

The Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-1274) holds a central place in the tradition of Roman Catholic intellectual and spiritual life. The *arc-boutant* of Aquinas's own mystical experiences was the some thirty years of Dominican ministry and community life that this Neapolitan nobleman began in 1244. We see Aquinas's spiritual self-understanding reveal his deep personal love for Jesus Christ in the words that he spoke before receiving the blessed Eucharist for the last time: "I now receive you who art the price of my soul's redemption, I receive you who art the food for my final journey, and for the love of whom I have studied, kept vigil, and struggled; indeed, it was you, Jesus, that I preached and you that I taught" (Naples 80, p. 379). While some categories favored by recent spiritual authors, such as religious experience and community, do not figure as key notions in Aquinas's writings, both his philosophical and theological treatises provide rich sources of insight about the human experience of transcendence and man's mystical bond with God. It is customary to identify three strains of mystical teaching that appear in the works of Thomas Aquinas: Being-mysticism, Bridal-mysticism, and Knowledge-mysticism.

(1) Being-mysticism. The twentieth-century German theologian Josef Pieper once suggested that Aquinas should have been known as Friar Thomas of the Creation. For while St. Thomas, as he himself testifies, did everything out of an unstinting love for the incarnate Son of God, the surpassing riches of Christ never kept him from drawing the full theological implications of St Paul's words to the Romans: "Ever since the creation of the world God's invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom 1: 20). As the Catholic faith teaches that the created order witnesses to the existence of a God who entirely surpasses every form of finiteness and contingency (see *Dei verbum*, no. 3), Aquinas can argue that the human experience of transcendence is founded on the causal relationships that bind the created person with the Creator. By appeal to the real distinction in created beings between their specific identity ("*essentia*") and their actual existence ("*esse*"), Aquinas unequivocally excludes all forms of pantheism or panentheism. Rather, he describes an ordering that obtains between intellectual creatures and God and which establishes the basis for a certain kind of justice: Reverence for and submission to an utterly transcendent God are among the dispositions that religion requires of the human person. Of course, to acknowledge an acquired virtue of religion in no way prejudices the fact that the only perfect worship of God remains that which is revealed by Jesus Christ and is practiced in the Church of faith and sacraments. Aquinas's appreciation for creation as providing the basis for an analogical knowledge of the supernatural order lies at

the heart of his Being-mysticism, for which the most celebrated commentator remains the German Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327), who richly developed this metaphysical theme in his Christian preaching and spiritual writings.

(2) Bridal-mysticism. Aquinas would also have merited the title Friar Thomas of the Incarnation. For as commentary on the magisterial documents that affirm the divinity of Jesus Christ, Aquinas's discussion of the metaphysics of the Incarnation ranks among the best in this genre of Christian literature. Aquinas locates the supreme moment of alliance between humankind and God in the hypostatic union. In the person of the Logos—Son, a human nature comes together with the divine nature, without either one thereby suffering division or mixture. As the primordial wedding between God and humankind, the Incarnation makes a personal relationship between God and human persons possible; for each member of the human family becomes an adopted son or daughter of God only in the one incarnate Son. Aquinas's Bridal-mysticism emphasizes the intimate communication with God that Christ's mission makes possible for all persons. So while the human person can approach the Creator in a spirit of reverence and submission, only those who are sons or daughters in Christ dare address God using the familiar name, "Abba, Father." Aquinas's explanations about the person and life of Christ, especially his salvific death, his Virgin Mother, his mystical body, which is the Church, and the sacraments all serve to explain how this privileged form of personal communion with God begins and develops in the Christian believer. As Aquinas's own deathbed prayer witnesses, the blessed Eucharist preeminently realizes his Incarnation-centered mysticism, for at the moment of holy communion the Christian believer is joined with the person of Christ as present under the sacramental signs of bread and wine. The Sieneese Dominican Catherine Benincasa (1347-1380), who, while herself communicating, received a mystical ring as a symbol of her extraordinary spiritual union with Christ, best represents Aquinas's Bridal-mysticism. Her indefatigable defense of Christ's mystical body points up moreover the ecclesial aspect of *communio* that Aquinas assumes as the foundation for all bona fide Christian mysticism.

(3) Knowledge-mysticism. On Aquinas's account, the theological virtue of faith is first of all a perfection of the human mind. Under the impulse of divine grace, God moves the human will to assent to truths that surpass reason's grasp and for which God therefore serves as the only Source and Guarantor. But theological faith also effects a marriage between the human person and God. In one of his short works, the *Expositio primae decretalis ad Archidiaconum Tudertinum*, Aquinas cites the biblical text, "I will espouse thee to me in faith" (Hosea 2: 20) in order to emphasize the mystical dimension of Christian belief. Thus,

Aquinas teaches that this virtue leads the human person not only to a cognitive grasp of revealed truth, but also to an authentic embrace of the divine Persons that such truths represent. The transformation of the human intellect that faith achieves in the believer is the beginning of the new life that charity establishes in the person. By the gracious condescension of the divine Goodness, charity makes the human person a lover of God, and this love reaches its earthly perfection in the affective beholding of God that Aquinas calls contemplation.

For Aquinas, contemplative prayer forms part of the ordinary dynamic of Christian mysticism. The spiritual elitism that characterizes certain European mystics of the seventeenth century such as the Spanish priest Miguel Molinos (c. 1640-1697) and the French clairvoyant Madame Guyon (1648-1717) finds no support in the works of Thomas Aquinas. On the contrary, as his teaching about the gifts of the Holy Spirit makes plainly evident, the theological life of faith and charity develops into a form of habitual connaturality that makes the felt experience of God a swift matter of ease and joy. Aquinas himself provides a peerless illustration of this Knowledge-mysticism. In 1273, shortly before his death, Aquinas experienced the utter nothingness of his vast literary output. "I can write no more," he told his secretary, "for all that I have written seems like straw in comparison to what I have seen" (Naples 79, pp. 376-377). Perhaps Aquinas's own biography more forcefully demonstrates how he conceived the immediacy of the mystical experience than do his unsurpassed writings on the Christian life.

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