

A TRANSITION BY LOVE
(EXPLORING THE SUMMA THEOLOGIAE OF SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS)

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INTRODUCTION

The *Summa Theologiae* is a vast and complex work that many take to be the most comprehensive account ever given of the Christian Faith. Aquinas was writing at a time when the works of Aristotle, which many Christians took to be antithetical to the Christian Faith, had recently been recovered. One of Aquinas' tasks was to show how Aristotle could, on the contrary, be an aid for the presentation of the Christian Faith. Because of his extraordinary philosophical skills, Aquinas has often been understood to be more the philosopher than the theologian. This way of reading Aquinas often stresses his understanding of "natural theology" as well as his account of natural law. Those that read Aquinas in this fashion give the impression that Aquinas thought one should try to proceed as far as possible with unaided "natural reason", which can then be supplemented by truths known through revelation. But Aquinas did not think of himself as a philosopher whose task was to reflect on the writings of nature. He thought of himself as a theologian, whose primary function was rightly to interpret the scripture.

Aristotle was certainly important for Aquinas, but Augustine was equally, if not more, his primary conversation partner. Indeed, at least an aspect of Aquinas' extraordinary achievement is to have represented essential themes in Augustine. Thus the virtues, rather than the law, are the principle subject of Aquinas' understanding of the Christian life. However, he departs from Augustine in his account of the virtues. Following Aristotle, Aquinas stresses the importance of habitual formation – whereas Augustine, following Plato, sees all the virtues as forms of love. For Aquinas, it is not so much that the virtues are forms of love, but rather that Charity – which is nothing less than the work of the Holy Spirit to make us friends with God – is the form of courage,

temperance, justice, and prudence.¹ Indeed, the “natural virtues”, which to be sure are of some use, are but sin unless they are vivified by the Holy Spirit.²

In the *Summa theologiae* Aquinas was not attempting to provide an account that avoids the continuing struggle Christians must undertake in this life. Indeed, his favorite way of describing the Christian life was that of being “wayfarers”³ The *Summa* was his attempt to help the Church continue to develop the skills to discern the work of the Spirit. That is why the very structure of the *Summa* is determined by the story of creation, fall, and redemption. Thus, theologians like Augustine and Aquinas never forgot that their task was to help Christians remember that their lives are shaped by story-determined practices that make all that they do and do not do intelligible.

. Another important innovation of the *Summa* is the analogy drawn between the Gifts and the Moral Virtues. As the latter make the appetites amenable to the movement of reason, so the former make all the faculties amenable to the movement of the Holy Spirit. By means of this analogy, Thomas explains the abiding character of the Gifts, the basis of their organization and their link with one another in charity. In summary, St. Thomas’ theory developed in three phases. In the first the Gifts are represented as a superhuman mode of action in human life, proportionate to man’s supernatural destiny. The second phase is characterised by a new way of explaining the superhuman mode of the Gifts, namely, by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The third phase freed the interpretation of various particular Gifts, (especially Knowledge, Wisdom and Understanding) from the uncongenial biases that had been imposed on them by the pressures of Augustinian rhetoric and scholastic systematization.

¹ *ST*, I-II, 65

² *ST*, II-II, 23,7

³ *ST*, II-II, 24, 4.

Many theological explanations are found in the *Summa* on Gifts and Virtues. This exposition will study the intrinsic link between the two, established by the love of God, and why the intervention of God is needed for the perfection of the struggles of man towards his friendship. Particular emphasis will be laid on the virtues as infused virtues and gifts as the highest level formed by the love of God in the person of the Holy Spirit.

VIRTUES

What is remarkable about the Virtues of a Christian sort is that they prepare us to rely on an agency other than our own. For Aquinas virtue does not imply self-mastery, nor does it simply imply self-sufficiency emphasizing so much the power of agency that eventually the virtuous person has no need of another. Here what accounts for the difference is charity. Charity makes every virtue an expression of love, but love is a confession of need, it is an admission of our own incompleteness, and charity is a love confessing who we need is God.

