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Theology: Most Noble Science



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Theology: Most Noble Science

Is Theology the Most Noble of the Sciences?

St. Thomas continues his introduction to theology (in *ST I*, q. 1, a. 5) by asking whether it is the most noble of the sciences. This question is important also on account of its social consequences, for the noblest science ought to be promoted by society. Of course, Aquinas' answer is affirmative. In the thirteenth century this would have been a shared conviction governing the life of the university, but in the last three centuries this thesis has become less and less evident, and perhaps even laughable to many.

The first objection proposed by St. Thomas is based on the principle that the dignity of a science depends on its degree of certainty. But sacred theology is a science based on faith in God's revelation, and the articles of faith can be doubted, and are in fact doubted by all unbelievers. Thus it would seem that a science based on faith is not the most certain, but the most dubious.¹ This kind of objection took on great force in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment world. A methodology of universal doubt, such as that used by Descartes and his followers, contributed to the growth of the persuasive power of this objection, giving rise to diverse rationalistic systems. Forms of rationalism, if they acknowledge theology's right to exist at all, deny its nobility, holding the empirical sciences and philosophy higher than theology precisely because theology is based on faith and not on self-evident principles.

The most extreme form of rationalism denies the validity of any knowledge based on faith, rejecting the existence of supernatural mysteries, the infallible authority of the Magisterium, and the inspiration of the Bible. A more moderate type of rationalism may profess allegiance to some revealed religion, and yet maintain the supremacy of human reason with respect to faith, and of philosophy and natural science with respect to sacred theology. This generally involves the claim that faith and Revelation teach the same moral truths as philosophy, but in a way that is symbolic and better suited to the masses, dressing truths up in mythical images or "picture-thinking."² Faith would be

1 St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 1, a. 5, obj. 1: "It seems that sacred theology is not more noble than other sciences. For certainty pertains to the dignity of a science. But other sciences, whose principles cannot be doubted, seem to be more certain than sacred theology, whose principles, such as the articles of faith, can be doubted. Therefore other sciences seem to be more noble than this."

2 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 479 (§788). Rudolf Bultmann gives a good description of this position in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress

a type of knowledge that is suited to the uncultured and to a more primitive state of mankind. It is acknowledged as contributing ethical insights that were not yet philosophically or scientifically formulated. However, mankind that has come of age no longer has need of faith, which should be replaced by philosophy or science.

This moderate rationalist position was defended by the Muslim philosopher Averroes (1126-1198) in the twelfth century. An opposite reaction of *fideism* resulted in the Muslim world, rejecting the use of philosophy in the service of the faith, and philosophy never recovered its prestige there. A rationalist position was defended later in the West by Spinoza (1632-1677), Kant (1724-1804),³ and Hegel (1770-1831), who all held the supremacy of philosophy over religion (whether Judaism or Christianity).⁴ The French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857) held a somewhat more extreme rationalist position, putting theology at the most primitive historical stage of mankind's knowledge. The second intermediate stage would be metaphysics (philosophy). However, the mature age of mankind recognizes the supremacy of the empirical sciences, which ought to replace both metaphysics and theology.

Such rationalist positions are only possible given the premise that God has not revealed Himself to mankind with a revelation that transcends the power of reason. Rationalism presupposes *naturalism*, which is the *a priori* exclusion of the supernatural dimension.

In order to properly resolve this question, one must clarify in what way one science should be regarded as

Press, 1984), 22: "Theology would be the predecessor of philosophy — something that can certainly be understood as a matter of intellectual history — which, having been surpassed by philosophy, is now only its unnecessary and tiresome competitor."

3 See Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, trans. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), originally published in 1793.

4 For Hegel, both religion and philosophy are seen as development of the self-consciousness of absolute Spirit, but with religion taking the form of pictorial language and metaphor rather than absolute thought. Religion thus ought to progressively cede its place to philosophy as the more complete expression of Self-Consciousness. See, for example, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 479 (§788): "The Spirit of the revealed religion has not yet surmounted its consciousness as such, or what is the same, its actual self-consciousness is not the object of its consciousness; Spirit itself as a whole, and the self-differentiated moments within it, fall within the sphere of picture-thinking and in the form of objectivity. The *content* of this picture-thinking is absolute Spirit; and all that now remains to be done is to supersede this mere form, or rather, since this belongs to *consciousness as such*, its truth must already have yielded itself in the shape of consciousness."

