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Theological Literacy and Theological Science

In order to develop theological literacy, one first of all must know something about the nature of theology. What kind of discipline is theology? St Thomas Aquinas, the 13th-century Dominican theologian who still serves as the Common Doctor for Catholic theologians, addresses this question in his

chef-d'oeuvre, the three-part *Summa theologiae*. His analysis still merits our consideration.

Aquinas clearly argues that theology is a human activity, but points out at the same time that it does not constitute a self-standing discipline. Instead, the practice of theology remains dependent on what Aquinas calls the *sacra doctrina*. The expression, which can be translated as "holy teaching," signifies God's own self-knowledge, a knowledge that God shares with the saints on high. Aquinas, it is true, does not discuss theological literacy as such, but he surely would have recognized this quality only in those who actively sought and maintained friendship with God here below, a friendship realized exclusively through the divinely bestowed energies that the Christian tradition names faith, hope, and charity. How else could one come to know something about the invisible God?

Theological literacy means familiarity with the things of God, and so must be distinguished from native human wisdom. In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas writes: "The *sacra doctrina* is more theoretical than practical, since it is mainly concerned with the divine things which are, rather than with things human beings do; it deals with human acts only in so far as they prepare humankind for that achieved knowledge of God on which depends their eternal bliss" (*prima pars*, question 1,

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article 4). Even when a theologian turns to consider human affairs, the inquiry remains governed by the requirements of divine truth, not those of human experience. In other words, the theologian, who draws on the *sacra doctrina*, first aims to master and then to expound all "the divine things" that God has revealed in Christ. He or she can accomplish this only in the Church, where the offer of eternal life is preached daily.

In his *Natural History of Religion*, David Hume predicted that "religion will be driven out by stronger secular convictions derived from natural regularities." Supernatural religion, of course, has not been supplanted. In any event, because Aquinas reads the New Testament revelation as an instruction about God's love for each person, he is more optimistic than Hume. For example, Aquinas cites the Gospel of John, "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me" (Jn. 6: 45). In a word, theological literacy is a virtue of the disciple, since it depends on what one Renaissance Thomist commentator describes as "all knowledge taught us by God's grace." For this reason, Aquinas would consider any effort to do theology entirely from the ground up self-defeating precisely because a theologian who starts "from below" will neglect too long the one source of all theological science which is the grace of God. It would be like trying to do applied physics without first learning mathematics.

By reason of its certitude and intrinsic worth as well as its ultimate purpose, theology ranks above all other sciences. Theological literacy, then, characterizes the wise person: "That person who considers maturely and without qualification the first and final cause of the entire universe, namely

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God, is to be called supremely wise; hence wisdom appears in St. Augustine as knowledge of divine things" (*ibid.*, article 6). But remember that in Christianity, those with the best ideas—even those about personal experience and order in the universe—obtain no special purchase on divine wisdom. Wisdom rather belongs to the Little Ones, to the Children, and to those who receive the Kingdom of God like little children (see Mt 19:14).

In a later question of his *Summa*, Aquinas introduces the Trinitarian theme as the architectonic one for theological literacy. Theology properly considers God as the first cause (origin) and final end (destiny) of every human person. We can say that the Three Divine Persons of the Blessed Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, set the parameters for theological science and so establish the norms, as it were, for theological literacy. This means that to pursue theological literacy constitutes an implicit desire to know and love the adorable Trinity. Beatific communion with the Triune God is the "one pearl of great price" (Mt 13:46) that those who qualify as theologically literate search for above all things.

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