

Golden Straw: St. Thomas and the Ecstatic Practice of Theology

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IN THIS ARTICLE I shall pursue a double thesis. First, I will give reasons for my conviction that we can only fully understand what is written in St. Thomas if we look to what is not written, and to the unwritable experience that occurred to him on the Feast of St. Nicholas in the year 1273.¹ Second, and in close connection with this point, my essay will plead for “theology on the knees,” arguing that we must treasure above all the contemplative leisure of *sacra doctrina*, which has no other object than the First Truth in its dazzling splendor, no other motivation than love of this gracious, glorious Truth that sets us free and makes us divine.² The desire to share the fruits of contemplation with others, like the desire to help the poor, the suffering, the oppressed, must come from a prior thirst and hunger for the living and life-giving God, if what we seek to pass on is real knowledge and real mercy.

¹ The earliest sources tell us that Thomas’s mystical experience took place “around the time of the feast of blessed Nicholas,” *a festo beati Nicolai circa*. In a future article I shall make an *argumentum ex convenientia* for accepting the precise date of December 6, as the biographical tradition has instinctively done. On matters of dating and other details, I follow the research of Jean-Pierre Torrell, OP, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996) [hereafter *Thomas Aquinas*].

² In this essay “theology” will be shorthand for *sacra doctrina*, granting the qualifications that ought to be made. See James A. Weisheipl, OP, “The Meaning of *sacra doctrina* in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1,” *The Thomist* 38 (1974): 49–80.

The Experience of December 6, 1273

During his final period in Naples (mid-1272–early 1274), where he served as director of the Dominican *studium*, St. Thomas's favorite place of prayer seems to have been a chapel dedicated to St. Nicholas in the church of San Domenico Maggiore, where he could invariably be found twice a day, first for morning Mass, and again for prayer at night, prior to Matins. "Thomas adhered to a strict regimen. He arose early every morning to confess his sins to Reginald and celebrated Mass in the chapel of St. Nicholas, served by Reginald," who then said his own Mass, which Thomas served as a way of making his thanksgiving.³ To this general background may be added the famous incident that Thomas's earliest biographers derived from the eyewitness report of "an old lay-brother, a man of holy life and scrupulous conscience, Dominic of Caserta."

This brother, who was the sacristan, had noticed that Thomas would often leave his cell quietly before Matins and go down to the church to pray alone; and one night, happening to observe more attentively than usual, the brother saw Thomas, praying in the chapel of St. Nicholas, raised off the ground about two feet. For a long while brother Dominic remained watching in wonder; then suddenly, from the crucifix at which Thomas was gazing, he heard a clear voice say these words: "You have written well of me, Thomas; what do you desire as a reward for your labours?" And Thomas replied: "Lord, only yourself." It should be noted that this occurred at the time when the last part of the *Summa theologiae* was being composed, which treats of the Incarnation, birth, suffering, and resurrection of Christ; and with that mention of "reward" Thomas was no doubt given to understand that the end of his labours was near at hand; and indeed he wrote little after this.⁴

³ James A. Weisheipl, OP, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works*, with corrigenda and addenda (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 320. For a detailed description of the Cappella di S. Nicola di Bari, see Raffaele Maria Valle and Benedetto Minichini, *Descrizione storica, artistica, letteraria della chiesa, del convento e de' religiosi illustri di s. Domenico Maggiore di Napoli dal 1216 al 1854* (Naples: Vaglio, 1854), 400–14.

⁴ From the Vita composed by Bernard Gui, trans. Kenelm Foster, OP, *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1959). Gui's recounting of the mystical conversation with the Crucified is on pp. 42–43. Tocco is more specific: he says Thomas was writing on the passion and resurrection of Christ. On this incident, see Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas*, 315–16; Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 285. The Sienese painter Sassetta has given us a moving depiction of the scene, *St. Thomas in Prayer Before the Cross* (1423), in the Vatican Pinacoteca. For discussion of the earliest biographers of Thomas (William of Tocco,

This cannot have occurred much before the end of Thomas's life, since he was to die less than two years after arriving in Naples.⁵ "It is my conviction," writes Robert Barron, "that this mystical conversation between servant and Master is a sort of interpretive key to the whole of Aquinas's life and thought: he wanted nothing more than Christ, nothing other than Christ, nothing less than Christ."⁶ Thomas says exactly this in his comments on Colossians 2:3, speaking of Jesus "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." After quoting 1 Corinthians 2:2, "I did not judge myself to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified," the saint writes: "just as if one were to have a book in which all knowledge could be found, he would not seek to know anything else except that single book, so, too, there is no need for us to seek anything beyond Christ."⁷

I will now turn to the testimony of Bartholomew of Capua for the event which took place in December of 1273. It is certainly among the most celebrated of Thomas's life.

While brother Thomas was saying his Mass one morning, in the chapel of St. Nicholas at Naples, something happened which profoundly affected and altered him. After Mass he refused to write or dictate; indeed he put away his writing materials. He was in the third part of the *Summa*, at the questions on Penance. And brother Reginald, seeing that he was not writing, said to him: "Father, are you going to give up this great work, undertaken for the glory of God and the enlightenment of the world?" But Thomas replied: "Reginald, I cannot go on" [*Raynalde, non possum*]. Then Reginald, who began to fear that much study might have affected his master's brain [*timens ne propter multum studium aliquam incurisset amentiam*], urged and insisted that he should continue his writing; but Thomas only answered in the same way:

Bernard Gui, Peter Calo) and the depositions collected for the canonization process, one can do no better than Torrell, who annotates and assesses the documentary evidence: *Thomas Aquinas*, passim, especially 267–75.

⁵ As Thomas arrived in Italy between Pentecost and September of 1272, and had to begin the journey to Lyons at the end of January or the beginning of February 1274, the longest he could have resided in Naples is about 18 months (Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 247). Tocco and Gui recount a similar story from Parisian circles: Jesus appeared to Thomas to commend him for his treatment of the mystery of the Real Presence, in particular how accidents can exist in this sacrament without their subject. See Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 284–85; Foster, *Life of Aquinas*, 43–44.

⁶ *Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 13–14.

⁷ *Super ad Colossenses* 2, lec. 1, no. 82: "sicut qui haberet librum ubi esset tota scientia, non quaereret nisi ut sciret illum librum, sic et nos non oportet amplius quaerere nisi Christum" (*Super Epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, ed. Cai, 2 vols. [Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1953], 2:142).

“Reginald, I cannot—because all that I have written seems to me so much straw.”⁸

From this time onward, everything was different. The normally robust friar who got up before dawn and slept little had to take to his bed. Soon he was sent to his sister Theodora’s house in San Severino to recuperate.

Hastening there with much difficulty, when he arrived and the countess came out to meet him, he could scarcely speak. The countess, very much alarmed, said to Reginald: “What has happened to my brother Thomas? He seems quite dazed and hardly spoke to me!” And Reginald answered: “He has been like this since about the feast of St. Nicholas—since when he has written nothing at all.” Then again brother Reginald began to beseech Thomas to tell him why he refused to write and why he was so stupefied; and after much of this urgent questioning and insisting, Thomas at last said to Reginald: “Promise me, by the living God almighty and by your loyalty to our Order and by the love you bear to me, that you will never reveal, as long as I live, what I shall tell you.” Then he added: “All that I have written seems to me straw compared with what has now been revealed to me.”⁹

At the castle Thomas was oblivious to his surroundings for three days straight; Theodora understandably grew worried. “The master is frequently borne away in spirit when he is contemplating something. But never has he been out of his senses for as long as I have seen him now,” said Reginald to the countess,¹⁰ and gave a strong tug at his master’s cloak to break the trance. To the well-known words already quoted, Thomas evidently added: “The only thing I want now is that as God has put an end to my writing, He may quickly end my life also.”¹¹

⁸ Foster, *Life of Aquinas*, 109–10. The Latin is taken from *Fontes Vitae S. Thomae Aquinatis notis historicis et criticis illustrati*, ed. D. Prümmer and M.-H. Laurent (Toulouse, n.d.; originally published in the *Revue Thomiste* from 1911 to 1937), 376–78.

⁹ Foster, *Life of Aquinas*, 109–10, translation slightly modified.

¹⁰ Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 289.

¹¹ Foster, *Life of Aquinas*, 46. Gui then comments: “Thus it was with him as with Moses and Paul, to whom God revealed things that surpass human understanding, to the one as the mediator of the Law to the Jews, to the other as the preacher of Grace to the Gentiles. For it was fitting that to this holy teacher Thomas, who from the Throne on high received the book of both Laws and expounded it in the presence of the whole Church, should be shown things beyond the reach of natural reason, as pledges of a still greater vision to come. O happy teacher, enlightened in the present and seeing far into the future! Who from those things you were found worthy to write of rose to a vision of yet greater things!”

