

FIRE GROWS IN WATER: THOMAS AQUINAS' INTERPRETATION OF VIRTUE IN THE SCRIPTURES

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*But to keep me from being too elated
by the abundance of revelations,
a thorn was given me in the flesh,
a messenger of Satan, to harass me,
to keep me from being too elated.
Three times I begged the Lord about this,
that it should leave me; but he said to me,
'My grace is sufficient for you,
for my power is made perfect in weakness.'
2 Cor 12, 7-9a*

When Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on *Second Corinthians* considers the Lord's words to Paul, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power (*virtus*) is made perfect in weakness,'¹ he exclaims, 'what a marvelous way of speaking (*mirus modus loquendi*): virtue is perfected in weakness, fire grows in water.'² St. Thomas interprets this seeming contradiction as pointing to the contrast between the weakness of the flesh and the power of the spirit, between wounded human nature and God's healing grace. Ultimately, for Aquinas, the fire that grows in water points to the mystery of Christ, who, 'although he was crucified in weakness, lives by the power of God (*virtus dei*).'³ It is by participating in the life and grace of Christ that this fire grows in the Christian. Nature on its own is weak, but elevated by the grace of Christ it becomes strong and can attain heavenly beatitude.⁴ In what follows, this essay will

¹ 2 Cor 12, 9.

² *In II Cor* 12 l. 3 (479): 'Mirus modus loquendi. Virtus in infirmitate perficitur: ignis in aqua crescit.'

³ 2 Cor 13, 4. See, *In II Cor* 13 l. 1 (521-522).

⁴ *In II Cor* 12 l. 3 (477, 478): 'Dicit ergo: ego rogavi, sed dominus dixit mihi sufficit tibi, etc., quasi dicat: non est tibi necessarium, quod infirmitas corporis recedat a te, quia non est periculosa, quia non duceres ad impatientiam, cum gratia mea confortet te; nec infirmitas concupiscentiae, quia non protrahet te ad peccatum, quia gratia mea proteget te. Rom c. III, 24: iustificati gratis, et cetera. Et vere sufficit gratia Dei ad

consider briefly how Thomas Aquinas portrays the virtues in his biblical commentaries. It will focus on three features of Aquinas' thought: his analogous use of the term virtue (and related terms), the centrality of Christ as the man of perfect virtue, and third, the dependence of Christian virtue on God's action in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

1 Virtue as an analogous term

St. Thomas Aquinas' interpretation of the Scriptures is influenced by the particularities of the Latin translation with which he was raised. The Medievals were fortunate to have St. Jerome's excellent Latin translation, which formed the basis of what became known as the Vulgate Bible.⁵ One feature of Jerome's Latin is that the terms '*virtus*' and '*fortitudo*' convey a wider range of analogous meanings than their Greek and Hebrew counterparts. Although most generally they signify 'power' and 'strength' respectively, Jerome applies them to translate a series of different but related Hebrew and Greek terms. While this practice emphasizes the continuity of God's power in creation, it also has the effect of understating certain contrasts present in the New Testament. Specifically, while in the Vulgate New Testament '*virtus*' appears frequently, in the Greek New Testament, the classical Greek term for virtue, '*areté*,' appears virtually not at all. The biblical authors employ it in only three places, and one of the three refers to God: to his virtue.⁶ If

mala vitanda, ad bona facienda, et ad vitam consequendam aeternam. I Cor. XV, 10: gratia Dei sum id quod sum, et cetera. Rom VI, 23: gratia Dei vita aeterna. . . . Ergo et stimulus carnis secundum se est vitandus ut affligens, in quantum vero est via ad virtutem et exercitium virtutis, est appetendus.'

⁵ See J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975), as well as the chapter on Jerome in Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 259-272. For more on Jerome as translator and the creation of the Vulgate, see Catherine Brown Tkacz, "'Labor Tam Utilis': The Creation of the Vulgate," *Vigiliae Christianae* 50 (1996), 42-72; Stefan Rebenich, 'Jerome: The '*Vir Trilinguis*' and the '*Hebraica Veritas*,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 47 (1993), 50-77; Paul B. Decock, 'Jerome's Turn to the *Hebraica Veritas* and his Rejection of the Traditional View of the Septuagint,' *Neotestamentica* 42 (2008), 205-222. See also John Cameron, 'The Rabbinic Vulgate?' in *Jerome of Stridon: His Life, Writings and Legacy*, ed. by Andrew Cain and Josef Lössl (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 117-129 and Hillel I. Newman, 'How Should We Measure Jerome's Hebrew Competence?' in Cain and Lössl, *Jerome of Stridon*, pp. 131-140.

