵ All translations of Colossians in this section are my own.

famous Colossians hymn from which the notion of Christ as “the image of the invisible God” is taken. It can hardly be a coincidence, then, that the hymn is framed on the other side by a reference to the Colossians’s former ways: “And you who once were alienated and hostile in mind in evil works [ἐχθρούς τῇ διανοίᾳ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς πονεροῖς], now he has reconciled by the body of his flesh through his death to present you holy and without blemish and beyond reproach before him” (Col 1:21–22). The transformation brought about by the Cross of the “image of the invisible God” is made manifest in the minds of the Colossians and in the good works that flow from this renewal of their minds.⁷⁶

Wisdom reappears toward the end of Colossians 1 as a necessary element of the full transformation of those redeemed by Christ, part of what makes believers “perfect” or “complete” (τέλειον). As Christ, through his death, “presents [the Colossians] holy and without blemish” (Col 1:22), Paul, too, presents them as mature in Christ by instructing them in wisdom: “We announce [Christ], warning every human being and teaching every human being in all wisdom [ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ], so that we might present every human being mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). Once again we see that the redemption wrought by the cross achieves its end in the perfection of human beings in wisdom.

This emphasis on wisdom, knowledge, and understanding continues into Colossians 2, as Paul explicitly describes the mystery of God in Christ in these terms. Referring to the struggles he undergoes for the sake of his congregations, Paul indicates the purpose of these struggles: “so that their hearts might be encouraged, united in love and in all the riches of the fullness of understanding [πᾶν πλοῦτος τῆς πληροφορίας τῆς συνέσεως], unto knowledge [ἐπίγνωσιν] of the mystery of God, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge [πάντες οἱ θησαυροὶ τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως]” (Col 2:2–3). As the “image of the invisible God,” Christ is the source of the wisdom necessary to renew the minds of believers and equip them to understand the mystery of God.

This knowledge of God is meant to be not only a speculative knowledge, but also one that reshapes the Colossians’s behavior, as we see in the hortatory section of the letter. Paul urges his audience,

⁷⁶ Though it is beyond the scope of this essay, the question of how exactly Christ’s bodily death on the Cross relates to this transformation of the mind for the author of Colossians would be well worth exploring.

“Set your minds [φρονεῖτε] on the things above, not on the things upon earth.” The exhortation culminates with the explicit combination of knowledge language and image language: “Do not lie to one another, putting off the old human being with his deeds and putting on the new human being, the one being renewed in knowledge [εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν] according to the image [κατ’ εἰκόνα] of the one who created him” (Col 3:9–10). Given that the letter earlier describes Christ as the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge [πάντες οἱ θησαυροὶ τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως]” (Col 2:3), the “image” according to which the Colossians are being renewed and through whom they were created can be none other than Christ himself. All of this fits with Aquinas’s understanding of the *imago* as the rational Word derived from the Father, the Word through whom Christians are renewed and conformed to that image.

Aquinas’s theology of the *imago* thus has the potential to illuminate one of the main biblical texts from which it is drawn, providing a more integrated reading of the letter as a whole. Image and knowledge go hand in hand, and the connection between the two sheds considerable light on the nature of the redemption described in Colossians. Far from distorting the message of the letter, Thomas’s theology demonstrates the fruitfulness of a careful interplay between philosophical reasoning, the Church’s tradition, and the close reading of Scripture.