I take it as a given that the experience of December 6 was principally if not exclusively a mystical one, whatever additional psychic or physiological factors might have been involved (a stroke, breakdown caused by overwork, brain damage through haemorrhage, etc.).¹²

A Preacher Falls Silent

The statement *Omnia que scripsi videntur michi palee respectu eorum que vidi et revelata sunt michi*¹³ has elicited the most diverse reactions. What was it that compelled St. Thomas to pass so severe a judgment, as it may seem, on that vast body of doctrine which the Church's Magisterium, from John XXII in 1318 to John Paul II in recent years, has declared the standard of philosophical and theological formation?¹⁴ And a further question arises: What significance should this event and the judgment to which it drove St. Thomas have for us who study his works or, more broadly, for whomever enters the world of *sacra doctrina* under his guidance?

To understand Thomas's state of soul, Jean-Pierre Torrell suggests we turn to the confession of faith in Jesus, truly present in the Eucharist, that Thomas made four days before his death when the Viaticum was brought to his bedside:

I receive you, price of my soul's redemption, I receive you, viaticum of my pilgrimage, for love of whom I have studied, watched, labored; I have preached you, I have taught you; never have I said anything against

¹² This, in contrast to the "scientific" explanation proposed by Weisheipl (*Friar Thomas*, 322–23) and by Edmund Colledge, OSA, "The Legend of St. Thomas Aquinas," in *St. Thomas Aquinas, 1274–1974, Commemorative Studies* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), 26.

¹³ Prümmer, *Fontes Vitae S. Thomae Aquinatis*, 378.

¹⁴ On papal commendations up to the mid-century, see Santiago Ramírez, OP, "The Authority of St. Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 15 (1952): 1–109; Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas, Angel of the Schools*, trans. J.F. Scanlan (London: Sheed & Ward, 1942), 184–240; Anthony D. Lee, OP, "Thomism and the Council," in *Vatican II, The Theological Dimension*, ed. idem (n.p.: The Thomist Press, 1963), 451–92. A review of the relevant documents shows the unique status of St. Thomas: never has any other theologian been recognized by the Magisterium as possessing such universal and preeminent authority in the handing down of sacred doctrine. A singular status continues to be granted St. Thomas in the decrees of Vatican II and in postconciliar documents, among the more important of which are *Optatam Totius* (1965), nos. 15–16, and *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), no. 10; the *Ratio Fundamentalibus Institutionis Sacerdotalis* of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1970); Paul VI's Apostolic Letter *Lumen Ecclesiae* (1974); John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia Christiana* (1979), no. 71, no. 79, and no. 80; the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1983), canon 252.3; and John Paul II's Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (1998), nos. 43–44 and nos. 57–61.

you, and if I have done so it is through ignorance and I do not grow stubborn in my error; if I have taught ill on this sacrament or the others, I submit it to the judgment of the Holy Roman Church, in obedience to which I leave now this life.¹⁵

“It is entirely permissible to refer to this declaration for a more positive—and therefore more exact—appreciation of Thomas’s expression,” remarks Torrell.

Straw is a stock expression used to distinguish, by giving it proper weight, the grain of reality within the chaff of the words; the words are not the reality, but they designate it and they lead to it. Having arrived at reality itself, Thomas had a certain right to feel himself detached with respect to the words, but this does not at all signify that he considers his work as without value. Simply put, he had gone beyond it.¹⁶

The secret lies in Thomas’s greatness. Only a saintly genius can begin to appreciate the discrepancy between the human mind and the divine Mind, the muddy shallows of creaturely knowledge and the fathomless depths of uncreated Wisdom. Josef Pieper writes:

The last word of St. Thomas is not communication but silence. And it is not death which takes the pen out of his hand. His tongue is stilled by the superabundance of life in the mystery of God. He is silent, not because he has nothing further to say; he is silent because he has been allowed a glimpse into the inexpressible depth of that mystery which is not reached by any human thought or speech.¹⁷

Pieper’s statement echoes Thomas’s commentary on John 21:25: “But there are also many other things which Jesus did; which, if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written.”

An infinite number of human words could not attain to the one Word of God. For from the beginning of the Church things have always been

¹⁵ Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 293; cf. Foster, *Life of Aquinas*, 55–56.

¹⁶ *Thomas Aquinas*, 293. For similar interpretations, see Simon Tugwell, OP, *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 266–67; Fergus Kerr, OP, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 1.

¹⁷ *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. John Murray and Daniel O’Connor (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 45; cf. the closing remarks of A. B. Sharpe, “The Ascetical and Mystical Teaching of St. Thomas,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas: Papers from the Summer School of Catholic Studies Held at Cambridge, August 1924*, ed. C. Lattey, SJ (Cambridge: Heffer, 1925), 223.

written about Christ, but nevertheless not sufficiently; indeed, if the world were to endure for a hundred thousand years, none of the books that could be written about Christ would perfectly express His deeds and sayings down to the last detail. “Of making books there is no end” (Eccles. 12:12); “I have declared and I have spoken: they are multiplied above number” (Ps. 39:6).¹⁸

John Saward draws attention to the paradox of a preacher falling silent, a man dedicated to wrapping truth in the swaddling clothes of words who must, in the end, relinquish human speech, that he may worship in total simplicity the naked truth, the newborn Babe, the one truth which makes all else true, the Word beyond all words. “In St. Thomas, a Dominican vowed to communicate to others the fruits of his contemplation, we see language consummated in adoring silence, the best of intellectual wisdom fulfilled in holy stupefaction and folly.”¹⁹

Iconographic Incompleteness

It is a common enough observation that the incompleteness of the *Summa theologiae*, not to mention the fragmentary condition in which Thomas left many other works, underlines the inadequacy of human words to capture the reality of God, or even to sound the depths of a creation that reflects His unknowability.²⁰ The *Summa* was abandoned, every project was abandoned, and no further writing was to come by Thomas’s own initiative; the brief letter to the Abbot of Monte Cassino on divine foreknowledge no less than the unrecorded comments on the Song of Songs were extracted from a silent man who, throughout his life, did not have it in him to refuse an appeal to his charity.

¹⁸ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura* ch. 21, lec. 6, no. 2660: “Infinita enim verba hominum non possunt attingere unum Dei Verbum. A principio enim ecclesiae semper scripta sunt de Christo, nec tamen sufficienter; immo si duraret mundus per centum millia annorum, possent libri fieri de Christo, nec ad perfectionem per singula, facta et dicta sua enuclearentur. Eccles. ult.: faciendi plures libros nullus est finis; Ps. 39: annuntiavi, et locutus sum: multiplicati sunt super numerum” (ed. Cai [Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1952], 488).

¹⁹ *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ’s Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 82–83.

²⁰ See Pieper, *Silence of St. Thomas*, 57–67; idem, *The Truth of All Things*, trans. Lothar Kraut, in *Living the Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 57–59; Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Thomas*, 5th ed., trans. Laurence K. Shook, CSB (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 357–78; W. Norris Clarke, SJ, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 294–96. The works left unfinished make a sizable catalogue unto themselves. Following the sequence

Thomas's initial words to Reginald, "I cannot go on," are ambiguous. Was he speaking of a voluntary renunciation, "I cannot go on [because I have lost my desire for work]," or a sort of inescapable paralysis, "I cannot go on [because what happened to me takes away all power of carrying on]"? For Simon Tugwell, it was the latter. The experience precipitated a "sudden helpless inability to go on with his work. He did not disown his work, he would have completed it if he could, and he deliberately alluded to it on his deathbed in quite positive terms. It was simply that he could not go on with it. As far as he was concerned, he was finished."²¹ If this is right, Thomas was burdened with a cross to which he had to resign himself in humility and faith. If, on the other hand, he might have continued but had lost the desire to do so—"I cannot go on" meaning "I cannot bear to go on"—one could then emphasize the significance of an *active* renunciation of the *Summa* and the other projects. This seems to be Pieper's view: "Thomas declared that writing had become repugnant to him."²² In any case, we are not in a position to know, and it does not much matter in the bigger picture; the telling fact is that "he abided by this decision" not to continue. "This means that the fragmentary character of the *Summa theologiae* is an inherent part of its statement."²³ Within Pieper's perspective, Thomas's relinquishment could be compared to the gesture of humility made by anonymous Celtic scribes who, in the midst of executing with flawless technique the elaborate "carpet pages" of manuscripts like the Lindisfarne Gospels, left here a loop undrawn, there an area unfilled or a color missing—surprising "lapses" that some art

and dating of Gilles Emery's catalogue in Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 330 ff., we can list the *Sententia super Meteora* (before 1270), the *Expositio Libri Peryermenias* (1270–71), the *Sententia Libri Politicorum* (1269–72), the *Sententia super librum De caelo et mundo* (1272–73), the *Sententia super libros De generatione et corruptione* (1272–73), the *Super Boetium De Trinitate* (1257–59), the *Compendium theologiae* (1265–67), the *De regno ad regem Cypri* (1267), the *De substantiis separatis* (after 1271). Thus, while mental and physical exhaustion in the face of too many projects going at once is reason enough for Thomas's abandonment of the post-1270 works, particularly the commentaries on Aristotle, this may not be the deepest reason. If weather phenomena as ordinary as the snow and rain can provoke a speechless wonder, more wonderful and mysterious still are the generation and corruption of beings and the ungenerable, incorruptible angels.