⁶ The classical Greek term *areté* appears four times in the New Testament in three places: in Phil 4, 8, 2 Pt 1, 3 (where it is employed in reference to God's power), and two verses later in 2 Pt 1, 5, where it is twice mentioned in a list of excellences that

the reader remains attentive, however, he will also find that the New Testament authors, while avoiding the term *areté*, do employ the classical terms for three of the four cardinal virtues: *phronesis* (prudence), *dikaiosune* (justice) and *sophrosune* (temperance).⁷ Apparently, the issue here is the source of moral excellence. For the New Testament authors, moral excellence comes from the grace of Christ that we receive through the action of the Holy Spirit.⁸ Christ is our wisdom and justice.⁹ We are to have the mind of Christ (his *phronesis* and *sophia*) and to conform to his life.¹⁰ We have been ‘justified’ by Christ and are to live in this justice through the relational excellences of faith, hope and charity.¹¹ This focus on the divine source of moral excellence is apparently what leads the New Testament authors to reject the classical term for courage: *andreia*. Since *andreia* has its roots in the Greek word for man (*aner*, *andros*), and thus would imply that courage has its source in us, the New Testament authors replace it with more generic terms such as power (*dunamis*), strength (*kratos*), force (*iskus*) and perseverance (*hupomone*).¹² If the attentive reader turns to the Old Testament in its Greek version, he will find a similar focus on the divine source of human excellence, but conveyed

begins with faith and ends with charity. For more on *areté* in the New Testament, see Otto Bauernfeind, ‘areté,’ in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), I, pp. 457-461. For more on use of *areté* in Second Peter, see J. Daryl Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice: the Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter 1* JSNT 150 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* The Anchor Bible 37C (New York: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 154-162; Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* Word Biblical Commentary 50 (New York: Nelson, 1983).

⁷ For example, John the Baptist is described as preparing the way for Christ by leading his people to the ‘*phronesis* of the just’ (Lk 1, 17). Through Christ, God gives us all manner of ‘wisdom and *phronesis*’ (Eph 1, 8). Christ himself is our *dikaiosune* (1 Cor 1, 30); it is from him that we receive the ‘gift of *dikaiosune*’ (Rom 5, 17), and in him that we become the ‘*dikaiosune* of God’ (2 Cor 5, 21). Moreover, ‘God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of *dunamis*, love and *sophrosune*’ (2 Tm 1, 7).

⁸ Ceslas Spicq, *Théologie morale du Nouveau Testament* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1965), II, pp. 592-622.

⁹ 1 Cor 1, 30.

¹⁰ 1 Cor 2, 15-16; Eph 1, 8; Phil 2, 5.

¹¹ Spicq, *Théologie morale du Nouveau Testament*, II, pp. 567-575.

¹² Spicq, *Théologie morale du Nouveau Testament*, II, pp. 353-354. One should note, however, that the traditional deponent Greek verb ‘to be courageous’ (*andrizesthai*) does appear once in the New Testament, at 1 Cor 16, 13, where Paul seems to be paraphrasing and thus engaging a passage from the Greek version of 1 Macc 2, 64. Paul transforms the Maccabean call to be courageous in keeping the law, with a New Testament call to be courageous in keeping the faith.

through a wider spectrum of terms employed to underline God's power and excellence.¹³ As with the New Testament, the classical term for a cardinal virtue that is most employed is *dikaiosune*, justice, used to translate *zedica*, which means right relationship, and specifically right relationship with God: the one who walks in God's ways is *zedek*.¹⁴

If we turn again to the Vulgate Bible, we discover that Jerome does not hesitate to employ the words *virtus* and *fortitudo* to translate the numerous references to God's power and to our dependence on it. For example, he translates the beginning of Moses's song to the Lord as, 'the Lord is my strength (*fortitudo*) and my song, this God of mine has become my salvation.'¹⁵ Jerome similarly translates a line of King David's canticle to God: 'You reign over all, and in your hand is power and might (*virtus et potentia*).'¹⁶ Moreover, in the New Testament, when Paul proclaims Christ as the 'power of God and the wisdom of God,' Jerome translates Paul's *dunamis* as *virtus*: '*Christum Dei virtutem et Dei sapientiam*.'¹⁷ Jerome also uses *virtus* to translate the above mentioned New Testament references to the classical Greek term for virtue, *areté*.¹⁸ Although this practice tends to obscure the New Testament's reluctance to employ the classical Greek term for virtue, it solidly conveys the New Testament's affirmation that all power, including moral excellence, comes from God. Whether it is the power to create the world, save from the Egyptians, heal the sick or to walk in God's ways, for Jerome, they are all *virtutes*: they are all analogously virtues that have their source in God. Thomas Aquinas inherits a Latin bible, therefore, that emphasizes a

¹³ For a helpful and accessible introduction to the *Septuagint*, see Arie van der Kooij, 'The Septuagint and Scribal Culture,' in *XIV Congress of the IOSCS, Helsinki, 2010*, ed. by Melvin K. H. Peters (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), pp. 33-39. See also Siegfried Kreuzer, *The Bible in Greek: Translation, Transmission, and Theology of the Septuagint* (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015).

¹⁴ See John W. Olley, '*Righteousness*' in the *Septuagint of Isaiah: A Contextual Study* (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1979); Benno Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and his World of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and Nigel M. Watson, 'Some Observations on the Use of *δικαιοῦν* in the Septuagint,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (1960), 255-266.

¹⁵ Ex 15, 2: 'fortitudo mea et laus mea Dominus et factus est mihi in salutem iste Deus meus.'

¹⁶ 1 Chr 29, 12: 'tu dominaris omnium in manu tua virtus et potentia.'

¹⁷ 1 Cor 1, 24.

