

## How can Thomism Benefit Catechesis for Adults Today?

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### Abstract

In today's increasingly secular and materialistic world, Thomism can continue to make significant contributions to the catechesis for adults. The teachings of St. Thomas, with the central theme "grace perfects nature," are highly relevant to the integral formation of the faith of the whole human person—a composite of body and soul. All the six dimensions of catechesis as stipulated in the *General Directory for Catechesis*: knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, moral formation, prayer, belonging to community, and missionary spirit can be cultivated via an in-depth understanding of Thomism throughout the four stages of the baptismal catechumenate. St. Thomas offers valuable insights on how to live a blessed and meaningful life. His profound teachings educate catechumens on the knowledge of faith, enrich their experience, once baptized, of receiving sacraments, and emphasize the importance of virtues to live a moral life. Loving God with their whole hearts and minds is always the ultimate end and happiness to achieve. Catechists should endeavor to employ St. Thomas' teachings to cultivate catechumens' faith and enable them to understand how grace perfects nature, and faith perfects reason.

**Keywords:** Scholasticism, St. Thomas Aquinas, Thomism, grace and nature, faith and reason, catechesis, Christian morality, sacraments.

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### 1. Introduction

Scholasticism, the use of human reason in understanding matters of faith, emerged at the turn of the first millennium into the second. St. Anselm, commonly known as Anselm of Canterbury because he was appointed the Archbishop of Canterbury in his later years, is one of the earliest theologians of Scholasticism.<sup>2</sup> Anselm was born in 1033 in Italy. Around that time, debates started in the Church on whether using dialectic methods for investigating Christian doctrines was appropriate. Anselm is famous for his ontological argument to prove God's existence. His reasoning is called "reason of faith," meaning that faith can provide the foundation and context for rational inquiry while human reason can be used to explore and deepen our understanding of the divine truths revealed by faith. He held that "faith purifies and directs reason in investigation." Relying on reason alone could be prone to errors and even becoming heretical. On the contrary, reason can be purified and directed by faith to investigate the nature of God.<sup>3</sup> Anselm is often considered a representative figure giving rise to Scholasticism in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

While the Greek philosophers are famous for their rational thinking, their influence on Christian theology had been minimal before the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The early scholastic theologians relied largely on the Scriptures and the early Church Fathers, notably St. Augustine, as their basis of reasoning. However, two factors led to a change in this approach. First, translating more of Aristotle's works from Greek to Latin, such as the Organon, provided theologians with instrumental tools for logical reasoning and argumentation. Second, the emergence of universities, like the University of Paris, created a platform for studying philosophy and theology. Although Aristotle is a pagan, he held that there was a "hierarchy of sciences," with metaphysics, on which theology could base, being the "highest among all the sciences." Despite concerns over the compatibility of Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine, some theologians, notably St. Albert the Great and his student St. Thomas

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Williams, "Reason & Faith: Philosophy in the Middle Ages, Lecture 7: Anselm and the 11th-Century Context," The Great Courses, 2007, <https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/reason-faith-philosophy-in-the-middle-ages>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Williams. Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Ryan Reeves, "Aristotle and Scholasticism," YouTube video, April 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeA7QPm8f8g>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

Aquinas sought to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology. They used it as a tool to deepen the understanding of the Christian faith, creating a new and influential approach to theology.<sup>1</sup>

St. Thomas Aquinas, the “Angelic Doctor,” was generally recognized as the most prominent theologian of Scholasticism.<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas was born in 1225 to a noble family. He was named “Aquinas” because he was born a few kilometers north of Aquino in Italy.<sup>3</sup> Contradictory to his family’s wish to raise him as an influential Benedictine monk, St. Thomas joined the then-new Dominican order and followed St. Albert from Paris to Cologne. He devoted his life to teaching and writing. Between 1268 and 1272, Aquinas devoted much time to refuting those who used Aristotle to deny certain Christian doctrines. In particular, the rise of Averroism held that human reason contradicted the faith in Christ. Because of the threat, some Catholic theologians of his time advocated abandoning Aristotle and philosophy altogether to protect the Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> However, St. Thomas considered that faith and reason could reconcile, and he defended the use of Aristotle while simultaneously against the errors of Averroism. “From this crucible, he created what the Catholic Church would recognize as a perfect synthesis between faith and reason.” In 1272, he completed his magnificent work *Summa Theologiae* in Naples. He was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church in 1567 by Pope Pius V (Marshall 2013, 6–7).<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Is Thomism Still Relevant Today?