²¹ *Albert and Thom's*, 267.

²² *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 158.

²³ Pieper, *Guide*, 158. "That act of falling silent . . . was only the most superficial existential embodiment of an attitude which Thomas had already expounded . . . For he explicitly says that all our knowledge, including the knowledge of theologians, is fragmentary in character" (ibid.).

historians have taken to be symbols of self-denial, ritual negations of the pride of human skill.²⁴ Thomas no doubt made a virtue of necessity by embracing the suspension God had imposed, and, leaving the *Summa's* eschatology unwritten, gave himself over to the judgment and bliss that awaited him.

Now, although the putting aside of literary labor is itself a provocative statement, the sign of an ever-heightening awareness of the discrepancy between human thought and divine mystery, we cannot countenance the extreme opinion of Philipp Rosemann who, exaggerating the apophatic and dialectical elements in Thomas, interprets his reaction to the experience of December 6 as a “denial of the ultimate validity of human knowledge.”²⁵ A careful reading shows how the words spoken to Reginald, so compressed and mysterious in their allusion, tell a fuller story than might have been perceived at first glance.

Omnia que scripsi

Thomas targets his *writings*, which are not the same as the unutterable communications of a saintly soul with the indwelling Trinity. The problem is always what can be formulated, not what can begin to be experienced. St. John of the Cross deserves our trust when he writes, apropos the “touching” of soul and God, substance-to-substance, with its “inexpressible delicateness of delight”:

I would desire not to speak of it so as to avoid giving the impression that it is no more than what I describe. There is no way to catch in words the sublime things of God that take place in these souls. The appropriate language for the persons receiving these favors is that they understand them, experience them within themselves, enjoy them, and be silent.²⁶

²⁴ That scribes left details unfinished as an act of monastic humility is proposed by, among others, Janet Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: A Masterpiece of Book Painting* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1993).

²⁵ “A Change of Paradigm in the Study of Medieval Philosophy: From Rationalism to Postmodernism,” *The American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1998): 73.

²⁶ *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 2, no. 21, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 665. The conclusion of this work repeats the same truth: “I do not desire to speak of this spiration, filled for the soul with good and glory and delicate love of God, for I am aware of being incapable of doing so; and were I to try, it might seem less than it is. . . . [T]he Holy Spirit, through this breathing, filled the soul with good and glory in which he enkindled it in love of himself, indescribably and incomprehensibly, in the depths of God” (Stanza 4, no. 17, p. 715).

The *cognitio affectiva* of the lover of God, the *cognitio veritatis per ardorem caritatis*²⁷ is not propositional—it is hardly even describable, as witness the arduous efforts of mystics who, prompted by a superior’s command or an interior exigency, must find ways to say *something*²⁸—but it is no less knowledge for all that; on the contrary, it is human knowing in its highest assimilation to God short of the beatific vision, partaking therefore of his “inaccessible light” (1 Tim. 6:16).²⁹

One should also consider that there are three distinct stages of human communication: the initial conception in the heart (*verbum cordis*), the words formed into speech (*verbum vocis*), and lastly, words written down (*quod habet imaginem vocis*).³⁰ Thomas alludes to these three stages while commenting on Psalm 45 [44]:2. “The word ‘tongue’ can also be taken to refer to something else, namely, that the Psalmist wanted not only to write [his song], but first he turned it over in his heart, then spoke it with his mouth, and finally wrote it down—as if to say, ‘This song is meant to profit not only those who are present, who hear it, but also those who are to come.’”³¹ As Plato well understood, each step in turn runs the risk of being less ample, less immediate, than the preceding.³² A serious thinker cannot

²⁷ See note 88 on *cognitio affectiva*. Speaking of John the Baptist, Thomas writes: “nam sicut lucerna lucere non potest nisi igne accendatur, ita lucerna spiritualis non lucet nisi prius ardeat et inflammetur igne caritatis. Et ideo ardor praemititur illustrationi, quia per ardorem caritatis datur cognitio veritatis” (*Super Ioan.* 5, lec. 6, no. 812).

²⁸ See James A. Wiseman, OSB, “‘To Be God with God’: The Autotheistic Sayings of the Mystics,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 230–51; cf. Walter H. Principe, CSB, “Mysticism: Its Meaning and Varieties,” in *Mystics and Scholars: The Calgary Conference on Mysticism 1976*, ed. Harold Coward and Terence Penelhum (Calgary: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1976), 1–15.

²⁹ Among the many discussions of knowledge in a superhuman manner, one could single out that of Jacques Maritain, which has the advantage of uniting brevity and depth: *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Bernard Wall (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937), 305–27.

³⁰ See *In Sent.* I, 27.2.1: “in nobis . . . invenitur triplex verbum: scilicet cordis, et vocis, et quod habet imaginem vocis” (Mandonnet, 654). Citations of the *In Sent.* commentary are from the Mandonnet-Moos edition in four volumes (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929–47).

³¹ “Potest autem lingua ad aliud referri, quia, scilicet non solum voluit dicere, sed corde primo cogitavit, secundo dixit ore, et tertio scripsit; quasi dicat: non solum profuit praesentibus qui audiunt, sed etiam futuris.” Citations from the *Postilla super Psalmos* are taken from the *Opera Omnia cum hypertextibus in CD-ROM*, ed. Roberto Busa, SJ (Milan: Editoria Elettronica Editel, 1992).

³² See *Letter VII*, 341b–345a, in *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 1588–91; compare *Letter II*. I do not suggest that St. Thomas could have given unqualified assent to

but be dissatisfied, to a greater or lesser extent, with what he has written down; it nearly always seems inadequate to the original content of thought, particularly when it is a question of synthetic insight into many great truths, a vision of the whole. Thomas comes at the most detailed issues with a cosmic, all-encompassing view in mind and takes his bearings again and again in reference to it; he has better grounds than most authors do for finding the written results a poor reflection of that sublime totality which inspires him and makes him hurry to get his ideas down on paper. Plato's emphasis on the necessity of a living, personal dialogue for learning and discovery³³ is multiplied a thousandfold in the education of a Christian: If he really wants to know Christ, he must *love* Him; if he would understand, he has to *follow*. Wisdom comes through discipleship.³⁴ The questions and replies contained in a written text, dead as it is, have to be re-lived, made one's own through an interior resurrection. If we do not enter by way of the text into the meditations that gave it birth and past them into the receptivity of the longing soul impregnated by the divine Word, we are not even *reading* the text, since the created word is always a sign of something else, a summons to the uncreated Word. Thomas's *Omnia que scripsi* is the cry of a man who sees how weak an *image*, how much akin to lifeless matter, are human words in comparison with that uncreated Word, the inexhaustible fountain of Life. Yet precisely because there *is* a reflection, however faint, a participated likeness, however distant, there is a way to get from lowly straw to sovereign Lord. It is the path of the *quinque viae*, of Romans 1, of Wisdom 13. It is the path trodden by the Word made flesh,

the teaching of *Letter VII*; on the contrary, he would have registered at least one fundamental disagreement, for God, the unreachable, impalpable Good of the Platonists, has condescended, in the "folly" of His love, to embody Himself first in the inerrant words of Scripture, and then, definitively, in the human nature assumed by the eternal Word. *Verbum caro factum est*: this publication of mercy destroys all secret teachings even as it initiates its adherents into the supreme secret of divinity. However, what Thomas and Plato share in common is reverence for the mysterious reality that infinitely transcends all thought and expression. See Anton Pegis, "Penitus Manet Ignotum," *Mediaeval Studies* 27 (1965): 212–26; Joseph Owens, CSSR, "Aquinas—'Darkness of Ignorance' in the Most Refined Notion of God," in *Bonaventure and Aquinas: Enduring Philosophers*, ed. R. W. Shahan and Francis J. Kovach (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1976), 69–86.

³³ *Letter VII*, 341d: "Acquaintance with it [true philosophy] must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining" (Hamilton/Cairns ed., 1589).

³⁴ See Marcus R. Berquist, "Learning and Discipleship," *The Aquinas Review* 6 (1999): 1–51.

whose manifestation began in the poor straw of the manger and reached its visible end in a glorious Ascension.