higher than another. Since theology is both a speculative and a practical science, we must examine its nobility in both regards. In *ST I*, q. 1, a. 5, St. Thomas observes that the measure of nobility for a speculative science depends on two factors: the dignity of its subject matter and its degree of certitude.⁵ For example, mathematics excels in its degree of certitude but falls short in the dignity of its subject matter, which is only quantity. Biology is less noble in its certitude, but more noble in its subject matter. Theology, however, has God Himself as its object, and everything else insofar as it relates to Him. Thus it has the highest possible subject matter, including mysteries completely unknowable to other sciences, such as the inner life of the Triune God. With regard to its certitude, theology is based on the omniscience of God expressed in His Revelation, whereas other sciences have only the light of human reason, which can err. If Revelation is truly the Word of God who can neither deceive or be deceived, then the science based on Revelation will be the most certain of all sciences, at least in its revealed principles. Theology is therefore the most noble of theoretical sciences both as regards the nobility of its subject matter and the certainty of its principal teachings.⁶

Practical sciences are more noble to the degree that they aim at a higher end. The highest practical science would be the one that leads to the attainment of the ultimate end. This is the case of theology, which shows us the way to eternal life—our supernatural final end. Other practical sciences, such as medicine and engineering, aim directly at intermediate and natural ends (health, material goods, etc.), and not at the final supernatural end.

In his response to the first objection,⁷ St. Thomas concedes that theology is not the most indubitable science,

5 *ST I*, q. 1, a. 5: “I answer that this science, which is theoretical in one respect and practical in another, transcends all others whether theoretical or practical. One theoretical science is said to be nobler than another, on account both of its certainty and of the dignity of its subject matter. In both regards this science surpasses other theoretical sciences. With regard to its certainty because other sciences draw their certainty from the natural light of human reason which can err, whereas this science has its certainty from the light of the divine science, which cannot be deceived. According to the dignity of its subject matter, because this science is principally about things that transcend reason on account of their loftiness, whereas other sciences only treat what is accessible to reason. With regard to practical sciences, one is nobler than another if it attains to a higher end, as political science is higher than military science, for the good of the army is ordered to the good of civil society. Now the end of this doctrine, insofar as it is practical, is eternal beatitude, which is the final end to which all the other ends of the practical sciences are ultimately ordered. Therefore it is manifest that in all respects this science is nobler than others.”

6 As will be seen in the discussion of infallibility below, this maximum certainty is by no means contained in all the conclusions of the theology, but only in those directly revealed by God or necessarily connected to that Revelation, and guaranteed as such by the Church’s infallible teaching office.

7 *ST I*, q. 1, a. 5, ad 1.

but this does not prevent it from being the most certain. Theology is not indubitable because the articles of faith are not directly seen by the human mind except through the beatific vision. Here St. Thomas brings in a helpful distinction made by Aristotle in book II of the *Metaphysics*. The articles of faith are not seen directly by the mind not because they are not manifest *in themselves*, but because they are not manifest *to us*, on account of the weakness of the human mind which is likened to the eyes of a bat:

Nothing prohibits something from being more certain according to nature, while being less certain with regard to us, on account of the weakness of our intellect, which is to the most manifest things of nature as the eye of a bat is to the light of the sun, as is said in book II of the *Metaphysics*.⁸ Thus the doubt which some hold about the articles of faith is not on account of the uncertainty of the truths themselves, but on account of the weakness of the human intellect. And yet the least knowledge that can be had of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge that can be had of the least of things, as is said in book II of *On Animals*.⁹

St. Thomas is admitting here that the mode of knowing of theology based on faith is inferior to the mode of human theoretical sciences that are not based on faith. For it is a higher mode of knowing to see a truth directly in itself than to hold a truth on the witness of another. However, this inferiority of the mode of theology is superabundantly compensated for in two ways. First, knowledge through faith enables theology to have access to God’s own knowledge of Himself. And even a little access to God’s own knowledge of Himself is immensely more satisfying than the most perfect knowledge of some limited aspects of creatures. For in knowing any creature, the mind cannot help but desire to adequately know its first causes, which requires the knowledge of God and His purpose in creating, which are known through faith. Secondly, the imperfect mode of knowing through faith enables theology to surpass all human sciences even with regard to certainty. Though the truth of an article of faith is not seen in itself so as to render it psychologically indubitable, its truth is rendered most certain to the eyes of faith through the testimony of God as manifested through the Church’s definitive teaching office, and through the power of the supernatural virtue of faith which is a gift of God.¹⁰

In his response to the second objection in this article, St. Thomas addresses the relation of sacred theology to the human sciences whose aid it employs. The objection is that if theology makes use of the human sciences—such as metaphysics, logic, history, and philology—in its work, it must depend on those human sciences, for the recipient

8 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 2.1.993b8–11 (*Basic Works of Aristotle*, p. 712).