Scholasticism is often perceived to reach its pinnacle with *Summa Theologiae*. After the death of St. Thomas in 1274, Scholasticism started a rapid decline in its influence in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Within the Church, Catholic theologians such as Nicolas of Oresme and Nicolas Cusa cast doubts on the Aristotelian approach to understanding the nature of the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God. On the other hand, debates over papal authority in contention with secular rulers and the development of natural sciences based on empirical evidence and scientific proof resulted in a shift of focus from philosophical inquiries in the realm of theology to new ideas in social and scientific regimes. These developments have contributed to the decline of Scholasticism in the pursuit of faith through human reason.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, it does not mean that the teachings of St. Thomas have disappeared altogether from the Catholic scene. A central theme of his teaching, “grace perfects nature,” remains prominent in the teachings of the Catholic Church today. In Aquinas’ belief, human nature was ruined by original sin but not destroyed by it.<sup>7</sup> The four natural or cardinal virtues, namely prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, are fundamental to good human deeds, and they are perfected by the three supernatural or theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, which God infuses into humanity.<sup>8</sup> These supernatural virtues direct humanity to God as the final end, which cannot be accomplished without the help of His grace. It is because “the human intellect possesses the form of intellectual light, which by itself is sufficient for the knowledge of such intelligible things as we can learn through sense. But it cannot know intelligible things of a higher order unless it is perfected by a stronger light.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1879, Pope Leo XIII addressed *Aeterni Patris* to all the bishops of the Catholic Church in communion with him to give directives on the “mode of taking up the study of philosophy” that would be faithful to the teaching of Christ while remaining harmonious with human knowledge.<sup>10</sup> In his encyclical, the Pope praised St. Thomas to be the “most venerated [among] the ancient doctors of the Church” since he “collected together and cemented [the works of his predecessors], distributed in wonderful order, and so increased with important additions that he is rightly and deservedly esteemed the special bulwark and glory of the Catholic faith.”<sup>11</sup> St.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Williams, “Reason & Faith: Philosophy in the Middle Ages, Lecture 13: The Rediscovery of Aristotle,” The Great Courses, 2007, <https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/reason-faith-philosophy-in-the-middle-ages>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor Marshall, *Thomas Aquinas in 50 Pages: A Quick Layman’s Guide to Thomism* (Electronic Copy by Taylor R. Marshall, 2013), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Marshall, 5–6.

<sup>5</sup> Marshall, 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Williams, “Reason & Faith: Philosophy in the Middle Ages, Lecture 24: The 14th Century and Beyond,” The Great Courses, 2007, <https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/reason-faith-philosophy-in-the-middle-ages>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2003), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Marshall, *Thomas Aquinas in 50 Pages: A Quick Layman’s Guide to Thomism*, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Leo XIII, “Aeterni Patris: Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on the Restoration of Christian Philosophy” (The Vatican, August 4, 1879), para. 1, [https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_04081879\\_aeterni-patris.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html). Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Leo XIII, para. 17.

Thomas combated and corrected the errors before his time and made convincing arguments to protect the Catholic faith from future errors.<sup>1</sup>

Modern Christian philosophers like Jacques Maritain, who had a profound influence on Vatican II and received from the hands of Pope Paul VI at the end of the Council in December 1965 “the message to the intellectuals of the world,” was a “militant Thomist who held up St. Thomas as the apostle for our time.”<sup>2</sup> Maritain maintained that people in the current age are “overwhelmed by the primacy of verification over speculative truth” in knowledge acquisition. Everything has to be verified scientifically, or else “it does not exist; [or] something very vague and remote.”<sup>3</sup> Étienne Gilson, on the other hand, admired the medieval philosophers for their belief that the human mind “can know reality and rise to a knowledge of universal truths—truths that hold for all times and for all peoples.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Gilson considered that the medieval philosophers’ excellence in philosophy was because they were Christians, with their reasons illuminated by faith.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Joseph White, the rector of the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, advocated that St. Thomas’ philosophy and theology are vital to the new evangelization of the Church today because “the universality and scope of his insight into reality has a perennial value.”<sup>6</sup>

Before His Ascension, Jesus ordered his apostles to proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation<sup>7</sup>, make disciples of all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit<sup>8</sup>. So, how can we make the most appropriate use of the teachings of St. Thomas, the “Master of Reality,”<sup>9</sup> in catechesis for adults in the modern era?

### 3. Catechesis for Adults in the Modern Era

The *General Directory for Catechesis (GDC)* stipulates that “the model for all catechesis is the baptismal catechumenate when, by specific formation, an adult converted to belief is brought to explicit profession of baptismal faith during the Paschal Vigil.”<sup>10</sup> The baptismal catechumenate is divided into four periods, going through three steps. The first period is the “Period of Evangelization and Pre-catechumenate,” the second period is the “Period of the Catechumenate,” the third period is the “Period of Purification and Enlightenment,” and the fourth period is the “Period of the Post-Baptismal Catechesis” (also known as “Mystagogy”). The three steps are the first step—the “Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens” (Rite of Acceptance), after which a catechumen enters into the second period; the second step—the “Rite of Election,” after which an elect enters into the third period; the third step—the “Rites of Initiation,” after which a newly initiated Catholic (neophyte) enters into the fourth period.<sup>11</sup>

Catechesis aims to develop a personal and lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ that can continue to grow in the Christian community by sharing the Trinitarian love of God and doing what God wills by loving our neighbors and proclaiming the Gospel to transform the world. To achieve this goal, there must be an integral formation of the faith of the whole human person.