¹⁸ Phil 4, 8: 'si qua virtus si qua laus haec cogitate'; 2 Pt 1, 3: 'qui vocavit nos propria gloria et virtute'; 2 Pt 1, 5: 'ministrare in fide vestra virtutem in virtute autem scientiam.'

key feature of the Biblical message: the virtues, like all powers in creation, come from God.¹⁹

St. Thomas readily recognizes both in the *Summa theologiae* and in his Biblical commentaries, that *virtus* is employed in several analogous ways. For example, while introducing the notion of virtue as a moral perfection, he notes that most generally ‘*virtus*’ signifies the perfection of a power.²⁰ Elsewhere he describes this perfection as a completion (*complementum*): ‘virtue, from the implication of its very name, signifies the completion of an active power.’²¹ In a quodlibital question he states this succinctly: ‘virtue, no matter how you take it, signifies the completion of a power.’²² He then explains that since powers are by their nature ordered to action, the perfection of a power is what renders that power perfect for action (or perfect in its act). *Virtus*, therefore, always signifies a principle of perfect action. We apply the term analogously, because powers become perfect for action in different ways. Some powers act perfectly by their very nature, whether this refers to sense powers such as sight or to spiritual powers such as an order of angels, and ‘thus,’ as Aquinas says, ‘these natural powers are themselves called *virtutes*.’²³ Humans, however, have powers that must be trained for perfect action; thus, these powers require some added principle of action between the power and the act itself. Aquinas draws on Aristotle to describe this added perfection as a *habitus*, because it is habitually present and disposes us to act.²⁴ In humans, there are virtues added to our powers that have the character of a *habitus*.²⁵ Nevertheless, the background concept that is present in every application of the term ‘*virtus*,’ is the notion of virtue as the principle of perfect action. For Aquinas, virtue’s versatility as an

¹⁹ For an account of the Latin versions of the Scriptures accessible in the Medieval Latin West, see Catherine Brown Tkacz, ‘The Bible in Medieval Literature: A Bibliographic Essay on Basic and New Sources,’ *Religion and Literature* 19 (1987), 63-76. See also Gilbert Dahan, *L’Occident médiéval lecteur de l’Écriture* (Paris: Cerf, 2001) and Gilbert Dahan, ‘Genres, Forms and Various Methods in Christian Exegesis of the Middle Ages,’ in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, ed. by Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2000), I/2, pp. 196-236.

²⁰ *STh* I-II, q. 55 a. 1: ‘*virtus* nominat quandam potentiae perfectionem.’

²¹ *De Ver*, q. 14 a. 3: ‘*virtus* ex sui impositione nominis significat complementum activae potentiae.’

²² *Quodl*, 4 q. 2 a.1: ‘*virtus*, qualitercumque accipiatur, significat potentiae complementum.’

²³ *STh* I-II, q. 55 a. 1: ‘ideo huiusmodi potentiae naturales secundum seipsas dicuntur *virtutes*.’

²⁴ *STh* I-II, q. 49 a. 3 and a. 4.

²⁵ *STh* I-II, q. 55 a. 1.

analogously predicated term is rooted in the character of creation itself. All creatures participate in God's perfections, but in different and hierarchically related ways. God is perfect, and thus God can be called *virtus* itself.²⁶ God also fills the humanity of Christ with a perfect participation in his virtues.²⁷ Lastly, God empowers humans, analogously, to act according to these same perfections, these same virtues.²⁸ St. Thomas readily recognizes the presence of acquired habits and is willing to describe them as true, if imperfect, virtues;²⁹ his primary interest, however, is with infused habits, which are the entirely gratuitous gifts of God, who instills them in the human person as a participation in the divine nature. Armed with this more versatile notion of virtue, we can now turn to what Aquinas says in his commentaries about Christ.³⁰

²⁶ *In I Sent* d. 8 q. 5 a. 3 ex: 'Quantum ad bene esse consideratur divina perfectio quantum ad tria. Primo quantum ad potestatem, et secundum hoc ipse deus dicitur virtus et non tantum habens virtutem.' See also *STh* I, q. 3 a. 7, where Aquinas, in defense of God's simplicity, quotes Hilary as affirming 'deus, qui virtus est, ex infirmis non continetur, neque qui lux est, ex obscuris coaptatur.'

²⁷ *STh* III, q. 7 a. 2. Aquinas explains, however, that with regard to those virtues that imply imperfection, such as faith and hope, Christ enjoys a fuller participation in God's perfection: instead of faith (with its imperfect knowledge of God), Christ enjoys the perfect knowledge of the beatific vision (*STh* III, q. 7 a. 3); instead of the virtue of hope (with its desire for fruition), Christ enjoys the perfect fruition of the hypostatic union (*STh* III, q. 7 a. 4). This is one way that, for Aquinas, the perfection of the New Adam surpasses the perfection enjoyed by the Old Adam before the Fall. As St. Thomas explains, although Adam in the state of innocence 'in a certain sense' (*aliqua*liter) had all the virtues, he experienced the imperfection proper to the virtues of faith and hope (*STh* I, q. 95 a. 3). As we shall see, Aquinas also affirms that Jesus enjoyed the perfection of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit (*STh* III, q. 7 a. 5).

²⁸ *STh* I-II, q. 62 a. 1 and q. 63 a. 3.

²⁹ *STh* I-II, q. 51 a. 2; q. 55 a. 3; q. 63 a. 2; II-II, q. 23 a. 7: 'Si vero illud bonum particulare sit verum bonum, puta conservatio civitatis vel aliquid huiusmodi, erit quidem vera virtus, sed imperfecta, nisi referatur ad finale et perfectum bonum. Et secundum hoc simpliciter vera virtus sine caritate esse non potest.'