Virtues formed in charity are borne from a longing to be transfigured by a love in whose likeness our happiness shines. Those virtues that are formed in charity testify that our perfection is not something we can give ourselves, but is something we receive when we avail ourselves to the purifying love and goodness of God capable of making us more than we already are; indeed capable of giving us the radical perfection of likeness to God. Through charity each virtue is an act of openness, an act by which God is able to determine us more deeply and completely. It is interesting to note that the strange thing about virtues formed from charity is that the stronger we grow in them, the more defenseless we are before God. Hence what is in play here is the notion of “Infused

Virtues” which is, allowing God to transform the virtues within us in love while we still remain the principal agents. Besides the Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity, a person in sanctifying grace receives an infusion of the moral virtues. Most Catholic Theologians explain both sets of infused virtues as supernatural counterparts of the virtuous habits we can possess naturally. The infused theological virtues, then, correspond to our natural knowledge, trust and love of God. The infused moral virtues are divinely conferred habits that supplement and elevate our naturally acquired prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. In order to understand what the infused moral virtues are, it is useful to see what they mean naturally, since the infusion of these powers does not radically change their natural character but sublimates and raises their capacity to a higher than natural end. The strategy here is not to increase self-determination, but to provide the openness and freedom God needs to enter our life and re-make us from within. As Thomas says, if God is our good, virtue which unites us with God “cannot be caused through human acts originating in reason, but is produced in us by the divine operation alone...”⁴

We commonly speak of "natural goodness" that some people seem to have as part of their native temperament. Yet we know that this is only a figure of speech because so-called natural virtue is not born of nature but comes as a gift of God, who endows some people with qualities of mind and heart that others, after a lifetime of effort, never acquire. But there is nothing rhetorical in the Catholic belief that part of the divine life we obtain in sanctifying grace is the possession of certain enduring powers, the infused virtues and gifts. Nowhere else does the true character of the supernatural appear more evident than in the endowments of infused virtue in the soul.

⁴*ST*, I-II, 63, 2

The soul is what makes a person a human being, and places him into the natural order; sanctifying grace, by analogy, is that quality of the soul which gives a person all that is properly divine and puts him habitually into the family of God. Comparing the two with each other, the soul is the foundation of natural life, as sanctifying grace is the basis of supernatural life. Yet we know that the soul is not all we have in the body; that the soul itself has various powers through which it operates and by which it gives expression to its rational nature. Even so, by a divine consistency, the “soul of the soul”, as sanctifying grace has been called, must have channels for the new life that God pours into the just. These are the virtues, theological and moral, according to their respective purposes; not unlike the native abilities through which mind and will come into contact with the visible world around and the world, in turn, comes into contact with us.

Among the infused virtues, however, some are concerned directly with God and operate in a field in which the unaided nature cannot work; they are called Theological. Others have as their object not God himself, the final end of all things, but human activities that are subordinate to the final end; they are called moral and, because four of them (prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice) are primary, are said to be cardinal in human conduct. Moreover, the powers of nature are possessed of certain instincts or impulses, which are natural propensities that incite animals (including man) to the actions essential to their existence, preservation, and development. In like manner, the powers of super nature are endowed with spiritual instincts or gifts by which the Holy Spirit directs souls to follow his inspirations easily and more securely toward the attainment of their heavenly goal.⁵

⁵ *The Catholic Catechism, part one, Doctrine of the Faith*

GIFTS

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit belong to the messianic endowment of Jesus.⁶ During his earthly life he was filled with the Spirit⁷ and throughout his ministry accompanied by the Spirit. He acted by the power of the Spirit⁸ and, finally, through the Spirit offered himself to God.⁹ For us to be children of God means receiving the Spirit and, like Jesus, being led by the Spirit.¹⁰ The Holy Spirit himself is the primary gift to Christians; sent by Jesus and the Father, he is God's loving gift of himself.¹¹ The Spirit's first gift distinct from himself is that love by which sinful human persons are inwardly transformed into loving children of God.¹² The Spirit is not communicated to individual Christians in their separateness, as if to be a private possession. Rather, he is the Spirit of Jesus shared with his Church, and received by each member of the Church.¹³

It follows that the effects of redemption accomplished by the Spirit primarily are gifts to the Church. Hence, St. Paul teaches that the one Spirit gives many gifts, each gift appropriate to the member of Jesus to whom it is given for the building up of the one body, the Church.¹⁴ However, the primary and greatest gift is that charity by which the entire body and all of its functions become an integrated whole, and every good work, every fruit of God's redeeming love manifested in Jesus, is brought to fulfillment.¹⁵

The Fathers and Doctors of the Church have thus taught that every Christian shares in the endowment of the Spirit promised in Isaiah to the Messiah: "And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and