As the vitality of the human body depends on the proper function of all of its organs, so also the maturation of the Christian life requires that it be cultivated in all its dimensions: knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, moral formation, prayer, belonging to community, missionary spirit. When catechesis omits one of these elements, the Christian faith does not attain full development.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pope Leo XIII, para. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Victor B. Brezik, ed., *One Hundred Years of Thomism: Aeterni Patris and Afterwards - A Symposium* (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, University of St. Thomas, 1981), 45–46.

<sup>3</sup> Brezik, 57.

<sup>4</sup> Brezik, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Brezik, 34.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Joseph White, *Thomism for the New Evangelization* (Washington, D.C.: Thomistic Institute, 2016), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 16:15.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28: 19.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor Marshall, “Why Every Catholic Needs Aristotle and Aquinas?,” YouTube video, November 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CSFdi8qPHg&t=4083s>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> The Vatican, *General Directory for Catechesis* (The Vatican, 1997), para. 59, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_17041998\\_directory-for-catechesis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_17041998_directory-for-catechesis_en.html). Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> USCCB, “Christian Initiation of Adults,” n.d., <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/who-we-teach/christian-initiation-of-adults>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> The Vatican, *General Directory for Catechesis*, para. 87.

#### 4. How is Thomism Relevant to Catechesis?

The teachings of St. Thomas are highly relevant to the integral formation of the faith of the whole human person—a composite of body and soul. All the six dimensions of catechesis: “knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, moral formation, prayer, belonging to community, [and] missionary spirit” stipulated in the *GDC* can be cultivated via an in-depth understanding of Thomism throughout the four stages of the baptismal catechumenate. The ensuing paragraphs aim to provide some pointers for catechists to develop the curriculum and prepare teaching materials for the catechetical lessons.

##### 4.1 Period of Evangelization and Pre-catechumenate

The first period of the baptismal catechumenate is the period of evangelization and pre-catechumenate. People who want to know more about the Catholic faith enroll in the baptismal catechumenate as inquirers. This initial period is characterized as “the locus of first evangelization leading to conversion and where the kerygma of the primary proclamation is explained.”<sup>1</sup> The inquirers may be instructed with the following Thomist thoughts.

###### 4.1.1 The Four Cardinal Virtues

The Greek philosophers considered four virtues—good habits perfect the human soul. These are natural virtues like the DNA implanted in every human being.<sup>2</sup> They are “prudence” exercised by the human intellect, “justice” exercised by the will, “fortitude”—a virtue perfecting our irascible passions, and “temperance”—a virtue perfecting our concupiscible passions.<sup>3</sup>

###### (a) Prudence

Prudence is the habit of good decision-making. According to St. Augustine, “Prudence is the knowledge of what to seek and what to avoid.”<sup>4</sup> It allows the human soul to discern a good action from an evil one.

###### (b) Justice

Aristotle explained that justice is the habit that “makes men capable of doing just actions.” All human beings commonly desire to do what is good for their family, friends, community, and countries, being fair in their dealings with others and grateful to the benefactors. Misconducts like theft, cheating, murder, and hurting others are actions against justice.<sup>5</sup>

###### (c) Fortitude

Cicero wrote, “Fortitude is deliberate facing of dangers and bearing of toils.” St. Thomas described martyrdom as the greatest act of fortitude because the brave action is directed toward God—the ultimate end of all things. A person exhibiting fortitude does not fear rejection with a life marked with perseverance.<sup>6</sup>

###### (d) Temperance

According to Aristotle, temperance is the virtue that moderates the “desires of pleasures of touch.” St. Thomas taught that the sins against temperance, such as lust, gluttony, and drunkenness, are most disgraceful because they make us irrational beasts.<sup>7</sup>

The above four cardinal virtues are easily understood by everyone, including those without Christian faith, because they are inborn attributes for every human being, created in the image of God.<sup>8</sup> However, since virtues are stable dispositions we need to acquire over time, modern people often neglect them in the face of individualistic beliefs and worldly temptations. It is useful to remind inquirers that these attributes are part of our natural instincts as they start their journey with understanding and conversion to the Catholic faith. Personal experiences may be shared during class.

###### 4.1.2 The Natural Law

Natural law is the law of human nature connected to the rationality of human acts. “The natural law is the law of reason; the good action is the reasonable action, the evil what is contrary to reason.” Proper human reasoning is

<sup>1</sup> The Vatican, para. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Ryan Reeves, “St. Thomas Aquinas (Part 2),” YouTube video, September 24, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPpugLKHQ6s&t=1375s>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall, *Thomas Aquinas in 50 Pages: A Quick Layman's Guide to Thomism*, 37.

<sup>4</sup> Marshall, 38.

<sup>5</sup> Marshall, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 1:27.

indispensable to our daily decisions and actions “without abandoning the proposition that morality is written in human nature.”<sup>1</sup> Most modern people, including inquirers, often do not recognize the beauty of virtues. God gives us the talents to fulfill our specific roles in this world, live a meaningful and virtuous life, and get closer to Him before entering eternal happiness.

While St. Thomas used Aristotle’s natural reasoning to explain the Christian doctrines, he also emphasized that the natural order is insufficient to comprehend knowledge about God fully. There is a supernatural order where faith brings reason to a higher fulfillment. The inquirers may now be given an initial taste of the Catholic faith by the catechists sharing their real-life stories of how faith and charity may make human virtues more perfect by influencing their daily decisions.