The closest St. Thomas comes in the biblical commentaries to addressing the vexed question of the relationship between infused and acquired virtue is simply to state, while commenting on Galatians chapter three, that justification occurs by means of the infused habits of faith and justice, and not by means of acquired versions of these virtues: *In Gal* 3 l. 4: 'Nam nullus per opera iustificatur apud Deum, sed per habitum fidei, non quidem acquisitum, sed infusum. . . iustificare potest accipi dupliciter: vel quantum ad executionem iustitiae et manifestationem, et hoc modo iustificatur homo, id est, iustus ostenditur, ex operibus operatis. Vel quantum ad habitum iustitiae infusum, et hoc modo non iustificatur quis ex operibus, cum habitus iustitiae qua homo iustificatur apud Deum, non sit acquisitus, sed per gratiam fidei infusus.' Cf. *STh* I-II, q. 51 a. 4; q. 62 aa. 1-3; I-II, q. 63 a. 3.

³⁰ For recent scholarship on Thomas Aquinas' biblical commentaries, see Piotr Roszak and Jörgen Vijgen, eds., *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas:*

2 Christ as the man of perfect virtue

Toward the end of his life, after completing his commentary on the Gospel of John, St. Thomas began his magisterial presentation of Christ and the sacraments in the third part of the *Summa theologiae*. During this same period, he simultaneously undertook commentaries on the Pauline Epistles and on the Psalms.³¹ Although, for Aquinas, John's Gospel marks the summit of New Testament Christology, Aquinas also views the Psalms as proclaiming Christ.³² Indeed, in Aquinas' view, the Psalter is almost one of the Gospels: 'all things which pertain to faith in the Incarnation are so clearly taught in this work that it almost seems to be the gospel and not prophecy.'³³ St. Thomas was not alone in holding this view. Medieval authors regularly portrayed the Psalter as *the* Old Testament work of Christology; in their view, the Psalter revealed and celebrated the Christ in his mission as Lord, Savior and Redeemer, as Priest, Prophet and King.³⁴ Peter Lombard, for example, describes the Psalter as 'the fulfillment of all theology.'³⁵ It is significant, therefore, as Martin Morard has noted,³⁶ that St. Thomas begins the third part of the *Summa theologiae* with words that echo the Lombard:

Hermeneutical Tools, Theological Questions and New Perspectives (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2015).

³¹ See Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin: sa personne et son œuvre, nouvelle édition profondément remaniée et enrichie d'une bibliographie mise à jour* (Paris: Cerf, 2015), pp. 320-343.

³² Thomas F. Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000); Martin Morard, 'Le Commentaire des Psaumes de saint Thomas d'Aquin' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, École nationale des Chartes, Paris 2002); Martin Morard, 'Sacerdoce du Christ et sacerdoce des chrétiens dans le Commentaire des Psaumes de saint Thomas d'Aquin,' *Revue thomiste* 99 (1999), 119-142; Martin Morard, 'À propos du Commentaire des Psaumes de saint Thomas d'Aquin,' *Revue thomiste* 96 (1996), 653-670.

³³ *In Is* prol.: 'Omnia enim quae ad fidem incarnationis pertinent, sic dilucide traduntur in hoc opere, ut fere videatur evangelium, et non prophetia.' Cited by Ryan, *Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms*, p. 14.

³⁴ Marcia L. Colish, 'Psalterium Scholasticorum: Peter Lombard and the Emergence of Scholastic Psalms Exegesis,' *Speculum* 67 (1992), 531-548; Martin Morard, 'Entre mode et tradition: Les commentaires des Psaumes de 1160 à 1350,' in *La Bibbia del XIII secolo: storia del testo, storia dell'esegesi*, ed. by Giuseppe Crevascoli and Francesco Santi (Florence: edizioni del Galluzzo, 2004), pp. 323-352.

³⁵ Peter Lombard, *Magna glossatura in Psalmos*, prol. (PL 191, 57B): 'Consummatio est totius theologice pagine.' Cited by Morard, 'Commentaire des Psaumes,' II/2, p. 252; Morard's analysis is also taken up by Torrell, *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin*, p. 335.

³⁶ Morard, 'Commentaire des Psaumes,' II/2, p. 252.

It is necessary, in order to complete the work of theology, that after considering the last end of human life, and the virtues and vices, there should follow the consideration of the Savior of all, and of the benefits bestowed by him on the human race.³⁷

Among the benefits that Christ bestows on the human race are the virtues. Christ was able to bestow them, because, as St. Thomas explains at the beginning of his commentary on John's Gospel, Christ himself was both perfect God and perfect man: 'For in the instant of his conception Christ was perfect God and perfect man, having a perfect rational soul with the virtues.'³⁸ This *in utero* perfection of Christ is what justifies the Baptist's description of Jesus as 'a man who comes after me but ranks before me.'³⁹ Aquinas explains that: 'Christ is called man . . . by reason of the perfection of all the virtues that were in him: As Isaiah states: 'Seven women,' in other words, the virtues, 'will take hold of one man,' the perfect Christ, as Zachariah proclaims: 'Look, a man! His name is the Orient,' because he is the origin of all the virtues found in others.'⁴⁰ Moreover, as Aquinas asserts in his commentary on Isaiah, Christ also enjoys the fullness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit: 'Although all gifts of sanctifying grace are simultaneously infused, individuals do not have the perfect use of all of them. . . . But Christ had all the gifts perfectly, 'for it is not by measure that God gives the Spirit' (Jn 3, 34), and in their fullness, because he was perfect in all grace.'⁴¹ Aquinas further reminds the reader that the revelation of the gifts in Isaiah chapter eleven primarily concerns Christ and his mission: 'For Jerome and all of our saints explain

³⁷ *STh* III, prol.: 'necesse est ut, ad consummationem totius theologici negotii, post considerationem ultimi finis humanae vitae et virtutum ac vitiorum, de ipso omnium salvatore ac beneficiis eius humano generi praestitis nostra consideratio subsequatur.'