Videntur michi palee

Thomas confesses that the writings appear or seem like straw—an implicit metaphor whose meaning has to be searched out. Was not the Christ-child placed upon a bed of straw, which He dignified by His divine presence? Moreover, we should not be too proud to admit an obvious, though humbling, truth: What looks like straw to the enraptured saint is gold to everyone else, or rather, to every lover of God who is moving toward, but has not yet received, the same experience of shattering glory and mighty consolation.³⁵

Respectu eorum que vidi et revelata sunt michi

The very repetition of *michi*, each occurrence conspicuous by its placement—the first one underlining the *videntur*, itself doubled by the *vidi*, and the second channeling the *revelata* to a singular recipient—serves to emphasize the subjectivity of the entire event. We have here neither new doctrine nor the repudiation of old, but an immediate, incommunicable *experience* of the reality of God, a seeing, touching, and tasting which can only make the public world of classroom and pulpit seem distant and unreal. The writings are straw in comparison to something *else*, a revelation whose content we shall never know. We can be certain that any finite human effort must appear trivial in the light of a divinely authored vision. Having glimpsed the divine Beauty itself, Thomas saw, as few others could see, the fragility and feebleness of theology *in via*. This is pure Thomism: The tiniest drop of divine truth is a liquor more precious, more intoxicating than the distilled wisdom of a thousand human generations. It is a note struck time and again by the friar preacher, as in these words from one of the Lenten sermons of 1273, just a few months before he stopped writing altogether:

³⁵ Hilary Carpenter, OP, beautifully expresses this paradox of “golden straw”: “We cannot know what vision of God had been vouchsafed him, but we can understand how pitiable and useless is a dim candlelight reflection to one who faces the blaze of the midday sun with the eye of an eagle. He had seen some vision of God Himself. Is it a thing of wonder that his former glimpses of the divine splendour, reflected so dimly and inadequately in the mirror of created things and seen by the poor candlelight of human reason, seemed to him so worthless in comparison? But to those many of us ‘who sit in darkness,’ to whom the vision is as yet denied, the Angelic Doctor is as a light that has discovered for us in things made the invisible things of God, through the mediumship of reason, servant of God and handmaid of faith and of divine revelation” (“The Philosophical Approach to God in Thomism,” *The Thomist* 1 [1939]: 61).

This truth, that Christ died *for us*, is so tremendous that our intellect can scarcely grasp it; for in no way does it fall within reach of our understanding. And this is just what the Apostle says: “I work in your days a work which you will not believe, if any man shall tell it to you” (Acts 13:41), and Habakkuk: “A work has been done in your days that nobody will believe when it is told of” (Hab. 1:5). For so great is the grace of God, so great His love for us, that He has done more for us than we can possibly understand.³⁶

As Tugwell suggests, Thomas’s ever-deeper experience of the love of God prepared him to undergo that *raptus* of which he had given such an authoritative account:

He had, as a theologian, argued that rapture is the highest level of contemplation, and one of the ways in which it can come about is that “one’s desire is so violently drawn to something that one becomes estranged from everything else.” Did not something like this happen to Thomas? This curiously calm, seemingly dispassionate man suddenly found that his lifelong love of Christ became too much for him. All his life he had been studying, writing, preaching and teaching for love of Christ; now that same love became momentarily so intense that it crippled him, leaving him a stranger in the world. There was indeed nothing left for him to do except to die and to enjoy forever the friendship of God.³⁷

³⁶ *In symbolum apostolorum*, art. 4: “Hoc autem, scilicet quod Christus pro nobis est mortuus, ita est arduum quod vix potest intellectus noster capere; immo nullo modo cadit in intellectu nostro. Et hoc est quod dicit Apostolus, Act. 13:41, “Opus operor ego in diebus vestris, opus quod non credetis, si quis enarraverit vobis”; et Habac. 1:5, “Opus factum est in diebus vestris quod nemo credet cum narrabitur.” Tanta est enim gratia Dei et amor ad nos, quod plus ipse fecit nobis quam possumus intelligere” (*Opuscula theologica*, 2 vols., ed. Verardo, Spiazzi, and Calcaterra [Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1953], 2:202). Cf. *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, ch. 54, no. 3922: “Si quis autem diligenter et pie incarnationis mysteria consideret, inveniet tantam sapientiae profunditatem quod humanam cognitionem excedat. . . . Unde fit ut pie consideranti semper magis ac magis admirabiles rationes huius mysterii manifestantur” (ed. Pera, Marc, and Caramello [Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1961], 348).

³⁷ Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas*, 267. That Thomas was graced with the gift of *raptus* is taken for an evident fact by the early biographers; Tugwell’s gentle question echoes Bernard Gui’s bold comparison of “this holy teacher” to Moses and Paul (see note 11). The three major treatments of *raptus* in Thomas are the commentary on 2 Corinthians 12:1–4, *DV* q. 13, and *ST*, II–II, q. 175. For commentary on the last, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Thomas und die Charismatik: Besondere Gnadengaben und die zwei Wege menschlichen Lebens* [translation of and commentary on II–II, qq. 171–182] (Freiburg i. Br.: Johannes, 1996).

The words to Reginald bear witness to that heavenly and perfect life, one taste of which makes all sweet things here below turn sour.³⁸ The “virtues of the purified soul” of *Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 61, a. 5, thus come to have an autobiographical resonance: the unearthly unknowing and “perpetual covenant with the Divine Mind” described at the end of the response tell us something about his own condition in the final weeks.³⁹

Compared to God, *everything* is straw. As Tugwell points out, “straw” was a conventional medieval image for the literal meaning of Scripture, which the devout monastic reader was meant to go beyond as he penetrated layer after layer to reach the innermost truth,⁴⁰ like one who strips off garments to lay bare the body, or pushes away the veil to see the face. This truth, this flesh, this face, is the very Author of the text: We are led in *lectio divina* from letter to spirit, from page to person. Must we not say that even Scripture is straw compared with its almighty Author? The words fall infinitely short of the Word. In heaven there are neither Bibles to be read nor churches for ceremony. “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22–23). As Thomas states, in beatitude three things coincide: “seeing, which is perfect knowledge

³⁸ “The 6 December experience, in accentuating still further his desire for the true homeland, only exacerbated to the point of *taedium uitae* his detachment from the things of this world, including what he held closest to his heart” (Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 294–95).

³⁹ “Ita scilicet quod quaedam sunt virtutes transeuntium et in divinam similitudinem tendentium: et hae vocantur virtutes purgatoriae. Ita scilicet quod prudentia omnia mundana divinorum contemplatione despiciat, omnemque animae cogitationem in divina sola dirigat; temperantia vero relinquat, in quantum natura patitur, quae corporis usus requirit; fortitudinis autem est ut anima non terreatur propter excessum a corpore, et accessum ad superna; iustitia vero est ut tota anima consentiat ad huius propositi viam. Quaedam vero sunt virtutes iam assequentium divinam similitudinem: quae vocantur virtutes iam purgati animi. Ita scilicet quod prudentia sola divina intueatur; temperantia terrenas cupiditates nesciat; fortitudo passiones ignoret; iustitia cum divina mente perpetuo foedere societur, eam scilicet imitando. Quas quidem virtutes dicimus esse beatorum, vel aliquorum in hac vita perfectissimorum.” The same Neoplatonic doctrine is alluded to in the *De commendatione et partitione Sacrae Scripturae* of 1256, where Thomas sees Proverbs expounding precepts of wisdom concerning social virtue, Ecclesiastes those concerning purifying virtue, and the Song of Songs those concerning the perfect virtue of the purified soul. See note 89.

⁴⁰ *Albert and Thomas*, 266 and note 636, citing a text from Hugh of St. Cher, a confere whom Thomas knew in Orvieto and consulted in writing *De emptione et uenditione* (Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 122–23).

of the intelligible end; embracing, which means the presence of that end; and delighting or enjoying, which means the resting of the lover in the beloved.”⁴¹

In no way, therefore, can the remarks to Reginald be construed as a repudiation of objective, determinate meaning, valid demonstration, timeless truth accessible to the wayfarer’s mind and capable of being written down—though capable, even more, of being transcended and left behind. Indeed, one has far better reason to see in the event of December 6 a supernatural confirmation and, in a way, a continuation *extra muros* of Thomas’s activity as a theologian, a further and more exalted mode of teaching.

It might seem that by calling his writings “straw,” he was renouncing his labors as worthless. This is far from the case. His contemplation of Christ as “the way, the truth, and the life” united him more and more perfectly to Christ, until at the end of his life he entered so fully into contemplation that he could write no longer. God inspired him to teach us in a final way: after teaching through his extraordinary writings, in the end he taught also what the true goal of these writings is, namely, union with God. This goal hardly negates the study and teaching that have gone before, but rather is their wondrous fulfillment.⁴²

Thomas, in company with all the Doctors of the Church, insists on the primacy of experience and prayer over book-learning and the classroom, yet with customary realism recognizes the human need for human books and teachers as rungs on the ladder, stepping stones across the river. One must journey through the desert to reach the fertile fields; before passing into the cloud one must climb the mountain. This explains the dual face of Thomas’s life: an assiduous lecturer constantly thinking about the needs of students, fully at the disposal of all who called upon him for help;⁴³ a devoted contemplative choosing solitude and silence over company and

⁴¹ *ST*, I–II, q. 4, a. 3: “Et ideo necesse est ad beatitudinem ista tria concurrere: scilicet visionem, quae est cognitio perfecta intelligibilis finis; comprehensionem, quae importat praesentiam finis; delectationem, vel fruitionem, quae importat quietationem rei amantis in amato.”

