

A Brief Note on Thomism and Moral Claims

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On account of his great wisdom and authority, Saint Thomas Aquinas's name is sometimes invoked to bolster the claims of theologians, including as a defense of *Amoris Laetitia*. If you have the Angelic Doctor on your side, you are doing pretty well. This raises questions about what sorts of claims and documents warrant being called "Thomistic," and how one might reasonably justify the appellation. The following observations might prove helpful for answering such questions.

First, something might be called Thomistic because it takes a cue from the methodology perfected by Aquinas. Like many authors, Aquinas uses many different "voices" depending on the occasion. He provides commentaries on Scripture or theological works, lectures on the Creed, a straightforward exposition of theology in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG), and so on. But his most unique and valuable contribution is in the *Summa Theologiae* (ST). There he asks literally hundreds of questions, and he always answers them in light of Catholic tradition—especially Sacred Scripture and the Fathers—with the help of solid philosophy. Sometimes he says "yes," sometimes "no," but he always provides a helpful distinction when he says "'yes' in one way, but 'no' in another." He liked clarity. As he said, it is the work of the wise man "to arrange and to judge," that is, to meditate on the truth, teach it to others in an orderly fashion, and to refute opposing falsehoods (see ST I, q. 1, a. 6, c. and ad 2; SCG I, c.1).

Second, something might be called Thomistic because it follows Aquinas's actual teachings. This can have varying results.

Sometimes, but only very rarely, following Aquinas can lead a person into error. Certainly this would be the case now if one denied the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the grounds that Aquinas denied it. Similarly, a person would be wrong to support abortion because Aquinas believed in the delayed hominization of the human embryo (see ST I, q. 118, a. 2, ad 2). Both issues have been abundantly clarified by the Church since the time Aquinas wrote (see Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* and John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* n. 57). In these cases, we must follow the Church and not proposed interpretations of Aquinas. Magisterial teaching does not intrinsically depend on St. Thomas Aquinas, but on Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, interpreted in continuity with previous teachings and in light of the most sound thinking. In the end, following Tradition is the most authentically Thomistic position, for he firmly opposed any doctrinal position that was not faithful to divine revelation and the Church's binding teachings.

Another tangle one can encounter is when quoting Aquinas piecemeal or without full advertence to his theological project. St. Thomas was nothing if not a complete and consistent thinker. To pick and choose his statements without considering their context and relation to his other relevant insights would be about as disastrous as proof-texting Sacred Scripture. One might suppose that a situationist ethic is supported by Aquinas when he states, "In matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles; and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all. [...] The principle will be found to fail, according as we descend further into detail" (ST I-II, q. 94, a. 4; quoted in *Amoris Laetitia* n. 304).

Isolated from Aquinas's other statements, it could seem as if the doctor of the Church is saying that no moral rule is absolute, but that discernment is needed in each and every situation to know whether or not a general moral principle applies in a particular situation. However, this is not authentic Thomism. Situation ethics contradicts Aquinas's firm affirmation that there are some moral norms that always hold for everyone: these are the precepts of the Decalogue (ST I-II, q. 100, a. 8), and similar universal negative precepts, for they condemn acts that are "evil in themselves and cannot become good" (ST II-II, q. 33, a.2). He specifically says that "one may not commit adultery for any good" (*De Malo*, q. 15, a.1, ad 5). In the same vein, Aquinas holds that some acts "have deformity inseparably attached to them, such as fornication, adultery, and others of this sort, which can in no way be done in a morally good way" (*Quodlibet* 9, q. 7, a. 2). The reason for these exceptionless norms is that human nature does not change, nor does the Gospel and the Church's mandate to transmit it unsullied through the centuries. Certain positive norms need to be adapted to the times, such as one's relation to the environment. In such cases, Magisterial teaching adapts to changing conditions—but always without contradicting reason and the truths already articulated by the Church.

Finally, with a Thomistic moral theology, one can embrace an authentic position of Thomas and benefit from the insights he offers to illuminate the truths of faith held perennially by the Church. For example, he explains the relation between the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance. Aquinas builds on St. Paul's teaching, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27). Aquinas says, "Holy Communion ought not to be given to open sinners when they ask for it. [...] A priest who has knowledge of the crime can privately warn the secret sinner, or warn all openly in public, from approaching the Lord's table, until they have repented of their sins and have been reconciled to the Church" (ST III, q. 80, a. 6). Furthermore, Aquinas states that, whatever reasons a person may have for engaging in sex outside of marriage, "actions done for the sake of pleasure are simply voluntary," so one cannot rightly claim that exterior pressures cause him to sin (ST II-II, q. 142, a. 3). Once a person regularly sins against marriage in this way and develops the vice of intemperance, his reason is darkened and he becomes enslaved by his passions (ST II-II, q. 142, a. 4). Such a person is not capable of fruitfully receiving the sacraments until he repents of all his sin and makes a determinate effort to avoid the near occasions of sin: "it belongs to penance to detest one's past sins, and to purpose, at the same time, to change one's life for the better" (ST III, q. 90, a. 4). Aquinas's teaching is clear: a person should not receive Holy Communion or absolution from sins who does not intend to change his life and forsake public sin—including being sexually active with another person who is not his sacramental spouse—a sin of scandal whereby one leads others into sin (ST II-II, q. 43, a. 1).

In sum, a burden of proof lies on anyone who wants to fly the banner of Thomism over his moral edifice. But even this is not sufficient for a nod of approval from God. Whether one is Thomistic in methodology or in content, what is most important is to be faithful to the teachings of Christ as expressed in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition as handed on through the perennial teaching of the Church, for "The apostles and their successors are God's vicars in governing the Church which is built on faith and the sacraments of faith. Wherefore, just as they may not institute another Church, so neither may they deliver another faith, nor institute other sacraments" (ST III, q. 64, a. 2, ad 3).