⁶ *ST*, 1-2, q. 68

⁷ *Luke*, 4.1

⁸ *Ibid*, 4.14

⁹ *Hebrew*, 9.14

¹⁰ *Roman*, 8.14-16; *Galatians*, 5.25

¹¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 39-40

¹² *Romans*, 5.5; 8.14-16; *Lumen Gentium*, 40 and 42

¹³ *Lumen Gentium*, 7

¹⁴ *1 Corinthians*, 12

¹⁵ *1 Corinthians*, 13

might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord”¹⁶ Until recently, translations generally used in the Church have added a “seventh spirit,” piety. These seven aspects of the messianic endowment have been called, in a special sense, the “Gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

St. Thomas Aquinas, following St. Augustine, closely relates the Gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Beatitudes. He considers that the Beatitudes express the acts of Christians in accordance with the gifts by which lesser goods are set aside, obstacles overcome, and heavenly fulfilment attained. On this analysis, the gifts correspond to the first seven of the eight Beatitudes.¹⁷ The difficulty with Thomas' account is in the notion that human powers are actuated by the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a manner which reason enlightened by faith and human love enlivened by charity cannot account for. Thomas seems to admit an element of divine activity into the process of human action and to treat it as a principle on the same level with the principles of human action. (If it were not on the same level, it would not be an alternative to the movement of reason.) This appears to be a case of commingling.

The rationale for the Gifts of the Spirit parallels Aquinas' argument for the necessity of grace and the infused virtues: in order to act towards an end, an agent has to be proportionate to the end. A conformity between an agent and the end is called to attain is demanded. Otherwise, Thomas reasons, there is no way the end can be achieved.

The Gifts are what we expect the behaviour of God's Friends to be. They are habits, how a life of friendship with God has disposed one to act; they are patterned ways of acting for the sake of a certain end; they are perfecting because they render both an action and its agent good. For Thomas, the Gifts are a kind of virtue inasmuch as they

¹⁶ *Isaiah*, 11.2

¹⁷ *ST*, 1-2, q. 69, aa. 1, 3

incline the agent to right action. The Gifts and the virtues are not opposed, or entirely distinct; rather, the Gifts are virtues, but what distinguishes them from the virtues is the agency from which they proceed. It is this difference in agency which accounts for the superior excellence of the Gifts.

Sometimes the Gifts are called virtues in the common meaning of the word virtue. However, there is something in them that transcends the common meaning of virtue, in that they are divine virtues and perfect man in so far as he is moved by God. The Gifts are God's virtues; they are how God is virtuous, good and perfect love. They are God acting not outside us but from within; we are the agents of virtue but God is the agent of Gift. However, with the Gifts God's agency has become our own. What accounts for the Gifts is a determination of agency effected through love. The Gifts signal a transformation of agency so complete that it is in virtue of God that the friend of God acts. They surpass the common perfection of the virtues not as regards the kinds of works done but as regards the mode of operation, inasmuch as man is moved in the case of the Gifts by a higher principle.

With the Gifts men and women are moved by God; they are perfections which dispose a man to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit. It must be remembered, however, that the Gifts are not inflicted upon the friend of God against his or her will, but express a harmony of will which is every friendship's purpose to achieve; man is moved by the Holy Spirit in such a way that he also acts, in so far as he has free will.

FROM VIRTUES TO GIFTS

For Thomas the Gifts confer an order of perfection that is not merely human, but superhuman and divine. Hence he says that in terms of other divisions, the Gifts must be compared, not to Virtues in the purgative state, but to the exemplary virtues.

The Gifts are able to take God himself as their standard of measurement, and thus to impart a divine mode to man's activity, because of the union with God that has been brought about by charity. Hence the Gifts are rooted in charity and are given along with it. Likewise they are all received and lost together, along with charity, grace, and the infused virtues. Based on this, for salvation, it is not necessary to have the virtues in a state of perfection. But it is necessary to have the perfection which comes from the Gifts, which is to have God as rule or standard of all things. This does not mean, of course, that it not necessary to have the virtues at all; it goes without saying that they are intrinsic components of moral and especially supernatural rectitude. Neither does it mean that one who has the Gifts must have them in a state of intrinsic perfection; any more than one must perfect virtue. But it means that the Gifts fulfil a function indispensable to a life ordained to God as its supernatural last end, namely, that God himself, and not merely human reason, be the standard of measurement by which one conducts oneself.