⁴² Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, *Knowing the Love of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 4. Pieper implies the same when he judges “the greatness of St. Thomas as a philosophical and theological thinker” to lie in “his attitude of veneration toward everything that is—which veneration is revealed above all in his falling silent before the ineffability and incomprehensibility of Being” (*Guide*, 159).

⁴³ See Christopher Rengers, OFM, Cap., *The Thirty-Three Doctors of the Church* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 2000), 376–79. Torrell’s “preliminary portrait” discloses the same qualities (*Thomas Aquinas*, 278–89).

conversation. We see in Thomas's final months not a repudiation of his life's labors, but the breakthrough into a new level of awareness that was discontinuous, even incompatible, with these labors: a new pain of longing, a new intensity of experiencing that same divine reality for love of whom he had labored in the academic vineyards.⁴⁴

Troubadour of the Transcendentals

Reflection on Thomas's personality, the style of his works, and his attitude toward theology as a science and a way of life brings out still more clearly why the ecstasy of December 6 should be regarded as the symbol, summit, and completion of his life's work.

That Thomas treats the most profound topics in the tone of a dispassionate chronicler concerned to be thorough, accurate, and pithy is a notable trait of his intellectual physiognomy. He employs a style "which permits the truth to be seen in all its profundity, as a man sees the fish on the bottom of a placid sea, or sees the stars shine through a clear sky"⁴⁵—a manifestation of "pure, forceful thought and the drive of a clear mind relentlessly pursuing truth."⁴⁶ It is often said that Thomas the man remains unknown and inaccessible owing to his austere, impersonal style. Should we not rather say his personality is greatly revealed in its being so well hidden? To be an unseen bearer of unseen Wisdom by means of the audible, legible instruments of teaching was the whole quest of his life. The "impeccable clarity" of his writing "shows him to be someone wanting us to see what he is talking about rather than wanting us to see him talking about it."⁴⁷ We see the constant subordination of servant to master, receptacle to content, created mind to uncreated Truth; we see a lover so enamored that he welcomes radical poverty of spirit and flesh in order to receive and hold nothing but the beloved.

The purity of his service of the truth shines out from the fact that he scrupulously refrained from intruding himself into what he had decided to serve, from adding to or subtracting from the truth he served. In this service he was pure by aiming to become, as far as possible, a pure instrument. . . . In his *Summa* alone, he wrote more than 3,000 articles, and in none of them, except here and there when he

⁴⁴ See Charles Journet, *Connaissance et inconnaissance de Dieu* (Saint-Maurice: Éditions Saint-Augustin, 1996), 128.

⁴⁵ Martin Grabmann, *The Interior Life of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Nicholas Ashenbrenner, OP (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1951), 34.

⁴⁶ Rengers, *The Thirty-Three Doctors*, 379.

⁴⁷ Brian Davies, OP, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15.

wished to retract some statement, does he speak of himself; there is not one of them that is not like a monstrosity behind which the theologian hides in order to exhibit his God.⁴⁸

In the same vein, Etienne Gilson writes of the *Summa*: “Such mastery of expression and of the organization of philosophical ideas cannot be achieved without a full surrender of oneself.” Sympathetic reading makes it ever more clear that “this tremendous work is but the outward glow of an invisible fire, and that there is to be found behind the order of its ideas that powerful impulse which gathered them together.”⁴⁹ Referring to the image of Thomas painted by Fra Angelico as part of the Crucifixion group at San Marco, Kenelm Foster observes:

What the conventional portraits lack, but this one does suggest, is the burning intensity that glows through the early biographical records and the eucharistic hymns and even, for him who reads it aright, through the severe pages of the *Summa*. Even to turn from that conventionally impassive countenance to the handwriting of Aquinas—surviving in such abundance—may surprise one by the contrast: “tranquil” is hardly the word for this furiously rapid script. Nor is tranquillity the thing most evident in that Crucifixion portrait at S. Marco. The broad face is almost fiercely thoughtful; the eyes express an intense attention and deep longing. It is not hard to imagine that St. Thomas really looked like this, in prayer before the crucifix. Let us not think of him as placidly sagacious; nor, even, as some oracular master of all the answers. If he is a prodigious master, it is because he himself was mastered—held by a vision of God’s presence in the world’s being (*esse*) and fascinated by the mystery of God incarnate and crucified. It is hardly possible, surely, to exaggerate either the clarity of this man’s awareness of the divine presence in all existence—*esse . . . proprius effectus Dei*—or, on the other hand, his sense of the complete “otherness,” the utter transcendence of the divine nature with respect to things created: to name only one, from a thousand instances, we could consider how St. Thomas lingers and ponders, in the *Contra Gentiles* [IV.1], over those words from Job [26:14]: “Lo, these things are said in part of His ways; and seeing we have heard scarce a drop of His word, who shall be able to behold the thunder of His greatness?”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Yves Congar, OP, “St. Thomas: Servant of the Truth,” in *Faith and Spiritual Life*, trans. A. Manson and L. C. Sheppard (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 77. Congar pronounces the near-invisibility of the ego in Thomas’s writings “an unprecedented example of purity, of priestly detachment and virginity”; “he is a priest, he exhibits his God and conceals himself” (*ibid.*).

⁴⁹ Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of Thomas*, 376.

⁵⁰ *Life of Aquinas*, 22. Comparable in intensity of expression to the San Marco portrait is Sassetta’s depiction of *Thomas Inspired by the Dove of the Holy Spirit* (1423), in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

Surprising though it may be to readers of Aquinas who only come into contact with the “finished product” of his mind—for most of us, a professionally printed edition many times removed from the first scribblings or rapid-fire dictations—beneath the calm, impersonal prose smoldered a volcano of tumbling thought and fiery feeling. “The imperturbable Buddha-like serenity attributed to him in the standard iconography is belied by the surviving manuscripts in his own hand: physical evidence of raw intellectual energy and passion.”⁵¹ Piet Gils’s close analysis of autograph texts discloses an author who is at times flustered from moving too fast, striking through and starting over, frequently misspelling, inverting, substituting the wrong words.⁵² “He clashes with himself over the demands of writing. He is constantly experiencing distractions, which oblige him to interrupt himself and to return later. He struggles with putting his thoughts in order and with the means of expressing them. He is simultaneously meticulous, and careless of the inconsistencies that his irresistible forward movement causes him to commit.”⁵³ The treatises in defense of mendicant life are among the works which best display “the passionate character of Thomas’s temperament,” not only in their “vigour and firmness” of tone, but particularly in the flashes of surprise, impatience, indignation, even sarcastic irony.⁵⁴ “What we may glimpse here also is a simmering sensibility that is obliged to contain itself in order not to surface too often in discussion, where passion must not obscure clarity of the argument.”⁵⁵

If he was able to express himself with such vehemence, we may suspect he struggled to achieve the virtuous self-mastery that was required for the birth of more austere works (where signs of humor practically never show themselves). Beyond the impatience that these linguistic remnants reveal, they eloquently witness that the spontaneity-in-moderation, which the whole world recognizes in Thomas’s genius, was the fruit of a conquest.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 2–3; cp. Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 92.

⁵² Gils’s study is published in vol. 50 of the Leonine edition, *Expositio libri Boetii De ebdomadibus* (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1992), 175–209; for a summary, see Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 93–94.

⁵³ Gils, quoted by Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 94.

⁵⁴ I am following here Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 91–92. The same observations hold true of the writings *contra Averroistas*, particularly the *De unitate intellectus*.

⁵⁵ Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 93.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 95. Conrad Pepler, OP, puts it this way, in words applicable to Thomas’s life no less than his doctrine: “The passions are not denied, drawn out like rotten teeth, but they are cured by the desert, by catharsis, of their insubordinate tendencies and so drawn into the integrity of the man who loves God. He loves him with passion as well as with the high-point of the will—this seems to be

With perceptive remarks like this, Torrell's biography successfully depicts the complex (and hitherto largely ignored) psychology of Thomas the man, even as it brings into clearer focus his evangelical spirituality.⁵⁷

The Theologian's Hallmark: Eucharistic Ecstasy⁵⁸

As there can be method to madness, there can be passion in peacefulness. One should not turn a blind eye to Thomas's warm emotional life, particularly the shedding of tears mentioned so often by those who knew him. Perhaps in modern times we have grown so accustomed to dissociating lofty intellectual activity from emotional dynamism and bodily involvement that we find it hard to conceive of a life in which each is present to the fullest and all are subsumed in a spiritual surrender at once tranquil and ardent. But this is what Thomas held to be ideal, as can be gathered from his teaching on the overflowing of the affections of the soul into the body, a theme prominent in his treatments of the resurrected body's sharing in the beatitude of the soul.⁵⁹ Consider his account of love's "burning":

The burning of charity can be taken two ways: properly and metaphorically. Metaphorically, according to which we call charity hot and the intensity of the act of charity burning, and this is the sense in which Dionysius identifies angelic love as "fiery." . . . In another way, burning is said insofar as it is found in the sensitive part; for since the lower powers follow the motion of the higher, if that motion be intense, as we see that a man's whole body is inflamed and moved when he looks upon a woman loved; so too when the higher affection is moved to God, a certain impression follows even in the sensitive powers, according to which they are aroused to divine love.⁶⁰

clear in the whole teaching of St Thomas on the nature of love" ("The Basis of the Mysticism of St. Thomas," *Aquinas Paper* 21 [London: Blackfriars, 1953], 18).