³⁸ *In Joh* 1 l. 9: 'Christus enim in instanti suae conceptionis fuit perfectus deus et perfectus homo, habens rationalem animam perfectam virtutibus.'

³⁹ Jn 1, 15. *In Joh* 1 l. 9: 'Constat autem quod Christus ante fuit conceptus quam Ioannes esset natus, et perfectus homo; et ideo dicit ante me factus est quia ipse prius fuit homo perfectus, quam natus fuisset ex utero.'

⁴⁰ *In Joh* 1 l. 14 (260): 'Dicitur autem vir Christus . . . ratione perfectionis omnium virtutum quae in eo fuerunt; Is 4, 1: 'apprehendent septem mulieres,' idest virtutes, 'virum unum,' scilicet Christum perfectum. Zec 6, 12: 'ecce vir, oriens nomen eius': quia ipse est origo omnium virtutum in aliis.'

⁴¹ *In Is* 11: 'Quamvis enim omnia dona gratiae gratum facientis simul infundantur, non tamen aliquis alius habuit perfectum usum omnium. . . . Sed Christus omnia perfecte habuit: 'non enim ad mensuram dat Deus Spiritum' (Jn 3, 34) Quantum ad plenitudinem, quia perfectus fuit in omni gratia.'

it as being about the restoration accomplished through Christ and by Christ.⁴²

This restoration is accomplished through Christ's passion. St. Thomas views the crucifixion as the place where Jesus reveals the perfection of his virtue and becomes a model for all to follow. Commenting on the Letter to the Hebrews, Aquinas explains that:

the remedy for every tribulation is found in the cross. For obedience to God is found there: 'He humbled himself, being made obedient' (Phil 2, 8); so is piety towards one's parents, because he provided for his mother there; and also love of neighbor; hence, he prayed for sinners: 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do' (Lk 23, 34); 'Walk in love, as Christ loved you and delivered himself for you' (Eph 5, 2); and patience in adversity: 'I was mute and was humbled and kept silence from good things: and my sorrow was renewed' (Ps 39:3); 'He shall be led as a sheep to the slaughter, and shall be silent as a lamb before his shearer, and he shall not open his mouth' (Is 53, 7); and final perseverance in all things; hence he persevered to the end: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Lk 23, 46). Hence, an example of every virtue is found in the Cross. As Augustine says, the cross was not only the gibbet on which he suffered, but the chair from which he taught.⁴³

⁴² *In Is* 11: 'Hieronymus enim et omnes sancti nostri exponunt de restauratione facta per Christum, et de Christo.'

⁴³ *In Heb* 12 l. 1 (667): 'in quacumque tribulatione invenitur eius remedium in cruce. Ibi enim est obedientia ad Deum. Phil 2, 8: 'humiliavit semetipsum factus obediens.' Item pietatis affectus ad parentes; unde ibi gessit curam de matre sua. Item charitas ad proximum; unde ibi pro transgressoribus oravit. Lk 23, 34: 'pater, dimitte illis, non enim sciunt quid faciunt.' Eph 5, 2: 'ambulate in dilectione, sicut Christus dilexit nos, et tradidit semetipsum pro nobis.' Item fuit ibi patientia in adversis. Ps 38, 3: 'obmutui et humiliatus sum, et silui a bonis, et dolor meus renovatus est.' Is 53, 7: 'sicut ovis ad occisionem ducetur, et quasi agnus coram tondente se obmutescet, et non aperiet os suum.' Item in omnibus finalis perseverantia; unde usque ad mortem perseveravit. Lk 23, 46: 'pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum.' Unde in cruce invenitur exemplum omnis virtutis, Augustinus: crux non solum fuit patibulum patientis; sed etiam cathedra docentis.' See also *In Joh* 19, l. 4 (2441). The exact quotation from Augustine is: 'Facit quod faciendum admonet, et exemplo suo suos instruit praeceptor bonus, ut a filiis piis impendatur cura parentibus: tamquam lignum illud ubi erant fixa membra morientis, etiam cathedra fuit magistri docentis' (*In Iohannis evangelium tractatus*, 119, 2: *CCL* 36, 658). Augustine expresses the same idea in two of his sermons: in an Easter sermon in reference to the good thief, 'Cruce illa, schola erat. Ibi docuit Magister latronem. Lignum pendens, cathedra factum est docentis' (*Sermo* 234, 2: *PL* 38, 1116), and in a sermon for the feast of St. Stephen, 'Quod Stephanus humilis, Christus sublimis: quod ille ad terram inclinatus, hoc Christus in ligno suspensus. Nam recolite quia et ipse ait: 'Pater, ignosce illis, quia nesciunt quid faciunt' (Lk 23, 34). Sedebat in cathedra crucis, et docebat Stephanum regulam