#### 4.1.3 The Existence of God

Before St. Thomas, St. Anselm was notable for proving the existence of God through the ontological argument, which essentially argues that God’s existence is “self-evident” without relying on the human senses. This *a priori* argument does not sound too convincing in modern times since the opposition could argue that God’s existence is not self-evident to everybody, particularly doubters and non-believers. St. Thomas derived a new set of “*quaestio* arguments” based on human senses, known as the “Five Ways.” The first argument, “the Unmoved Mover,” is most easily understood.<sup>2</sup>

St. Thomas posited that all accidental changes in quality, quantity, or place must have a “mover” distinct from the object that is moved. But there cannot be an infinite series of movers because finding someone who moved the first mover would be impossible. So, it is logical to think there must be an “unmoved mover.” The argument is based on our common sense and natural science that nothing just happens, and there must be a first cause: God, who created this wonderful world.<sup>3</sup> While his logic is not a perfect argument on the existence of God, the “unmoved mover” cum “ontological” arguments appear reasonably convincing for the inquirers to continue seeking the Christian God.

#### 4.1.4 God the Creator

Two scientific developments appear to significantly impact Christian religious belief, especially among the inquirers searching for God. They are the Big Bang cosmology and evolution, that is, the question of the origins of man. For the first question, while St. Thomas’ “Five Ways” to prove the existence of God were no longer as convincing as in the Middle Ages, they are not outdated as such. Metaphysical theories, particularly the first cause discussed above, do not contradict scientific discoveries and proofs. Even the most renowned contemporary theoretical physicists like Stephen Hawking, one of the initial proposers of the Big Bang theory, would not rule out the existence of God, although Hawking chose to believe that the universe is governed by the laws of science rather than created by God. “The laws [of science] may have been decreed by God, but God does not intervene to break the laws,” Hawking said.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, St. Thomas posited that “God has caused human beings to be and has given us a nature that is rational and free,” thereby making us the causes of other beings.<sup>5</sup> In this way, there is no contradiction between the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and modern cosmology. “They examine the same reality from two different, non-competitive perspectives.”<sup>6</sup>

The second question is about evolution and the origins of man. While science and archeology may provide convincing evidence that the first humans were developed from hominids, modern science can hardly address the philosophical question of the immaterial soul.<sup>7</sup> St. Thomas’ teaching on the spiritual soul, which directs human intellect and will, means a host of things that belong uniquely to human beings: “conceptuality and universal denotations in language,” “free action and moral responsibility,” “religion and ritual,” “games and arts,” and “marriage.”<sup>8</sup> These capabilities make us so different from other animals without a rational soul. While an entirely literal understanding of the Creation stories in Genesis would no longer agree with scientific evidence, it is plausible that God gave our first parents, “the first rational human beings, a significant advantage and tools—

<sup>1</sup> Brezik, *One Hundred Years of Thomism: Aeterni Patris and Afterwards - A Symposium*, 87–88.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Williams, “Reason & Faith: Philosophy in the Middle Ages, Lecture 16: Aquinas’s Proof of an Unmoved Mover,” *The Great Courses*, 2007, <https://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/reason-faith-philosophy-in-the-middle-ages>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Williams.

<sup>4</sup> Reuters, “Pope Sees Physicist Hawking at Evolution Gathering,” Reuters, November 1, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-hawking-idUSTRE49U6E220081031>. Accessed July 13, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> White, *Thomism for the New Evangelization*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> White, 9.

<sup>7</sup> White, 9.

<sup>8</sup> White, 10.

most likely intellectual dispositions—that enabled them to enhance their perception of reality.”<sup>1</sup> At a particular time juncture, this rational soul, given by God, was united with our hominid ancestors’ body to become a composite. Based on this understanding, there is no conflict between the creation of man as the image of God and the scientific hypothesis of man’s evolution from a hominid.

#### 4.1.5 The Kerygma

God is our Creator. “He made humanity so that we could seek the truth, find Him, and enter into the inheritance of His eternal happiness.”<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of the period of evangelization and pre-catechumenate, catechists should proclaim the kerygma to the inquirers so that they get to know that Jesus is our Savior and, through the Paschal Mystery, Christ brings salvation to humanity. The Son is God became a human being. The Mystery of Incarnation is “the first question St. Thomas [asked] in his treatise on Christ is “Why did God become a human being?”<sup>3</sup> He answered the question with reference to the original sin and elaborated that we need divine grace for spiritual healing. “God became human to restore our human condition ‘from within’ and to lead us back to God by participation in the grace of Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

With their hearts and conscience enlightened by the Holy Spirit, inquirers will get prepared to learn more about the Christian faith as they join the Rite of Acceptance. In the Rite of Acceptance, inquirers will be asked: “What do you ask of the Church?” Their response is “Faith.” And then, “What does faith offer you?” They reply: “Eternal life,” which is always the final end Thomism directs us to understand.