⁵⁷ On the spirituality of St. Thomas, Torrell is, of course, the expert; see his *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003); the entry "Thomas d'Aquin" in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 15 (1991): 718–73; and "Le Christ dans la 'spiritualité' de saint Thomas" in *Christ Among the Medieval Dominicans*, ed. Kent Emery, Jr. and Joseph P. Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 197–219.

⁵⁸ Here I use the term "ecstasy" as St. Thomas uses it: to designate that effect of love by which the lover is placed outside himself, to dwell in the beloved (*ST*, I–II, q. 28, a. 3). For examples of how Thomas employs the notion, see my "St. Thomas, *Extasis*, and Union with the Beloved," *The Thomist* 61 (1997): 587–603.

⁵⁹ For examples of each point: *ST*, I–II, q. 30, a. 1, ad 1; *ST*, III, q. 14, a. 1, ad 2.

⁶⁰ *In Sent.* I,17.2.1: "Fervor caritatis dupliciter accipitur: proprie et metaphoricè. Metaphoricè, secundum quod dicimus caritatem esse calorem, et intensionem actus caritatis metaphoricè dicimus fervorem, secundum quod Dionysius, VII *De*

What most impressed Thomas's contemporaries and confreres was his burning uncontrollable love for Christ that spilled over into tears and vigils, and above all, his devotion to the Eucharist, which inspired a liturgical office of exceptional beauty, graced with some of the loftiest hymns of the thirteenth century. In the *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, Thomas portrays the Eucharist as a "sacrament of ecstasy" because it is proper to charity to transform the lover into the beloved, and this is what the sacrament, worthily taken, accomplishes.⁶¹ Scholar though he was by native bent, preacher by profession, controversialist by circumstance, his life and work make plain the identity underlying them: that of a contemplative seeking the face of God, a mystic in love with the poor Christ.⁶² St. Jerome's striking phrase *nudum Christum nudus sequi*, "following naked the naked Christ," is a leitmotif in Thomas's portrayal of the *sequela Christi*.⁶³ According to witnesses, Thomas stated that he learned more from prayer before the crucifix than by all efforts of study, and when he encountered any difficulty he hastened to bring it to the Lord of the Altar.⁶⁴ Hence it is with manifest plausibility that Tugwell judges the experience of December 6 and its momentous outcome to have been specifically occasioned by, and intimately linked with, the offering of the Holy Sacrifice. "It looks as if Thomas had at last simply been overwhelmed by the Mass, to which he had so long been devoted and in which he had been so

cael. hier., ponit fervidum in amore angelorum. . . . Alio modo dicitur fervor prout est in parte sensitiva; cum enim vires inferiores sequantur motum superiorum, si sit intensior, sicut videmus quod ad apprehensionem mulieris dilectae totum corpus exardescit et movetur; ita etiam quando affectus superior movetur in Deum, consequitur quaedam impressio etiam in virtutibus sensitivis, secundum quam ad obediendum divino amori" (Mandonnet, 411).

⁶¹ *In Sent.* IV.12.2.1.1 ad 3: "Caritatis proprium est transformare amantem in amatum, quia ipsa est quae extasim facit, ut Dionysius dicit. Et quia augmentum virtutum in hoc sacramento fit per conversionem manducantis in spiritualem cibum, ideo magis attribuitur huic sacramento caritatis augmentum quam aliarum virtutum" (Moos, 525); see the texts cited below in note 86.

⁶² See Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 89, and the works mentioned in note 57; Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 167; Grabmann, *Interior Life*, 73–78; Congar, "Servant of the Truth," *passim*.

⁶³ The phrase from Jerome is cited three times: *Contra retrahentes* ch. 15, *Contra impugnantes* ch. 6 (in the numbering of the Leonine edition), and *ST*, II–II, q. 186, a. 3, ad 3. See Ulrich Horst, OP, "Christ, *Exemplar Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, According to Saint Thomas Aquinas," in *Christ Among the Medieval Dominicans*, 256–70.

⁶⁴ See Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 286–88; "when he is presented in prayer or in levitation, it is before the image of the crucified one or in front of the altar, liturgical symbol of Christ" (287).

easily and deeply absorbed.”⁶⁵ Even more suggestively, Saward writes of the *Summa*:

St. Thomas’s “cathedral” has a grand plan, and yet he left it unfinished. Compared with the grace of vision he received on the feast of St. Nicholas 1273, it seemed to him like straw. For us, though, whom God has not thus gifted, the “infants in Christ” for whom St. Thomas wrote this beginner’s guide, there is a strange completeness in the incompleteness of the *Summa*. Its last finished treatise is devoted to the Holy Eucharist, and the last question of that last treatise is on the rite of the Sacrament, that is, on the significance of the place and time in which it is celebrated, of the words uttered and the actions performed. The final act of St. Thomas was, as it were, to offer Holy Mass on the altar of this basilica of the intellect. You might say that, having begun with the cosmic liturgy, the universe created by God for His glory, he ends with the way of the Lamb, through whose sacrifice God is most perfectly glorified.⁶⁶

“It was particularly during the celebration of the Mass that Thomas had the prolonged ecstasies of his last months: the one that occurred on Passion Sunday (26 March 1273) and the one on the feast of St. Nicholas eight months later (6 December 1273).”⁶⁷ The story of the former is related in several early sources. Bernard Gui writes: “While he was saying Mass on Passion Sunday, he was observed by many people present to become so deeply absorbed in the mystery that it was as if he had been admitted to a share in the sufferings of Christ. For a long while he remained as in a trance, his face bathed in tears.”⁶⁸ With an historian’s sensitivity to detail, Torrell notes that the composition of the treatise on the Eucharist in the *Tertia Pars* must have taken place “approximately between these two dates”⁶⁹—making it a sturdy bridge of thought suspended between ecstasies of love—and hears the distinct echo of

⁶⁵ *Albert and Thomas*, 266. “Thomas’ deep devotion to the Mass emerges clearly from all our sources. Sometimes he evidently became deeply absorbed in it and was profoundly moved by it. Toward the end of his life he sometimes became so absorbed that he just stopped and had to be roused by the brethren to continue with the celebration” (264).

⁶⁶ “The Cosmic Liturgy and the Way of the Lamb,” *Faith & Culture Bulletin* 8 (n.d.), 20; a fuller version of the article appears under the same title in *Antiphon* 7.1 (2002): 18–28. Tugwell’s judgment coincides: “Thomas had already reached what was for him the high point of the *Summa*. He had reached Christ; he had reached the Mass” (*Albert and Thomas*, 266).

⁶⁷ Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 287.

⁶⁸ Foster, *Life of Aquinas*, 45–46.

⁶⁹ Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 287.

personal experience in the saint's description of the effects of taking the sacrament: "the soul . . . is inebriated by the sweetness of the divine goodness, according to the Canticle: 'Eat, my friends, and drink, and be drunk, my well-beloved.'" ⁷⁰ This last completed treatise sprang up in the soil of liturgy, from the seed of faith—a tree watered by tears, crowned with the Spirit's fruits, savoring of the intimate, ineffable presence of God. That depth of insight into the supreme mystery of the Eucharist which so impressed the Fathers of Trent was not, and could not have been, the achievement of study alone. It had its birth upon the altar of sacrifice; it found its goal in the wedding feast of communion.

For all the great masters of the Catholic tradition, theology is a science conceived in the night of faith, a fire kindled by contact with God's word, a life nourished by eating and drinking the sacred mysteries. "St. Thomas was not first and foremost an Aristotelian philosopher; he was primarily an expounder of the Scriptures, he studied over them, prayed over them, lived them in the Church and in her liturgy, and thence he expounded the Word of God in the schools."⁷¹ In such a life there is an ongoing fresh discovery of reason as openness to mystery, the natural world as icon of divinity.⁷² A life woven of liturgical prayer, *lectio divina*, and active love of neighbor is taken for granted by Thomas and his contemporaries as the only context in which the study of *sacra doctrina*

⁷⁰ *ST*, III, q. 79, a. 1, ad 2, quoting Song 5:1.

⁷¹ Pepler, "Mysticism of St. Thomas," 10; cf. Walter H. Principe, CSB, *Thomas Aquinas' Spirituality* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984); Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*, trans. M. Timothea Doyle, OP (St. Louis: Herder, 1949), 48ff. Congar describes what captivated Thomas in the Dominican ideal: It was "a way of serving God through that work of charity which consists in contemplating truth and communicating it," "a life that stemmed from the truth and for the truth, from the Word of God and for it, in which intellectual activity, applied to God himself, became the reality which was sanctified and offered to God as an act of worship" ("Servant of Truth," 72).