The cross, however, does not just reveal Christ's virtue, it also effects our salvation. This is what allows the Evangelist to describe the cross as Christ's glorification.⁴⁴ Thomas explains, 'The passion of Christ was a source of benefits and glory, not of defeat, . . . because by it human nature became a partaker of the Father's glory.'⁴⁵ Thus, Thomas interprets the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah as affirming that: 'Christ is the strength (*fortitudo*) of his people, liberated by him from sin.'⁴⁶ Fire grows in water: this is the great 'mystery of the cross,'⁴⁷ or what Aquinas more frequently describes as 'the mystery of the passion.'⁴⁸ For our salvation, the power of Christ's divinity is revealed in the weakness of Christ's humanity. This is what enables St. Thomas in three arresting metaphors to describe Christ as 'carrying his cross the way a king carries his scepter,' or 'the way a victor carries the trophy of his victory' or 'the way a teacher carries his candelabrum, as a support for the light of his teaching, because for

pietatis. O Magister bone, bene pronuntiasti, bene docuisti. Ecce discipulus tuus orat pro inimicis suis, orat pro lapidatoribus suis' (*Sermo* 315, 5 [8]; *PL* 38, 1430). St. Thomas also portrays Christ as teaching virtue from the cross in a university sermon preached for the first vespers of the exultation of the cross: see part three of Sermon 18 '*Germinet terra.*'

⁴⁴ Jn 13, 31.

⁴⁵ *In Joh* 13 l. 1 (1734): 'Promotiva fuit passio Christi et exaltativa, et non oppressiva . . . faciendo humanam naturam participem paternae gloriae.'

⁴⁶ *In Psalmos*, ps 27, 8: 'Christus est fortitudo populi ejus liberati per eum a peccato.'

⁴⁷ *In Joh* 19 l. 4 (2420): 'crucis mysterium.'

⁴⁸ *In Joh* 18 l. 1 (2271): 'mysterium passionis.' See also *In IV Sent* d. 8 q. 2 a. 2a ad 2; *In IV Sent* d. 8 q. 2 a. 2b; *STh* I-II, q. 102 a. 5, ad 5; q. 103 a. 2; II-II, q. 2 a. 7; q. 147 a. 7; III, q. 54 a. 2; *In I Cor* 5 l. 2 (245); *In Joh* 3 l. 2 (465, 472); *In Joh* 14 l. 2 (1880); *In Joh* 20 l. 1 (2470); *In Heb* 2 l. 2 (109). Especially interesting is Thomas' affirmation in his second inaugural lecture that among the four major prophets of the Old Testament, it is Jeremiah who focuses on the mystery of Christ's passion, while among the four New Testament evangelists, it is Luke who does so: 'Potest tamen aliter distingui, ut dicatur quod Isaias praenunciat principaliter incarnationis mysterium, unde tempore adventus in Ecclesia legitur; Ieremias vero mysterium passionis, unde legitur tempore passionis; Ezechiel mysterium resurrectionis, unde in resurrectione ossium et templi reparatione librum suum finit; Daniel autem secundum quod inter prophetas computatur ex hoc quod spiritu prophético praedixit futura, quamvis non ex persona domini populo loqueretur, prosequitur de divinitate Christi, ut quatuor prophetae quatuor Evangelistis respondeant, vel etiam de advocazione ad iudicium. . . . ut dicatur quod Matthaeus determinat de Christo principaliter quantum ad mysterium incarnationis; et ideo in figura hominis describitur; Lucas quantum ad mysterium passionis; et ideo describitur in figura bovis, quod est animal immolatum; Marcus vero quantum ad victoriam resurrectionis; et ideo describitur in figura leonis; Iohannes vero, qui ad alta divinitatis eius volat, per aquilam designatur' (*Hic est liber*, pars 2).

believers the message of the cross is the power of God.⁴⁹ Although unbelievers make the cross a ‘laughingstock’ (*ludibrium*), it is the mystery that reveals God’s power, a mystery in which, Thomas explains, each Christian is called to participate.⁵⁰

3 The Christian’s participation in the Virtues of Christ

*Behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you;
stay in the city until you are clothed with virtue from on high.
Lk 24, 49*

St. Thomas proclaims often that Christ, through the action of the Holy Spirit, shares his powers—his virtues—with us. Commenting on Paul’s affirmation that ‘we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works,’⁵¹ Aquinas affirms that Paul is referring here to the effects of justification: ‘the creation of justice occurs through the power of Christ communicating the Holy Spirit. . . . Moreover, not only are the habits of virtue and grace given to us, but we are inwardly renewed through the Spirit for good action.’⁵² In his commentary on Galatians, Aquinas underlines more explicitly the role of the Holy Spirit in effecting these virtues within us: ‘For the Holy Spirit is in us through grace, through which we acquire the habit of the virtues; from which we are able to work according to virtue.’⁵³ The work of the Spirit is grace in our souls, which causes the virtues to arise in our spiritual powers of intellect and will. What the Spirit effects is our configuration to Christ. Aquinas explains this by means of the patristic analogy of wood that takes on the character (*virtus*) of the fire that inflames it:

⁴⁹ *In Joh* 19 l. 3 (2414): ‘Portat Christus crucem ut rex sceptrum . . . Portat eam ut victor trophaeum suae victoriae. . . . Item ut doctor portat candelabrum, in quo ponenda erat lucerna suae doctrinae, quia verbum crucis fidelibus est virtus Dei.’