#### 4.2 Period of the Catechumenate

Following the Rite of Acceptance is a longer period of the catechumenate, which takes about one year for catechumens to be instructed on the fundamental doctrines of the faith in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* under four themes: the profession of faith, the sacraments, Christian morality, and prayer. While Thomism is relevant to all the above themes, four aspects are worth highlighting: grace, free will and merit, sacraments, and Christian morality.

##### 4.2.1 Grace

A fundamental teaching of St. Thomas is “grace perfecting nature.” He held that original sin ruined human nature but did not destroy the natural inclination to virtues.<sup>5</sup> In the presence of sin, the human soul is sick. Even for the damned, the natural inclination to virtue would not be totally lost; otherwise, he would not feel the remorse of conscience.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, a person cannot merit eternal life without grace, which was gifted to humanity only through the salvation brought about by Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. He cannot “by his natural powers produce meritorious works commensurate with eternal life.”<sup>7</sup> St. Thomas’ treatise on grace agrees with our daily experience. While we often will for good works, we occasionally fall prey to our selfish desires and commit sins.

St. Thomas is a master of reality. In his view, with the loss of original justice, a person cannot avoid sin entirely, and it is only by God’s grace can his corrupt nature be healed continually. “He cannot avoid all venial sin, owing to the corrupt sensuality of his lower appetite. Reason can indeed suppress the urges of the lower appetite severally, wherefore they are sinful and voluntary. But it cannot suppress all of them.”<sup>8</sup> Grace is itself not a virtue but a participation in the divine nature. “It is the disposition which the infused virtues presuppose as their principle and root.”<sup>9</sup>

##### 4.2.2 Free Will and Merit

St. Thomas reckoned that human free will plays a vital role in cooperating with divine grace. A person, using his free will, must be rightly disposed to receive grace, even though “his free will is moved by God as principal agent, his will is also said to be prepared by God, and his steps guided by the Lord.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, while a person’s justification must primarily come from God, his free will must still be moved by God to accept the

<sup>1</sup> Mariusz Tabaczek, “Contemporary Version of the Monogenetic Model of Anthropogenesis—Some Critical Remarks from the Thomistic Perspective,” *Religions*, Volume 14, Issue 4 (April 2023): 10.

<sup>2</sup> White, *Thomism for the New Evangelization*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> White, 16.

<sup>4</sup> White, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Aquinas, 101.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas, 113.

<sup>8</sup> Aquinas, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, 126.

<sup>10</sup> Aquinas, 137.

divine grace bestowed upon him. “God never moves him to justice without the use of his free will.”<sup>1</sup> While grace is always the first cause of the attainment of eternal life, our merit is nevertheless the “secondary clause.”<sup>2</sup> “A man merits an increase of grace by each and every meritorious action, just as he thereby merits the consummation of grace, which is eternal life.”<sup>3</sup> Put another way, human cooperation with God’s grace is necessary for his salvation, although the first mover must be God. As such, human charitable actions are not meaningless, even though everything should still be credited to God’s grace being the first mover. Following Luther and Calvin’s thoughts, some protestants play down human merits in salvation. Catechists should endeavor to emphasize St. Thomas’ teachings on grace and free will for catechumens to understand better how grace perfects nature and faith perfects reason.

#### 4.2.3 Sacraments

A common phenomenon appears today: many Christians are “spiritual, but not religious.”<sup>4</sup> They claim they can worship and pray to God at home without going to church. Different excuses were given, and the most commonly heard was busy. Modern people are always busy, but the reality is their relative priorities. St. Thomas taught that a human being is a composite of body and soul. We are not only spirits but also bodies, and “religion is about being spiritual in your bodily life by worshipping God through physical actions.”<sup>5</sup> In the Catholic Church, it means liturgical actions.

St. Thomas made two pertinent points in respect of sacramental theology. First, following Aristotle, St. Thomas posited that we know this world through our natural senses. On top of Aristotle, St. Thomas added supernatural grace. God is so gracious that He allows us to receive supernatural grace and share His life via the sacraments—to touch and sense the sacramental matters and forms in the most natural way—baptismal water, confirmation chrism, Eucharistic species (consecrated sacramental bread and wine), etc. In the sacrament of reconciliation, Thomism “may illuminate the way in which grace contributes not only to healing the human soul but the human mind as well.”<sup>6</sup> For St. Thomas, sin has turned a person away from the divine light,<sup>7</sup> and it caused him to distance himself from God and his neighbors. The healing through confession will not only absolve the penitent from sin by divine grace but also “as a means for overcoming psychological distress comes to fruition and the opportunity for the individual to regain a sense of wholeness and communion—with [himself] and with others.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, the sacrament of reconciliation contributes to both the spiritual and psychological healing of the human person. Through the sacraments, we are nourished by the death of Christ and His resurrected life. “That is very mysterious, but it is so simple. It’s about receiving love from God in the most connatural way, and then, when we receive these physical signs, grace truly acts upon us!”<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, the church liturgy “knits together the Church as a community, not a church of my own making in my own mind, but the Church that Christ founded.”<sup>10</sup> This is the true Church that Jesus founded, where the Apostles and first followers of Christ devoted themselves to fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer<sup>11</sup>. It is a “serious religion” that Jesus founded for Christians. “The sacraments are causes of grace. God causes grace in the soul through this set of physical gestures that Christ gave the Apostles, the Apostles gave to the Church, and the Church brings to us.”<sup>12</sup> This message is a powerful reminder to catechumens, who are reminded not to become CEOs (Christmas and Easter Only) and VIPs (Very Inactive Parishioners) after Baptism.