When we turn to the commentary on the *Sentences* to the *Summa*, the most striking change we encounter in the exposition of the Gifts is that the concept of superhuman mode of activity almost disappears. Its place is taken by the motion of change or prompting by the Holy Spirit. In the commentary the entire exposition of the Gifts is governed by the principle that they make act in a superhuman mode. The governing principle of the *Summa* is that the Gifts make man docile to the promptings of the Spirit. For example, to be moved to do something through reasoned inquiry is the proper characteristic of rational

creatures, which inquiry is called taking counsel. Accordingly the Holy Spirit prompts them in a fashion congenial to their deliberativeness. On this account counsel is counted among the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Prudence, whether acquired by practice or shed on us by grace, directs us in our searching into matters that our minds can grasp, and enables us to be of good counsel for ourselves or for others. Because of the inability of our mind to grasp all individual and contingent events we need in our searchings the guidance of God, who knows all things. This comes through the gift of Counsel, whereby we are guided by the advice, as it were, of God; rather as in human affairs those who are not sufficiently qualified to work things out for themselves require the counsel of wiser men. Hence prudence, which signifies the rightness of reason, is above all helped and completed by being moved and ruled by the Holy Spirit. This is for the gift of Counsel. Consequently the gift of Counsel complements prudence as adding it and bringing it to completion.

God causes knowledge and virtue in people, not only when we first acquire them, but as long as we hold on to them. And so he causes the knowledge of what should be done in the blessed, not as enlightening their ignorance, but as sustaining their knowledge. And so as regards the question of the life in heaven with the gift of Counsel, it is evident then that the gift remains with the blessed in heaven in that God sustain in them the knowledge of things they already know and also in that their nascence is enlightened about things to be done.

Counsel is a special gift that assists the mind and perfects the virtue of prudence by enlightening a man on how to decide and command individual supernatural acts. It refers primarily to prudent conduct in one's own case, and only secondly in favour of others. Its proper object is the right ordering of particular actions, after the gifts of knowledge and understanding furnish the general principles. Enlightened by the Spirit, a person reams

what to do in a specific case and what advice to give when consulted or commands to make if he is in authority. Implicit in this gift is the native inability of reason, left to itself, to grasp all the facets of a concrete situation and see at a glance all the circumstances. It needs the help of God, who comprehends all things and who acts in the capacity of counsellor to the humble soul, just as in human affairs we consult others who have more experience or knowledge than us.

With this it can be seen that, it seems better to link the gifts of the Holy Spirit more closely with the specifically Christian virtues. These virtues are already transformed by faith and charity. They might be regarded as virtues to the extent that they are dispositions to human acts, though of a specifically Christian sort, and as gifts insofar as their relationship to faith enlivened by charity makes them specifically Christian. Or, and perhaps preferably, the gifts of the Holy Spirit might be identified with charity considered precisely insofar as it is the gift of the Holy Spirit which transforms the moral requirements articulated in the modes of responsibility into the characteristically Christian inclinations proclaimed "blessed" in the Beatitudes.

This draws us closely to the arena of faith since it deals with man's understanding as intimate knowledge of the activity of the Holy Spirit from within; and Understanding is a Gift of the Holy Spirit which is very much necessary for the profession of faith. It implies a certain intimate knowing; to understand is, as it were, to read within. This is evident when you consider the difference between intelligence and sense. For sense knowledge is engaged with external empirical qualities, whereas intellectual knowledge penetrates as far as the essence of a thing, its objective interest being what a thing really is. As a free human act, faith must be responsible; good reasons are needed for making and keeping this commitment. Even while considering the good reasons, however, one must

remember that faith is first, last, and always an undeserved gift of God. Believers have no trouble understanding that those without faith should search for religious truth and consider why it would be good and right to become Catholics. But why should Catholic Christians reflect on their own responsibility to believe? After all, the experience of friendship with God provides a much greater motive for cherishing faith than any reasons one can find, and every Christian is able not only to believe but to know God's personal love: "God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us"¹⁸ This is the Gift of Understanding insofar as it is related to Faith.