⁵⁰ *In Joh* 19 l. 3 (2414): ‘Nec hoc vacat a mysterio: quia ipse primus passionem crucis sustinuit, et postmodum alii, et maxime advenae gentiles, eum imitando. 1 Pt 2, 21: ‘Christus passus est pro nobis, vobis relinquens exemplum’; Mt 16, 24: ‘si quis vult venire post me, abneget semetipsum, tollat crucem suam, et sequatur me.’ Sed hoc quod Christus crucem sibi portavit, et si impiis et infidelibus sit grande ludibrium, fidelibus tamen et piis est grande mysterium. 1 Cor. 1, 18: ‘verbum crucis pereuntibus quidem est stultitia: his autem qui salvi fiunt, idest nobis, virtus Dei est.’’

⁵¹ Eph 2, 10.

⁵² *In Eph* 2 l. 3: ‘Haec autem actio, scilicet creatio iustitiae, fit virtute Christi, Spiritum Sanctum dantis. . . . Ulterius, non solum datur nobis habitus virtutis et gratiae sed interius per Spiritum renovamur ad bene operandum.’

⁵³ *In Gal* 5 l. 6: ‘Nam Spiritus Sanctus est in nobis per gratiam, per quam acquirimus habitum virtutum, et ex hoc potentes sumus operari secundum virtutem.’

Just as burning wood takes on fire and shares in fire's power, so he who receives the virtues of Christ puts on Christ: 'Stay in the city till you be clothed with virtue from on high' (Lk 24, 49). This applies to those who are inwardly clothed with the virtue of Christ: 'Put on the new man, who according to God is created in justice and holiness of truth' (Eph 4, 24).⁵⁴

Like burning wood that begins to glow with the light and warmth of the fire, so too the grace of Christ gives the Christian a share in the warm holiness of Christ's virtues which give light to the world.

St. Thomas states clearly that the theological virtues are primary among the infused virtues. Commenting on Paul's famous canticle to love from chapter thirteen of First Corinthians, which proclaims that faith, hope and love are the three things that remain, Aquinas refers to the traditional doctrine that these three have God as their immediate object, and hence they alone are called theological virtues. He innovatively explains what this means by describing grace as establishing a communion of life (*communicatio*) between God and his people, and by describing charity as the friendship that is proper to this communion.⁵⁵ This enables Aquinas to describe the theological virtues in relational terms: as with any friendship, in order to love God we must first know something about our friend; we also must be confirmed in the hope that this relationship is based on a lasting and stable communion of life. Aquinas further describes this divine intimacy of knowledge and love as a school of virtue, where God is said both to dwell within his friends, 'for those who know and those who love have within themselves the thing known and loved,'⁵⁶ and to move them to acts of virtue through the mystery of cooperating grace: 'by which the saints make progress with God's help; as to this [the Lord] says, I will move among them: in other

⁵⁴ *In Gal* 3 l. 9: 'Et sicut lignum accensum induitur igne, et participat eius virtutem, ita et qui Christi virtutes accipit, induitur Christo. Lk 24, 49.: 'sedete in civitate donec induamini virtute,' etc., quod in illis locum habet qui interius Christi virtute informantur. Eph 4, 24: 'induite novum hominem, qui secundum,' et cetera.'

⁵⁵ *In I Cor* 13 l. 4 (806). See also *STh* II-II, q. 23 a. 1. Joseph Bobik, 'Aquinas on *Communicatio*, the Foundation of Friendship and Caritas,' *Modern Schoolman* 64 (1988), 1-18 and Joseph Bobik, 'Aquinas on Friendship with God,' *New Scholasticism* 60 (1986), 257-271.

⁵⁶ *In II Cor* 6 l. 3 (240): 'In sanctis autem est per ipsorum sanctorum operationem, qua attingunt ad deum, et quodammodo comprehendunt ipsum, quae est diligere et cognoscere: nam diligens et cognoscens dicitur in se habere cognita et dilecta.'

words, I will move them forward from virtue to virtue.⁵⁷

But this focus on the theological virtues should not give the impression that Aquinas neglects the cardinal virtues in his biblical commentaries. In fact, he refers to them often, especially to fortitude, which, when taken in general, can refer to the power to live all the virtues.⁵⁸ Thus, for example, Aquinas paraphrases the Psalmist as saying that God has infused in him the virtue of courage: ‘This is fortitude, namely, a virtue that is given to me by God, not only in bodily wars, but in spiritual ones, which I would not win without the virtue of God.’⁵⁹ Importantly, Aquinas seeks to describe the virtues (theological and cardinal) as working together in the Christian life. Aquinas even reads Paul’s martial imagery from Ephesians chapter six as referring to all seven of the infused virtues as well as to the gifts.⁶⁰ Aquinas follows a similar procedure when analyzing St. Paul’s rather quirky list of virtues in 2 Cor 6, 6-10, discerning in it all three of the theological virtues and all four of the cardinal virtues.⁶¹

Importantly, Aquinas holds that the seven infused virtues only function as moved and completed by the gifts, which move us to act at a higher level of agency. It is then, when acting from the gifts and the seven infused virtues that we experience the fruits of the Spirit, which are nothing other than virtuous deeds that bring us joy.⁶² Ultimately, however, this life of grace is ordered not simply to joyous acts of virtue, but to perfect acts of virtue, which for Aquinas are the beatitudes, that produce not merely joy, but give the saint a foretaste and earthly participation in the heavenly kingdom.⁶³ Thus, when Aquinas introduces his discussion of the gifts in his commentary on Isaiah, he begins by distinguishing them from the virtues, the beatitudes and the fruits. Faith elevates the mind to know divine truth, but as in a mirror and obscurely; the gift of understanding clarifies the mind and elucidates it concerning the insights necessary for salvation; the saint, however, in the purity of his heart begins in secret and hidden ways to ‘see God’, not yet in the

⁵⁷ *In II Cor* 6 l. 3 (240): ‘quo scilicet proficiunt sancti auxilio dei, et quantum ad hoc dicit inambulabo in eis, id est promovebo eos de virtute in virtutem.’