#### 4.2.4 Christian Morality

In the modern era, “absolute moral truth claims are [often] perceived as arbitrary moralism.”<sup>13</sup> Under the influence of contemporary liberalism, percepts on Christian morality, especially those concerning sexuality and human life, are perceived as imposing limitations to individual freedom “arbitrarily and without justification.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Aquinas, 145.

<sup>2</sup> Aquinas, 160.

<sup>3</sup> Aquinas, 166.

<sup>4</sup> White, *Thomism for the New Evangelization*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> White, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel J. Goodey, “Determining the Good and Human Culpability: Catholic Catechesis on Overcoming the Anxiety of Sin,” *New Blackfriars* 104, no. 1112 (July 2023): 466.

<sup>7</sup> *ST*, Pt. I-II, Q. 79, Art. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Goodey, “Determining the Good and Human Culpability: Catholic Catechesis on Overcoming the Anxiety of Sin,” 481.

<sup>9</sup> White, *Thomism for the New Evangelization*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> White, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 2:42.

<sup>12</sup> White, *Thomism for the New Evangelization*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> White, 10.

<sup>14</sup> White, 11.

As long as an action is considered sincere and does not hurt others, it is deemed morally acceptable without regard to the means.

According to St. Thomas, “the free act which tends towards the possession of God will be moral, or morally good; that which draws us away from Him, immoral, or morally evil.”<sup>1</sup> To this end, the morality of Thomism appears to have two key propositions: “the end does not justify the means”<sup>2</sup> and the “Principle of Double Effect.”<sup>3</sup> Under the first proposition, certain acts are classified as “intrinsic evil” in Catholic teaching. For example, the intentional killing of an innocent person cannot be justified regardless of the circumstances.<sup>4</sup> As such, acts like abortion and euthanasia must be evil in principle. Under the “Principle of Double Effect,” a bad outcome (e.g., killing a person in self-defense) may be tolerated if the act does not directly cause it and the evil caused is proportionate to the good effect achieved. That is why the Church must take a critical look at scientific experiments such as those in biotechnology that involve human embryos, even if they appear incredibly beneficial to society.

Besides the above doctrines, an essential teaching of St. Thomas about Christian morality is the purpose of living a moral life. According to St. Thomas, the primary aim of being virtuous is achieving happiness in this life and the afterlife. God is the ultimate end, and loving Him will empower us to love our neighbors. Conversely, loving our neighbors will draw us closer to God—our ultimate goal. St. Thomas considered that “happiness in this world is fragile and best achieved when we have a deeply rooted happiness in the love of God because God is unchanging, brilliantly good, and always interesting. God is always there, and God is eternal.”<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Joseph White made an analogy between Thomistic moral theology and jazz. Jazz requires improvisation, and the key is to master the skills at a basic level, listen to what others play, and innovate with the flow of music.

It’s about trying to acquire the virtues and prudence to a sufficient degree so that when you’re in these delicate situations, you can actually preserve love in all things; you can stay in the stream of music—preserving moral harmony—as situations move in a sort of jerky, unpredictable fashion, to remain in charity and in prudence. Moral theology for Aquinas is about getting into that stream of knowledge and love and staying there. And staying in the rhythm of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

The above vision is interesting and inspiring. Catechists can advocate it to catechumens to help them consolidate their faith in becoming virtuous and cheerful Christians. When the faith of catechumens reaches a state of maturity that they show readiness to receive the sacraments of initiation, they will join the Rite of Election, supported by their sponsors. The rite is held on the first Sunday of Lent, which is a period of fasting, prayers, and almsgiving for the faithful to prepare for participation in the significant salvation events of the Paschal Mystery. Catechumens who are elected will have their names enrolled to receive Baptism in the Easter Vigil.

### 4.3 Period of Purification and Enlightenment

The period of purification and enlightenment affords a more intense preparation for the sacraments of initiation. The elects have to join a retreat and a series of scrutiny rites as the final preparation. The Gospel readings of the three scrutiny rites held on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent emphasize the imminent need for conversion of the elects. The first scrutiny features the Samaritan woman.<sup>7</sup> Jesus is the living water, and whoever drinks it will never thirst. The conversion of the Samaritan woman prompts her to spread the good news to her neighbors. The second scrutiny features the man born blind.<sup>8</sup> Resembling the man whose sight was restored by Jesus, the elects are reminded to say “no” to the devil and resist its temptations. The third scrutiny features the raising of Lazarus.<sup>9</sup> Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in him will live forever. It is time for the elects to make up their minds to follow Christ for a new life reborn in Him, with unwavering hopes for eternal life in the loving unity of the Trinity. The scrutiny rites also include exorcism with the imposition of hands by the priest as well as prayers for the elects, which give them the necessary strength for renewal and

<sup>1</sup> Maurice De Wulf, *Scholasticism Old and New, an Introduction to Scholastic Philosophy: Medieval and Modern* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, Ltd., 1910), 138.