9 The reference is to Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 1.5.644b25–645a1 (*Basic Works of Aristotle*, p. 656).

10 See chapter 4 below on the virtue of divine faith.

depends on the supplier. Thus theology is not the highest science.¹¹

St. Thomas responds by pointing out that one science can use another in two ways: as a subordinate science uses a superior, or the reverse. In the former case, a subordinate science uses the conclusions of another as its own principles. In the latter case, a higher science uses the conclusions of another not to supply its own principles, but rather as an instrument for the sake of a greater manifestation of its own principles. This is the relation of theology to the human sciences. St. Thomas writes:

This science can receive something from the philosophical disciplines, not because it stands in need of it by some necessity, but for the sake of a greater elucidation of what is passed on in this science. For it does not receive its principles from other sciences, but immediately from God by revelation. And thus it does not receive from other sciences as from superiors, but uses them as inferiors and handmaidens, as architectural sciences use others that supply their materials, and as political science uses military science.¹²

Why does theology need to use the human sciences at all? Some would like to strip theology of all use of philosophy, as if philosophy were water diluting and denaturing the wine of theology. This anti-philosophical position is called *fideism*. St. Thomas explains that theology needs the aid of philosophy and the other human sciences not to receive principles from them, but because theology must always make use of *analogy* to understand what God has revealed:

That it uses them is not on account of its own defect or insufficiency, but on account of the defect of our intellect, which is more easily led to those things that transcend reason, that are treated in this science, through things known by natural reason, from which the other sciences proceed.¹³

Because Revelation transmits supernatural truths that exceed human experience, theology must labor to render them more intelligible through the analogy of natural things that are accessible to human experience, and which are treated in the human sciences. This use of analogy is constantly evident in Revelation itself. Christ and the prophets make frequent use of parables and metaphors for this purpose of elucidating supernatural truths by means of natural ones. Theology therefore cannot avoid making use of philosophy in its work. It especially uses metaphysics, but also the other philosophical sciences such as logic, ethics, and the philosophy of man, as well as other human sciences such as history, rhetoric, philology, and, to a lesser degree, the empirical sciences. However, this does not mean that theology is subordinated to the human

sciences, for theology makes use of them as an architect makes use of bricklayers and carpenters. Theology uses philosophy or history as a handmaid or servant.

However, in order for philosophy and the human sciences to be an adequate instrument to aid theology, the philosophy or science must be true and valid in its own order. A false or deficient philosophy would be a source of error and heresy. What is received from the philosophers must always be critically judged, case by case, according to its compatibility with faith, under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium. Only a true and adequate philosophy can serve theology as its handmaid.

The certitude of theology's conclusions does not come from philosophy, but rather from Revelation itself. We are certain that God is a Trinity, for example, because the Church has defined that God has revealed this, and not on account of any analogy that theology may receive from philosophy. Certitude in theology comes from faith in God's Revelation. Nevertheless, theology needs the aid of philosophy in order to understand this Revelation, penetrate it more fully by means of analogy, and properly communicate what we believe.

Is Theology Wisdom?

One might think that since we have shown that theology is a science, it could not also be wisdom. St. Thomas, however, holds that precisely because sacred theology is the noblest science, it is also supernatural wisdom.

Wisdom is generally understood to be the highest kind of knowledge by which one can rightly judge and order all things. Aristotle shows that this knowledge must be of the first and ultimate causes of all being, for only in the light of God (who is both the First Cause and Final End) can one rightly judge and order all things.¹⁴ Wisdom seeks the ground and foundation of all that we encounter in human experience. On the natural level, this highest science—natural wisdom—is called metaphysics. Metaphysics is the science that studies being as being, and the properties and first causes of all being. Metaphysics alone of the human sciences can show the existence and attributes of God. Nevertheless, metaphysics is limited to what reason alone can know of God as the first cause and final end of all things. Natural theology is a part of metaphysics.