⁷² For example, *ST*, II–II, q. 180, a. 4, especially ad 1 and ad 3, presents keen study and appreciation of created things as rungs on the ladder of contemplation, and *ST*, III, q. 60, a. 2, ad 1 draws a distinction that implies a prior common symbolism: "creaturae sensibiles significant aliquid sacrum, scilicet sapientiam et bonitatem divinam, in quantum sunt in seipsis sacra, non autem in quantum nos per ea sanctificamur." A comment on Ps. 45 [44]:2 sees the signature of the Word on all creatures: "Sicut enim respiciens librum cognoscit sapientiam scribentis, ita cum nos videmus creaturas, cognoscimus sapientiam Dei. Calamus igitur est Verbum Dei." On the contemplative stance toward the world, see Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 76–88; Barron, *Spiritual Master*, 136.

can be fruitfully undertaken, so as to resonate within the heart.⁷³ That theological reflection sustained by living faith is intrinsically sacred and sanctifying—that the *Summa* is best approached as a systematic arrangement of spiritual exercises through which the graced intellect, exerting itself to the utmost, responds with generosity to God’s revelation of Himself in the book of Scripture and the book of Nature—would strike many people as odd only because modern man has grown comfortable with an habitual divorce between thought and life, faith and practice, speculative study of God and silent vigils in His presence. Consider the doctrine of the Divine Essence unfolded in questions 2 through 26 of the *Prima Pars*—a treatise many continue to misread as if it were philosophical theology *more geometrico*, with no more “relevance” to the spiritual life than the definitions and axioms of Newton’s *Principia*. Barron explains the deep-seated spiritual aims this treatise has in store for responsive students, the call to conversion of mind and heart it issues:

Thomas is decidedly *not trying to capture or define the divine*; on the contrary, he is attempting to show us precisely how *to avoid the temptation of such definition*. He is demonstrating how the soul can be liberated in the act of surrendering to the God who reveals himself as an unsurpassable and ecstatic power in Jesus Christ. Thus, the *simple* God is the God who cannot be understood or controlled; the *good* God is the one who captivates us and draws us out of ourselves; the *God who is present to the world* is the divine power that will not leave us alone, that insinuates itself into our blood and bones; the eternal God is the one who invites us into the ecstasy of being beyond time; the *immutable* God is the rock upon which we can build our lives; the God of *knowledge and love* is the spirit who searches us and knows us, who seeks us and who will never abandon us. It is this all-embracing, all-captivating, all-entrancing, all-surrounding power that Thomas Aquinas seeks to celebrate.⁷⁴

More broadly, for Dauphinais and Levering the *Summa theologiae* traces out an arc that sweeps from one open-ended mystery, God in His unfathomable happiness, to another, our heavenly share in the same divine bliss, “which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived” (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9).⁷⁵

To understand the thought of Thomas or that of any Father or Doctor, let alone the revealed word of God which is its source, requires an earnest

⁷³ See Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 166–67; cf. Edward D. O’Connor, CSC, Appendix 2 in vol. 24 [I–II, qq. 68–70] of the Blackfriars *Summa theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 96.

⁷⁴ *Spiritual Master*, 108.

⁷⁵ *Knowing the Love of Christ*, 4.

effort to lead the life he and all the saints led. St. Athanasius concludes his treatise *On the Incarnation* with those now-classic words that stand forever as a monument to the unity of faith and life, study and holiness:

For the searching and right understanding of the Scriptures there is need of a good life and a pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word. One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life. . . . [A]nyone who wishes to understand the mind of the theologians must first cleanse his own life, and approach the saints by imitating their deeds. Thus united to them in fellowship of life, he will both understand the things revealed to them by God and, thenceforth escaping the peril that threatens sinners in the judgment, will receive that which is laid up for the saints in the kingdom of heaven.⁷⁶

If one does not enter upon this way of imitation and immersion, one remains aloof from the humble cradle theology is born into, the blood-stained cross it hangs upon, the silent tomb it rises from, the heavenly heights it scales. One abandons, in short, the reality whose love makes theology *alive*: the triune God, living and true. A person is not in fact doing theology at all unless he unconditionally submits his whole being to God, the First Truth, accepting first principles from Him, striving to live the charity which faith demands.⁷⁷ Although theology treats the highest truths with unwavering certitude, it is also, humanly speaking,

⁷⁶ Translation by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 96. The same point is made by Plato about the study of philosophy, e.g., *Letter VII*, 340d–341a (Hamilton/Cairns ed., 1588); but in spite of the similarity, the difference is greater: “The belief that interior holiness is essential for wisdom is not exclusively Christian. It is shared, for instance, by Plato, and is exemplified in the life of Plotinus. But whereas Plotinus sought for self-emanipation in a One beyond all being, St. Thomas looked—where Augustine and Anselm and Francis of Assisi had looked—to a Wisdom which is personal, to a Logos which is incarnate, and it is this ideal which colours all his thought and conduct” (Martin C. D’Arcy, SJ, *Thomas Aquinas* [Westminster, MD: Newman, 1944], 52).

⁷⁷ On faith as the condition of theology, see Torrell, *Thomas Aquinas*, 158, and “The Necessity of Faith” by a Monk of Most Holy Trinity Monastery, *The Aquinas Review* 6 (1999): 53–76. As we read in the Proemium of the *Compendium theologiae*: “Primo igitur necessaria est fides, per quam veritatem cognoscas; secundo spes, per quam in debito fine tua intentio collocetur; tertio necessaria est caritas, per quam tuus affectus totaliter ordinetur” (*Opuscula theologica*, Marietti 1:13). John Paul II reminds us of this connection in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 53: “divus Thomas apertissime asserit fidem esse veluti theologiae habitum, id est permanens operandi principium, et theologiam totam ad fidem nutriendam ordinari.”

“the poorest and most destitute of sciences,” since it is cradled within an act of primordial, all-encompassing *faith*. The theologian, like a child learning the alphabet or arithmetic, depends wholly on the word of another; he has not the means of verification in his own hands, he remains empty-handed and must give the glory to God.⁷⁸ “In the house which he is building he is not the master, but the servant; he is constantly referring to this fact and referring himself to it, for he is only enriched with the wealth of God’s wisdom if he accepts the conditions of being himself poor and, in his actual scientific labours, becoming the man and servant of another.”⁷⁹ We accept the condition of mental poverty above all when we kneel before the Eucharist and worship the God-Man veiled under the humble appearances of bread and wine. There is *nothing* here for natural reason to seek or prove; there is only faith, *sola fides sufficit*. It is the *mysterium fidei*.⁸⁰

Absolute Self-Donation

Without the vows of spiritual poverty, chastity, and obedience, academic theology, like Christianity that has faded into a mere cultural background, is lifeless matter, a body without a soul. This is the challenge and the glory of theology: Like no other discipline, it demands *everything* from man, body and soul, every power of sense and spirit, all our thoughts and affections.⁸¹ Nothing is left untouched, for the Word became flesh in order to touch and sanctify the whole of man. In his commentary on *The Divine Names*, Thomas expands a few phrases of Dionysius into an arresting portrayal of our universal calling: to be transformed into Christ by love.

It is because love does not allow the lover to belong to himself, but makes him belong to the beloved, that the great Paul, being established in the divine love as in a certain constraining power that makes him go completely out of himself, says (as though speaking by the divine

⁷⁸ Congar, “Servant of the Truth,” 70.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸⁰ See Charles De Koninck, “This is a Hard Saying,” and Thomas A. McGovern, SJ, “The Most Blessed of Sacraments,” both in *The Aquinas Review* 1 (1994): 105–11; 97–104. “There is no mystery of faith where the otherness of the properly divine ways is more radiantly manifest than in that of the Holy Eucharist” (De Koninck, 107). “Transubstantiation is precisely an absolutely invisible miracle. . . . We adhere to it, in fact, by divine faith alone” (109). “It is in the faith in this sacrament that God demands of us the most complete abnegation of that which is the most profoundly human—I mean the loss of our proper judgment upon the substance of the object most proportioned to our intelligence” (110).