<sup>2</sup> *ST*, Pt. I-II, Q. 18.

<sup>3</sup> *ST*, Pt. II-II, Q. 64, Art. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Brezik, *One Hundred Years of Thomism: Aeterni Patris and Afterwards - A Symposium*, 78.

<sup>5</sup> White, *Thomism for the New Evangelization*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> White, 14.

<sup>7</sup> John 4:5-42.

<sup>8</sup> John 9:1-41.

<sup>9</sup> John 11:1-45.

conversion.

We usually think that a person who accepts the Christian faith would require a conversion of his heart to God and to Jesus Christ as his Savior. Conversion appears to be a “battle in the heart—to discover Christ, to give ourselves to God, to consent, to surrender, to trust, to love, to find peace.” However, this is only half the battle. The other half would require conversion of the mind. It is about “intellectual happiness.”<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas taught that a human being has an intellect and a will. Conversion of his heart will enable him to act according to God’s will. But is it sufficient for him to find God and happiness? If your mind does not understand the Truth, how can you accept and act according to the Truth? Like the Samaritan woman, her mind was enlightened by Jesus’ words before her conversion to spread the good news to her neighbors. Similarly, the blind man and Martha, Lazarus’ sister, were also enlightened by Jesus’ words and miraculous deeds before they could see the lights of salvation. Finding God would require the conversion of both the heart and the mind, perfecting the will and intellect.

In this modern world, many advocates of secularism, particularly among the younger generation, are skeptical of traditional Catholic teaching because they consider that doctrines like those against abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia infringe on individual freedom and personal choice, are unreasonable and grossly outdated. “They sense that the depth of Catholic teaching regarding human personhood, moral realism, the reality of God, and divine revelation all challenge the *status quo* at a deep level.” On the other hand, Pope Francis encouraged Christians to reach out to this secular world and engage in dialogues with our adversaries, and challenge them with a Christian vision known as “intellectual charity,” helping people “find a deeper peace, perspective, serenity, and happiness in the heart and mind through the truth.”<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas, the mastermind in interpreting the unity of human soul and body, grace perfecting nature, faith perfecting reason, and the interaction between human intellect and will, provides the best guidance for the elects to make their final preparation in resisting temptations, overcoming spiritual darkness, and making up their mind to follow Jesus before they receive the sacraments of initiation.

#### 4.4 Period of the Post-Baptismal Catechesis

In the Easter Vigil, the elects receive the sacraments of initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. The baptismal liturgy is full of signs and symbols for the participants to see the salvation power of God and receive divine grace in this most sacred liturgy. The baptismal catechumenate does not end with the sacraments of initiation. The period of post-baptismal catechesis (mystagogy) follows immediately until Pentecost.

During the catechetical lessons of mystagogy, neophytes will share the joy, difficulties, and setbacks of their initial Christian experience. Allocating and spending quality time nourishing the new Christian life is a common challenge. It is indisputable that modern people are busier than ever, and we rarely spare enough time for reflection, not to mention seeking God in contemplation. Moreover, we are too used to employing tools in our daily lives and work. These tools are under our command to improve efficiency. Yet, we “lose the intellectual environment of gratuity, of something that given, that’s outside [our] intellectual sufficiency and command.”<sup>3</sup>

St. Thomas can help us appreciate why contemplation is vital to our happiness. To him, “You begin to contemplate when you encounter a good that your intellect has to ponder, which it can’t fully comprehend.”<sup>4</sup> These include, for example, the metaphysical questions of existence, the cosmos, and ultimately God. Contemplation helps us study the mystery more deeply and better understand the meaning of life. The Blessed Virgin is exemplary in her contemplation of the divine mysteries. “The highest nobility of our intellect is that we are made for contemplation.”<sup>5</sup> Neophytes can be encouraged to contemplate and seek to find God through various means, such as silent prayers after the daily biblical readings, praying the rosary, and Eucharistic adoration in church. Visiting the monastery may also be organized during the mystagogy for the neophytes to share the experience of the monks in embracing work, prayer, study, and contemplation intertwined to search and praise God.

On the Pentecost, all the neophytes will gather around the Bishop in the Cathedral to celebrate the Eucharist, signifying the end of the period of mystagogy. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that catechesis will not yet end as it is a lifelong endeavor. As living disciples of Jesus, they are “ready to make an explicit, living and fruitful profession of faith”<sup>6</sup>—proclaiming the Gospel to others and bearing witnesses to Christ to transform the

<sup>1</sup> White, *Thomism for the New Evangelization*, 2.

<sup>2</sup> White, 3.

<sup>3</sup> White, 20.

<sup>4</sup> White, 21.

<sup>5</sup> White, 22.

<sup>6</sup> USCCB, “Christian Initiation of Adults,” para. 56.

world with the power of love and mercy. Thomism continues to offer guidance and insights along their journey of faith.