Most Catholics are baptized as infants, without making any personal choice. Even as adults, their commitment of faith usually is made and reaffirmed only in making choices to practice it, so that the reasons for believing as they do can remain unclear. But the reasons why one freely does anything are an important part of what one is doing. That is obvious when, for instance, an otherwise good act is done for a bad reason, for example, telling others the truth about their failings in order to hurt them. Conversely, when good acts are done for good reasons, the reasons are no less an important part of what one does. A good act is enriched when one has more good reasons for doing it. Thus, one can enrich one's act of faith, insofar as it depends on one's choice, by considering the reasons why it is right and good to believe. As with any other choice, the commitment to believe can be made on the basis of mixed motives, a combination of feelings both appropriate and questionable, of reasons both good and bad. Better understanding helps overcome faulty motives for believing, especially reasons which make Christian life a mere means to an inappropriate, ulterior end.

¹⁸ *1 John*, 4.15-16

Among the bad reasons for believing are, first, social conformism for the sake of temporal advantages and, second, the prospect of hell misunderstood as an arbitrary punishment. The first exposes faith to shifting social pressures; the second breeds legalistic minimalism in those who are docile and rebellion in those who are spirited. As people and their circumstances change, faulty reasons for believing often turn into plausible excuses for abandoning faith. Still, emotional motivations for doing anything always are mixed and usually can be allied to different sorts of reasons. Feelings of solidarity and fear naturally motivate faith, and inasmuch they are not reasons for believing, neither are they bad reasons. Moreover, the joy of solidarity in Christian communion and the fear of hell, when hell is correctly understood, normally are allied with sound reasons for faith. The presence in oneself or others of various emotional motives for faith should not cause embarrassment or lead to criticism. But it should spur one to examine one's feelings and reasons, and to integrate emotional motives with good reasons for believing. Understanding Can Strengthen Commitment

Since faith is a commitment to renounce sin and live a holy life, every mortal sin in some way challenges faith, and mortal sin, unfortunately, seems not to be a rare occurrence. Thus, many Christians are tempted at some time to renounce their faith. Reflection on all the appealing aspects of the option of faith strengthens the will in its commitment, for the more one understands why it is good to believe, the less appealing are tempting alternatives. Moreover, misunderstandings can make it seem that faith is at odds with some other genuine human good - honesty, say, or concern for justice. Better understanding eliminates such false options by clarifying how Christian faith serves many human goods and is at odds with none. Eliminating false options strengthens the

commitment of faith by making it clear that there is no sound reason to choose contrary to it.

In any case, since man's knowledge starts from the senses as a virtue, and from the outside, it is clear that the stronger the light of understanding the deeper the penetration. The natural light of our understanding is, however, of limited power, and can go only so far. Consequently man needs a supernatural light to penetrate further and know things for which natural light is not enough. Since man is ordained to supernatural happiness, we need to reach beyond to certain deeper truths. And for this we need the Gift of Understanding to acquire not only a thin conception of Faith but an intimate knowing for its practice.

CONCLUSION

St. Thomas summarizes the great diversity of theological opinion up to his time concerning the gifts. Some did not distinguish the gifts from virtues, in particular from the specifically Christian virtues by which one is conformed to Jesus. The common view was that the gifts are like virtues at least in being enduring dispositions and in having relevance for human acts.

Thomas' position is that the Christian needs the gifts as lasting dispositions distinct from the virtues. Human persons are naturally disposed to act according to reason, and the virtues perfect this disposition. But as a child of God, the Christian needs to be disposed to be divinely moved. The gifts are created qualities made present in the soul together with charity (and never apart from it) which provide an inherent receptiveness to divine leading, so that the Christian led by the Spirit is inwardly drawn, not violently

dragged.¹⁹ In providing this explanation, Thomas regards movement by reason (Virtues) and by the Spirit (Gifts) as alternatives, thus suggesting that the gifts of the Spirit account for actuations of the Christian's human powers which have no adequate natural principle.²⁰

It is true that Christian life, insofar as it is lived not only according to human nature but also according to a share in divine nature, is a participation in the activity of the Holy Spirit. It is also true, of course, that divine causality is presupposed by every actuation of human powers, and that such an actuation, if salvific, is caused by grace, which may be attributed to the Holy Spirit. Moreover, Christian life presupposes faith and is formed by it, and living faith has a certitude and force it could not have were it not motivated by charity. The same is true of all virtuous acts which make up the life of faith. Also, the human modes of responsibility and virtues are specified in the Christian to become modes of Christian response, and this transition is accounted for by charity, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ *ST*, 1-2, q. 68, aa. 1, 3

²⁰ *ST* 1-2, q. 68, a. 2; cf. a. 1, ad 3, 4