Sacred theology is a *supernatural or revealed wisdom* that penetrates more profoundly into the First Cause and final end. It is a much higher wisdom than metaphysics, for it knows mysteries concerning God and His salvific will for mankind that reason alone could never know. Thus sacred theology knows far more about God than the greatest minds such as Plato or Aristotle could know through metaphysics alone. In the light of divine Revelation it can also judge and order all things more profoundly. As St.

11 ST I, q. 1, a. 5, obj. 2: "It belongs to an inferior science to receive from a superior one, as the musician receives from the mathematician. But sacred theology receives something from the philosophical disciplines. . . . Therefore, sacred theology is inferior to the other sciences."

12 ST I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

13 Ibid.

14 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.1–2.

Thomas wrote in his commentary on the Apostles' Creed: "Before the coming of Christ none of the philosophers was able, however great his effort, to know as much about God or about the means necessary for obtaining eternal life, as any old woman knows by faith since Christ came down upon earth."¹⁵ Our knowledge of the catechism gives us a wisdom immeasurably greater than that of Aristotle, and which he doubtless would have valued more than all his philosophy if he had but known that gift of God. Aristotle knew that the end of man must lie in a contemplation of God, but he could not know that it will be a supernatural contemplation face to face for all eternity, which we attain by knowing God, loving Him, and serving Him on this earth through His grace.

At the beginning of his earliest major work, his commentary on the *Sentences*, St. Thomas distinguishes the supernatural wisdom that is sacred theology from the natural wisdom that is the philosophical science of metaphysics. This clear distinction between two orders of knowledge is one of his most important contributions, and it is interesting to see it present right from the beginning of his teaching. He writes:

Theology is wisdom insofar as it considers the highest causes. . . . It is said to be wisdom more so than metaphysics for it considers the highest causes according to the mode of the causes themselves, since it is accepted immediately from God through revelation. Metaphysics, on the other hand, considers the highest causes from viewpoints taken from the realm of creatures. Hence this doctrine [theology] is said to be more divine than metaphysics, for it is divine in respect to the subject and the approach, whereas metaphysics is divine only in respect to the subject.¹⁶

Metaphysics or natural theology can be said to be divine because it studies God as First Cause, but sacred theology can be said to be a science doubly divine, for it studies God through God's own Revelation.

St. Thomas returns to this theme in *ST I*, q. 1, a. 6, in which he asks whether sacred theology qualifies as wisdom. In support of the identification of wisdom and theology, he cites Deuteronomy 4:6 in which God says of His Revelation in the Torah: "That will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples." Aquinas then explains that all wisdom enables the wise man to order and judge things, but there are also grades of wisdom, according to the height and universality of the principles by which one judges and orders. Both metaphysics and sacred theology judge all things in the light of God. However, metaphysics knows God only as First Cause and Final End, whereas sacred theology knows God in a far higher way through Revelation. Thus it can judge and order all

¹⁵ *The Aquinas Catechism: A Simple Explanation of the Catholic Faith by the Church's Greatest Theologian* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2000), 6.

¹⁶ St. Thomas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, book 1, prologue, a. 3, solution 1.

things according to God in a far more perfect way than metaphysics. St. Thomas writes:

I answer that this doctrine is most especially wisdom among all forms of human wisdom, and not just in any one order, but absolutely. Since it belongs to the wise man to order and judge, and since judgment of a lower matter is taken from a higher cause, he who considers the highest cause in any order is said to be wise in that order. Thus in the order of building, the one who determines the form of the house is said to be wise and an architect with respect to inferior artisans who trim the wood and prepare the stones. Thus in 1 Corinthians [3:10] it is said: "As a wise architect I have laid the foundations." Again, in the whole order of human life, the prudent person is said to be wise, insofar as he orders human acts to their due end. Thus in Proverbs [10:23] it is said that "wisdom is prudence for a man." Therefore he who considers absolutely the highest cause of the entire universe, which is God, is said to be supremely wise. Thus wisdom is said to be knowledge of divine things, as is clear from St. Augustine's *De Trinitate* [12.14]. Now sacred theology most properly considers God insofar as He is the highest cause, because it considers Him not only insofar as He can be known through creatures . . . but also with regard to what He alone knows about Himself and has communicated to others through revelation. Thus sacred theology is especially called wisdom.¹⁷