## 5. Critical Evaluation

The *General Directory of Catechesis* stipulated that “the maturation of the Christian life requires that it be cultivated in all its dimensions: knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, moral formation, prayer, belonging to community, missionary spirit.”<sup>1</sup> It is evident that a catechetical formation infused with Thomism can lay a solid foundation to cultivate the Christian life of catechumens and the newly baptized.

### 5.1 Knowledge of the Faith

Reason enlightened by faith is a key teaching of St. Thomas, and grace perfects nature is his famous doctrine. Obviously, catechumens must know God from the Bible. Yet, God has also given us the intellect to know Him and His creations by our senses. St. Thomas taught us to use our rational minds to judge between good and evil, seek God in nature and among those needing help, and embrace Him now and in eternity. Catechumens should undergo both a conversion in their hearts and minds amidst this increasingly materialistic, utilitarian, and political world. It calls for the holistic development of the whole person to exercise the virtues of prudence, justice, faith, charity, etc., to help build His Kingdom on Earth.

### 5.2 Liturgical Life

The sacramental theology of St. Thomas makes it so easy to understand because it integrates our natural senses with the supernatural grace of God, granted to us solely through His only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ. It also reminds the newly initiated Catholics that it is insufficient to honor God by praying to Him at home alone. They must bring their bodies together with their souls to church to praise God in a community.

### 5.3 Moral Formation

St. Thomas is also a master of good morals. While his doctrinal principles of doing good and avoiding evil remain influential in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* today, his teachings on the virtues that bring about happiness in this life and the afterlife to come are instrumental to Christian morality. The four cardinal virtues, perfected by the three theological virtues, offer catechumens the best guidance, directions, and targets to live a blessed and meaningful life. Indeed, being virtuous should never be a burden, while indulgence in material wealth and pleasures cannot bring true happiness.

### 5.4 Prayer

Not only is St. Thomas exemplary in his philosophy and knowledge, but also in his faith and love of God. Lying on his death bed on March 7, 1274, he asked his Dominican companions to read the Cantic of Canticles, received the last rites, and prayed: “I receive Thee, ransom of my soul. For love of Thee have I studied and kept vigil, toiled, preached and taught...”<sup>2</sup> He always knew that finding and honoring God in prayers and contemplations is the ultimate purpose of life—a model saint for all of us to follow suit.

### 5.5 Belonging to Community

St. Thomas was a member of the Dominican community. He devoted his life to prayers, writing, and teaching. As members of the universal Church, St. Thomas taught us that Jesus made His sacrifice for the whole Church, which celebrates the Eucharist every time in remembrance of the Paschal Mystery.<sup>3</sup> Catechumens and newly initiated Catholics are constantly reminded that they are a member of the whole church community, and the “parish is, without doubt, the most important locus in which the Christian community is formed and expressed.”<sup>4</sup>

### 5.6 Missionary Spirit

The outward act of faith is the confession of faith, which is always necessary because it is an act honoring God. St. Thomas separated “unformed faith” from “formed faith.” He viewed the virtue of charity as “the form of faith” since “it is through charity that the act of faith is made perfect, and brought to its form.”<sup>5</sup> He emphasized that our good works and merits do play a role in our salvation. Christians are called to spread the good news and be a channel of God’s love and peace to the world.

<sup>1</sup> The Vatican, *General Directory for Catechesis*, para. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall, *Thomas Aquinas in 50 Pages: A Quick Layman’s Guide to Thomism*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New Advent, n.d.), <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> The Vatican, *General Directory for Catechesis*, para. 257.

<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica of Thomas Aquinas*, 208.

## 6. Conclusion

Thomism can continue to make significant contributions to the catechesis for adults today in terms of educating the catechumens on the knowledge of faith, recognizing that nature is perfected by grace, enriching their experience, once baptized, in receiving sacraments and the grace of Christ, understanding the importance of virtues to live a moral life, and loving God and neighbors with their whole hearts and minds. Indeed, Thomism offers ample opportunities to influence modern people: non-believers and believers, lukewarm and devoted Catholics, catechumens and catechists, and in different settings such as universities and schools, our interaction with friends and relatives, counterparts at work, and even daily routines. It can even be adopted to discuss contemporary subjects such as the pros and cons of technology like artificial intelligence and how to make the best use of modern technology to serve humanity, not diminish it. For St. Thomas, the final end is always God Himself. Let us offer our prayers to the Father so that we can become a better instrument of His love and peace.

Merciful Father, You loved us so much that You sent Your only Begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him might have eternal life. Father, eternal life is Knowing You and Your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to share our faith with our neighbor through prayer and service, love and action. Guide us with the Spirit of Christ so that we may understand the needs of the people of Hong Kong today. Father, send the Holy Spirit to help us to accompany those seeking Truth and inspire those pursuing true love. Rekindle our hearts with charity, heal our wounds, and foster our compassion for the weak. For better and for worse, may we always embrace hope. As Jesus has sent His disciples into the world, Father, send us also into the society to preach Your Kingdom. We ask this through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, Who is with us always until the end of the age. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, “Mission Sunday 2023 Prayer,” Catholic Way YouTube Channel, May 22, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGy2en92s9M>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

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