⁸¹ See Grabmann, *Interior Life*, 29.

voice): “I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me”—and why? Because the whole self going out from itself stretches out into God, not seeking what is its own, but what is God’s, as the true lover who has suffered ecstasy by the living God, and no longer lives his own life, but the life of Christ the beloved, which life was intensely lovable to him.⁸²

The “unadulterated service” demanded by the Lord is “such an absolute donation, uncontaminated with self, that in fact the other’s life becomes one’s own, more real than the self itself. Only love can do this, for only love produces ecstasy, the exodus from self, only love can allow a master, the mastery of one’s soul.”⁸³

“Knowledge of the Trinity in Unity is the fruit and purpose of our entire life,” declared Thomas as a young man commenting on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard.⁸⁴ This startling assertion both exalts and humbles the human mind. It says forcefully: There is *one* activity right for man’s eternity, *one* sovereign goal, *one* definitive happiness. Yet such knowledge of God in His inner life is infinitely beyond our powers, a goal we cannot attain by our own strength, a treasure we cannot demand but only beg for, as a mendicant begs for bread. Theology is not a science that can be “mastered” and carried in one’s mental pocket; it is a way of obedience through which the human mind is mastered by the one Teacher, Christ the Lord, the light who enlightens every man coming into the world (Mt. 23:10; Jn. 1:9). It is a discipline that originates and culminates not in conquest but in abandonment, not in seizing but in handing oneself over. “*Sacra doctrina*, or knowledge revealed by God, is necessary because the final goal of human life is not to grasp but to be grasped, not to rise up but to be raised up, not to ascend but to be drawn.”⁸⁵ So far from gripping the subject with our hands and modeling it after our image, we are taken and held by *Him*, changed

⁸² *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus* [=DDN] 4, lec. 10, n. 436: “Deinde, cum dicit: *Propter quod . . . ostendit idem per auctoritatem; et dicit quod propter hoc quod amor non permittit amatorem esse sui ipsius, sed amati, magnus Paulus constitutus in divino amore sicut in quodam continente et virtute divini amoris faciente ipsum totaliter extra se exire, quasi divino ore loquens dicit, Galat. 2:20: ‘Vivo ego, iam non ego, vivit autem in me Christus’ scilicet quia a se exiens totum se in Deum proiecerat, non quaerens quod sui est, sed quod Dei, sicut verus amator et passus extasim, Deo vivens et non vivens vita sui ipsius, sed vita Christi ut amati, quae vita erat sibi valde diligibilis” (Marietti 143, the words of Dionysius italicized).*

⁸³ Congar, “Servant of the Truth,” 81–82.

⁸⁴ *In Sent.* I.2, expositio textus: “Cognitio enim Trinitatis in unitate est fructus et finis totius vitae nostrae” (Mandonnet, 77).

⁸⁵ Barron, *Spiritual Master*, 34.

into Him in proportion to our surrender in love.⁸⁶ Theology in this life is the intellectual appropriation, through Eucharistic friendship, of the reality first given in the mystery of baptism: conformity to the crucified and risen Lord, the power to think with His mind, to love with His heart. We are carried in the womb of the Virgin, carried on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd, nailed to His cross, resurrected by His power. The perfect theologian is, in the words of Dionysius, the one who “not merely learns, but suffers divine realities,” on which Thomas comments: “He does not merely gather up knowledge of divine things in his intellect, but by loving them is united to them in his heart.”⁸⁷ This is the basic truth out of which Thomas’s rich mystical theology pours like a torrent, interweaving charity and all the virtues it nurses, the gifts and fruits of the Spirit, and that “affective knowledge” whereby the presence of the indwelling God is felt and savored.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ See *ST*, III, q. 73, a. 3, ad 2: “haec est differentia inter alimentum corporale et spirituale, quod alimentum corporale convertitur in substantiam eius qui nutritur, et ideo non potest homini valere ad vitae conservationem alimentum corporale nisi realiter sumatur. Sed alimentum spirituale convertit hominem in seipsum, secundum illud quod Augustinus dicit, in libro Confess., quod quasi audivit vocem Christi dicentis, ‘nec tu me mutabis in te, sicut cibum carnis tuae, sed tu mutaberis in me.’” *In Sent.* IV.12.2.1.1: “Et ideo cum materiale in hoc sacramento sit cibus, oportet quod effectus proprius huius sacramenti accipiatur secundum similitudinem ad effectum cibi. Cibus autem corporalis primo in cibatum convertitur, et ex tali conversione, deperdita restaurat, et quantitatem auget; sed spiritualis cibus non convertitur in manducantem, sed eum ad se convertit. Unde proprius effectus huius sacramenti est conversio hominis in Christum, ut dicat cum Apostolo, Galat. II: Vivo ego, jam non ego; vivit vero in me Christus” (Moos, 524).

⁸⁷ *ST*, II–II, q. 45, a. 2: “Hierotheus est perfectus in divinis ‘non solum discens, sed et patiens divina’”; *DDN* 2, lec. 4, n. 191: “idest non solum divinorum scientiam in intellectu accipiens, sed etiam diligendo, eis unitus est per affectum” (Marietti 59). Cf. *ST*, I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3; I–II, q. 22, a. 3, obj. 1; *DV* q. 26, a. 3, obj. 18. On the Dionysian axiom, see Vivian Boland, OP, “*Non solum discens sed et patiens divina*. The Wanderings of an Aristotelian Fragment,” in *Roma, magistra mundi. Itineraria culturae medievalis*. Mélanges offerts au Père L. E. Boyle à l’occasion de son 75e anniversaire, ed. J. Hamesse, 3 vols. (Louvain-la-Neuve: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d’Études Médiévales, 1998), I:55–69.

⁸⁸ A detailed summary of Thomas’s ascetical-mystical theology is found in Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP, *The Three Ages of the Spiritual Life*, trans. M. Timothea Doyle, OP, 2 vols. (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1989); a more recent overview is that of Heather McAdam Erb, “‘Pati Divina’: Mystical Union in Aquinas,” in *Faith, Scholarship, and Culture in the 21st Century*, ed. Alice Ramos and Marie I. George (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 73–96. Of the many studies on knowledge by connaturality, the following deserve special mention: M. D. Roland-Gosselin, OP, “De la connaissance affective,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 27 (1938): 5–26; Michael J. Faraon, OP, *The*

In 1256, Thomas, then about 32 years old, delivered two lectures upon incepting as Regent Master of the Sacred Page at Paris. In the second lecture, he furnishes a *divisio textus* of the books of Scripture that identifies the Song of Songs and the Apocalypse of John as the highpoints of the Old and New Testaments, because each treats in a special way the ultimate end of human life, the perfect union of God and man, compared in these two books to the union of lover and beloved, bridegroom and bride.⁸⁹ It is beautifully fitting that the same teacher should have spent some of his final hours on earth speaking to a community of Cistercians about that incomparable poem of divine love, the Song of Songs, devoting his failing strength to the monks gathered around him and giving one last demonstration of the charity in his soul.⁹⁰ Bernard Gui tells of Thomas's last days:

Now with every day that passed his body grew weaker; yet still from his spirit flowed the stream of doctrine. For, being asked by some of the monks to leave them some memorial of his stay with them, he gave a brief exposition of the Canticle of Solomon. And it was indeed appropriate that the great worker in the school of the Church should terminate his teaching on that song of eternal glory; that such a master in

Metaphysical and Psychological Principles of Love (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1952), 70–83; Walter H. Principe, CSB, “Affectivity and the Heart in Thomas Aquinas’s Spirituality,” in *Spiritualities of the Heart*, ed. Annice Callahan (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 45–63; Thomas Gilby, OP, “The Dialectic of Love in the *Summa*,” in vol. 1 of the Blackfriars *Summa theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 124–32. On the origin, evolution, and importance of Thomas’s doctrine of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, see the appendices to O’Connor’s translation of *ST*, I–II, qq. 68–70, vol. 24 of the Blackfriars *Summa theologiae*, 80–152.

⁸⁹ The two *Principia* are printed in the *Opuscula theologica*, Marietti 2:435–43; see nn. 1203–8 for the *divisio textus* of Scripture. The importance of this claim of Thomas’s is discussed by Michael Waldstein, “On Scripture in the *Summa theologiae*,” *Aquinas Review* 1 (1994): 85–86, and idem, “John Paul II and St. Thomas on Love and the Trinity,” *Anthropotes* 18 (2002): 119–20. The former article includes a schematic diagram of the *partitio sacrae Scripturae*. An English translation of both *Principia* can be found in *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Ralph McInerney (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 5–17. In regarding the Song as exegetically central, Thomas stood within a larger monastic tradition. See Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 83–123.

⁹⁰ I find helpful Benedict Ashley’s suggestion that we take Thomas’s commentary on Psalm 45 [44] as an indication of how he might have approached the greater wedding song (see *Thomas Aquinas: The Gifts of the Spirit*, trans. Matthew Rzeckowski, OP, ed. Benedict Ashley, OP [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995], 103–33).

that school, when about to pass from the prison of the body to the heavenly wedding-feast, should discourse on the bridal union of the Church with Christ her Spouse.⁹¹

He who began his teaching career insinuating that the ecstatic union of lovers is the key to understanding Scripture ended it some eighteen years later as a pupil who had learned from the inner Teacher how to live what he had understood. According to legend, Thomas fainted when the monk reading the Canticle recited the verse: "Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the fields" (7:12).⁹² Soon afterward, the great doctor peacefully died, his soul going forth to enjoy forever the vision of glory. May we make our own the prayer that closes one of his hymns: "Lead us along Your paths to the goal we are striving for, the light wherein You dwell."⁹³ **N-V**

⁹¹ Foster, *Life of Aquinas*, 55.

⁹² See Blaise Arminjon, SJ, *The Cantata of Love: A Verse-by-Verse Reading of the Song of Songs*, trans. Nelly Marans (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 321.

⁹³ "Per tuas semitas duc nos quo tendimus/Ad lucem quam inhabitas."