St. Thomas has some good objections to the identification of theology with wisdom. The first objection protests that "no doctrine that borrows its principles from another is worthy of the name of wisdom, for it belongs to the wise man to order and not to be ordered [*Metaphysics* 1.2]. But this doctrine borrows its principles from another, as is clear from what has been said. Therefore this doctrine is not wisdom."¹⁸ In other words, it seems that the science of faith is not wisdom because it does not *see* what it holds, but goes by the authority of another. This would be a valid objection for a merely human science. No subordinate or practical human science, such as engineering or medicine, has the dignity of wisdom, for such sciences are governed by higher sciences from which they receive their principles. However, theology receives its principles directly from God, the author of every order. As St. Thomas replies, "Sacred doctrine derives its principles not from any human knowledge, but from the divine knowledge, through which, as through the highest wisdom, all our knowledge is set in order."¹⁹

Another objection denies that theology is wisdom because it is acquired by laborious study.²⁰ Scripture, however, speaks of a wisdom from above not acquired by

¹⁷ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 6.

¹⁸ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 6, obj. 1.

¹⁹ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 6, ad 1.

²⁰ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 6, obj. 3: "Furthermore, this doctrine is acquired by study. But wisdom is received by infusion, for it is numbered among the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, as is clear from Isaiah 11. Therefore this doctrine is not wisdom."

study but infused directly by God.²¹ Indeed, we see that many canonized saints had great wisdom without having ever formally studied sacred theology.

This objection is answered by distinguishing three levels of wisdom: metaphysics, sacred theology, and the highest gift of the Holy Spirit, mentioned in Isaiah 11:2. Metaphysics and sacred theology are levels of wisdom acquired by study. The gift of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, is an ability to judge all things in the light of God that works not through learning, but through the force of the person's inclination of love for God. Supernatural charity establishes friendship with God. Since the friend is like another self, all true friendship gives one a connatural knowledge of the interior dispositions of the friend, and enables one to see the world through the eyes of the friend. Supernatural charity, therefore, confers on the one who loves God an ability to see the world, as it were, through the eyes of the Beloved. This intensity of the gift of wisdom is strictly correlative with the intensity of one's charity.²² The science of theology is not enough to attain the heights of supernatural wisdom. The gift of wisdom is the highest of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and gives a quasi-experiential knowledge of divine things, through the perfection of charity.²³ Theologians are called to elevate their knowledge through the gift of wisdom. The greatness of St. Thomas Aquinas and the other Doctors of the Church is that they *combined to an eminent degree all three types of wisdom*: metaphysics, theology, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.²⁴

21 See James 1:5 and 3:17.

22 See *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

23 See *ST* I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3: "Since judgment pertains to wisdom, wisdom can be taken in two ways according to two modes of judgment. One can judge another in one way by mode of inclination, as he who has the habit of virtue rightly judges about virtuous actions insofar as he is inclined to them. Thus it is said in the tenth book of the *Ethics* that the virtuous person is the measure and rule of human acts. Another way is by mode of knowledge, as when someone who is instructed in moral science can judge of virtuous acts, even if he does not have virtue. The first way of judging divine things pertains to the wisdom which is counted as a gift of the Holy Spirit, according to 1 Corinthians [2:15], 'The spiritual man judges all things.' And Dionysius says, in chapter 2 of *De divinis nominibus*, 'Hierotheus is taught not merely by learning, but by experiencing divine things.' The second mode of judging pertains to this doctrine, insofar as it is obtained by study, even though its principles are received by revelation."

24 See Bl. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* 44: "Another of the great insights of Saint Thomas was his perception of the role of the Holy Spirit in the process by which knowledge matures into wisdom. From the first pages of his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas was keen to show the primacy of the wisdom which is the gift of the Holy Spirit and which opens the way to a knowledge of divine realities. His theology allows us to understand what is distinctive of wisdom in its close link with faith and knowledge of the divine. This wisdom comes to know by way of connaturality; it presupposes faith and eventually formulates its right judgment on the basis of the truth of faith itself. . . . Yet the priority accorded this wisdom does not lead the Angelic Doctor to overlook the presence of two other complementary forms of wisdom—*philosophical wisdom*, which is based upon the capacity of the intellect, for all its

In the beginning of his earlier great systematic work called the *Summa contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas praises sacred theology, or supernatural wisdom, as follows:

Among all human pursuits, the pursuit of wisdom is the most perfect, noble, useful, and full of joy. It is most perfect because, insofar as a man gives himself to the pursuit of wisdom, to that extent does he even now have some share in true beatitude. And so the wise man has said: "Blessed is the man that shall continue in wisdom" (Sir 14:22).²⁵ It is most noble because through this pursuit man especially approaches to a likeness to God, Who "made all things in wisdom" (Ps 103:24). And since likeness is the cause of love, the pursuit of wisdom especially joins man to God in friendship. That is why it is said of wisdom that "she is an infinite treasure to men, by which they that use her become the friends of God" (Wis 7:14). It is most useful because through wisdom we arrive at the kingdom of immortality. For "the desire of wisdom brings one to the everlasting kingdom" (Wis 6:21). It is most full of joy because "her conversation has no bitterness, nor her company any tediousness, but joy and gladness" (Wis 7:16).²⁶

This praise of wisdom belongs to all three levels of wisdom, which ought to grow together.

Theology and Prayer

In order to illuminate divine things, the theologian must first taste them through intimate contemplation. St. Thomas states this in his Commentary on Psalm 33:9 (*RSV* Psalm 34:8): "O taste and see that the Lord is good."

In the material order we first see and then taste; but in spiritual things one must first taste in order to see, because *no one knows who does not taste*. Therefore (the Psalmist) says first, taste; and then, see.²⁷

Obviously, Thomas was writing from the depths of personal experience. Similarly, we see his life of prayer in the following text from his commentary on Dionysius' *Divine Names*:

We should understand divine things according to this unifying action of grace—not as if divine things were drawn down to the level of our being, but rather our whole being is established above nature in God, with the result that we become totally God-like through His unifying action of grace.²⁸

St. Thomas' early biographers give a marvelous description of St. Thomas' life of prayer. Bernard of Guy writes:

In Thomas the habit of prayer was extraordinarily developed; he seemed to be able to raise his mind to God as if the body's burden did not exist for him. He had a particular

natural limitations, to explore reality, and *theological wisdom*, which is based upon Revelation and which explores the contents of faith, entering the very mystery of God."

25 Douay-Rheims version.

26 *Summa contra Gentiles* [SCG], bk. 1, ch. 2, no. 1, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 1:61–62. I have slightly modified the translation.

27 Commentary on Psalm 33:9.

28 *In Dionysii de Divinis nominibus*, ch. 7, lect. 1.

devotion to the Sacrament of the Altar; and no doubt the special profundity of his writings on this subject was due to the same grace which enabled him to say Mass so devoutly. This he did every day, unless prevented by sickness; after which he would hear, and usually also serve, another Mass said by his socius or some other priest. . . . While saying Mass he was utterly absorbed by the mystery, and his face ran with tears. At night, when our nature demands repose, he would rise, after a short sleep, and pray, lying prostrate on the ground; it was in those nights of prayer that he learned what he would write or dictate in the daytime. . . . He never set himself to study or argue a point, or lecture or write or dictate without first having recourse inwardly—but with tears—to prayer for the understanding and the words required by the subject. When perplexed by a difficulty he would kneel and pray and then, on returning to his writing or dictation, he was accustomed to find that his thought had become so clear that it seemed to show him inwardly, as in a book, the words he needed. All this is confirmed by his own statement to brother Reginald that prayer and the help of God had been of greater service to him in the search for truth than his natural intelligence and habit of study.²⁹

In his continual recourse to prayer in the doing of theology, St. Thomas is a magnificent model for the theologian. The Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian, *Donum veritatis* 8, stresses: “The theologian is called to deepen his own life of faith and continuously unite his scientific research with prayer. In this way he will become more open to the ‘supernatural sense of faith’ upon which he depends.” Theology depends on prayer because it depends on living faith to grasp and penetrate its object—divine Revelation. Romano Guardini beautifully expresses this dependence of theology on living faith:

When Thomas Aquinas states that he carried out his *Summa theologiae* on his knees, it is not a pious remark but rather a methodological principle valid for every genuine theology. It indicates not only that a theologian must be pious and ask for God’s assistance; all of this would only have personal consequence. Even more so, it means that the living act of faith and its concrete activity, in prayer and Christian deeds, are together the methodological foundation of theological thought—just as the perception of work of art is the basis for every possible aesthetic science. It is not at all accidental that the truly great theologians were saints—men of prayer.³⁰

²⁹ Bernard Guy, *Historia ecclesiastica*, ch. 15, in Kenelm Foster, *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1959), 36-37.

³⁰ Romano Guardini, “Holy Scripture and the Science of Faith,” *Letter & Spirit* 6 (2010): 422.