⁵⁸ For the way in which fortitude can signify in both a general and a specific sense, see *STh* I-II q. 61 aa. 2-4; *STh* II-II q. 123 a. 2.

⁵⁹ *In Psalmos*, ps 17, 19: ‘Haec est fortitudo, scilicet virtus quae data est mihi a Deo, non solum in corporalibus bellis, sed et in spiritualibus, quae non vincerem sine virtute Dei.’

⁶⁰ See *In Eph* 6 l. 3-5.

⁶¹ See *In II Cor* 6 l. 2 (217-220).

⁶² *In Is* 11; *In Gal* 5 l. 6; *STh* I-II, q. 68 aa. 1, 2 and 8; q. 70 a. 1.

⁶³ *In Matt* 5 lect 2; *STh* I-II, q. 69 a. 2.

vision of heaven, but nonetheless beyond what most of us see or understand.⁶⁴ The beatitudes, as the acts of perfect virtue, bring us to the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem. Here again, however, the way through the gates is by means of Christ and his humanity. Just as God protected the bones of his anointed, not letting even one of them be broken, so too, Aquinas explains, will God protect our ‘spiritual virtues’ in times of trial. Just as bones interiorly support the body, so too the virtues sustain human life.⁶⁵ In the future, God will liberate his people from trials and infirmities. In the meantime, God protects their virtues: ‘in tribulations no virtue of man will be lacking, because God will protect them.’ Aquinas adds that these spiritual virtues ‘are perfected in weakness.’⁶⁶ As Aquinas explains elsewhere, weakness encourages us to grow in humility and even in the moral virtues of temperance and patient courage.⁶⁷ Most importantly, it encourages us to apply ourselves to living the gifts we receive from Christ, attentive to the education in virtue he wishes to give us.⁶⁸

The goal of this brief essay has been to present Thomas Aquinas’ theology of virtue as he develops it in his biblical commentaries. It began by tracing his understanding of virtue as an analogous term. It then sketched his portrayal of Christ as the man of perfect virtue, and subsequently noted his conception of the Christian life as a participation

⁶⁴ *In Is* 11; *STh* I-II, q. 69 a. 2 ad 3.

⁶⁵ *In Psalmos*, ps 33, 19: ‘sicut per ossa sustentatur corpus, ita per virtutes sustentatur vita humana.’

⁶⁶ *In Psalmos*, ps 33, 19: ‘in futuro ergo liberabit totaliter, sed interim custodit ossa, idest virtutes, quae magis proficiunt in infirmitate.’

⁶⁷ *In II Cor* 12 l. 3 (479): ‘Intelligi vero potest hoc, quod dicitur ‘virtus perficitur in infirmitate,’ dupliciter, scilicet materialiter et occasionaliter. Si accipiatur materialiter, tunc est sensus: virtus in infirmitate perficitur, id est infirmitas est materia exercendae virtutis. Et primo humilitatis, ut supra dictum est, secundo patientiae, . . . tertio temperantiae, quia ex infirmitate debilitatur fomes, et temperatus efficitur quis.’

⁶⁸ *In II Cor* 12 l. 3 (479-480): ‘Si vero accipiatur occasionaliter, tunc ‘virtus in infirmitate perficitur,’ id est occasio perveniendi ad perfectam virtutem, quia homo sciens se infirmum, magis sollicitatur ad resistendum, et ex hoc, quod magis resistit et pugnat, efficitur exercitator et per consequens fortiori. . . . Consequenter ponit apostolus effectum huius responsionis dominicae, dicens ‘libenter gloriabor,’ et cetera. Ponit autem duplicem effectum. Unus est gloriacionis; unde dicit: quia virtus mea perficitur in infirmitatibus, igitur ‘libenter gloriabor in infirmitatibus meis,’ id est mihi ad utilitatem meam datis. Et hoc, quia magis coniungitur Christo. ‘Mihi autem absit gloriari, nisi in cruce,’ etc., Gal ult. Eccli 10, 34: ‘qui in paupertate gloriatur,’ et cetera. Et ratio quod libenter gloriabor, ‘ut inhabitet in me virtus Christi,’ ut scilicet per infirmitates inhabitet et consummetur in me gratia Christi. Is 40, 29: ‘qui dat lapsos virtutem,’ et cetera.’

in the virtues of Christ. Even though Thomas Aquinas recognizes the existence of acquired excellences and is willing to call them true if imperfect virtues, for him the Christian life is primarily about infused virtue, infused cardinal virtues as well as the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. These excellences enable the Christian to live heroic virtue even in the face of human weakness, sickness and suffering. Through the mystery of Christ's cross, God's power is made perfect in weakness, and his love is enflamed in fragile human hearts. In this sense, for Aquinas, fire can indeed grow in water.

HARM GORIS and HENK SCHOOT (eds.)

THE VIRTUOUS LIFE

Thomas Aquinas on the
Theological Nature of Moral Virtues

A collection of studies presented at the fifth conference of the
Thomas Instituut te Utrecht, December 16-19, 2015

with contributions of

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