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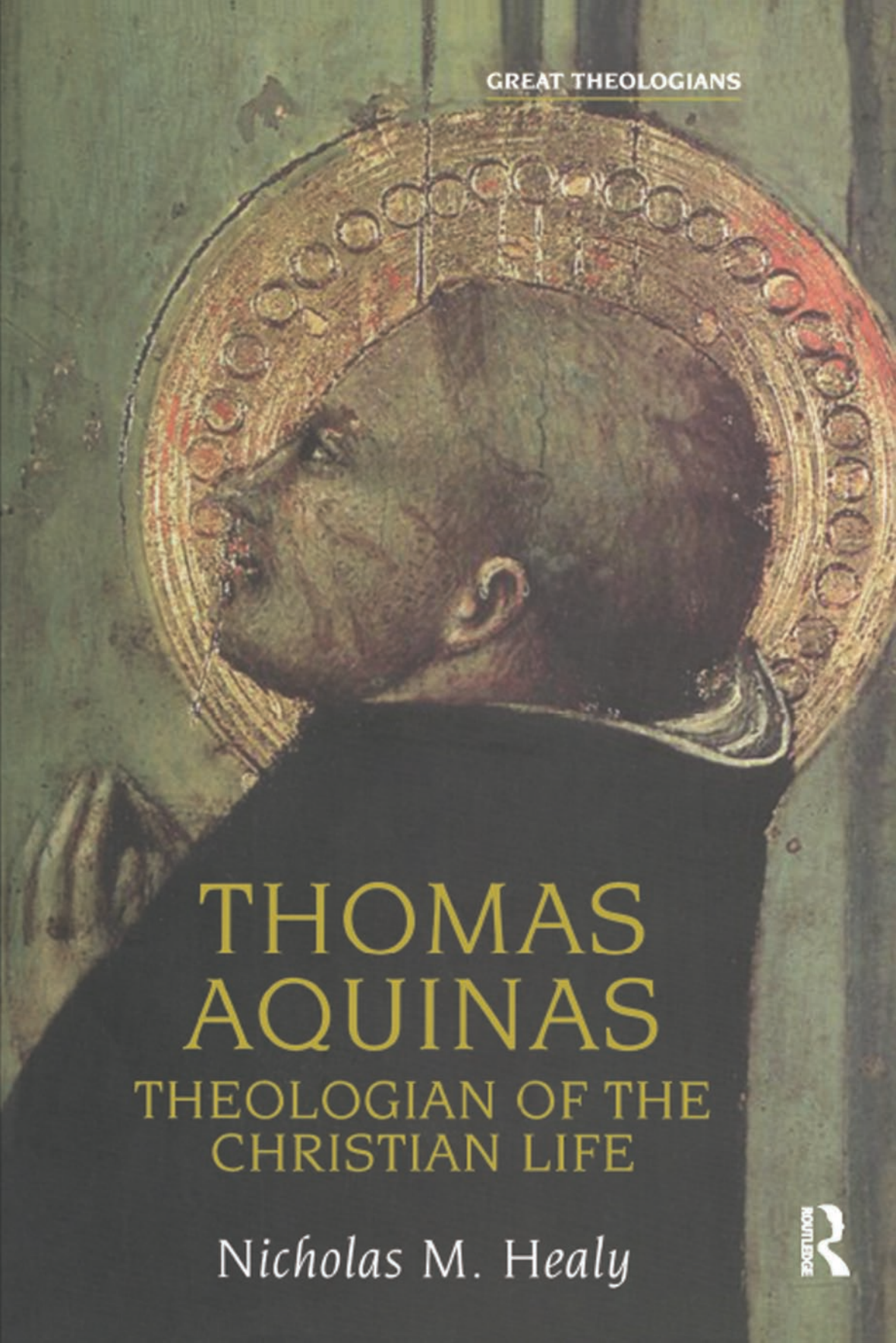

THOMAS AQUINAS

THEOLOGIAN OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Nicholas M. Healy

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Thomas Aquinas

Theologian of the Christian Life

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Preface

Why Read Thomas?

There are two basic questions that should be addressed by everyone who writes a book about Thomas Aquinas. The first asks why anyone should find it worthwhile to read about the work of this Dominican *magister in sacra pagina* (master of the sacred page) who lived so long ago – in the middle years of the thirteenth century (1224–75). There were many other medieval friars and monks, many of whom were *magistri*, and not a few of whom wrote theological and philosophical works that were regarded as significant in their day. Few of them are read nowadays, even by theologians and philosophers. Thomas, though, has been read ever since his death, and recently as much as ever. So what is it that distinguishes his work?

One reason for Thomas's perduring popularity, and thus one possible reason for devoting time and energy to him today, may lie in the experience of many of his readers who have found that the more his thought informs their own thought and action, the more coherent, profound and, so to say, *livable* it appears. Thomas seems to have an unusual ability to display the richness, the glorious complexity yet profound simplicity of the Christian way of life. Immersing oneself within his work, one may come to see that being a Christian can be thoroughly exciting, even something of an adventure.[1] No doubt the theology of Thomas's great Franciscan contemporary, St Bonaventure (1217–74) is livable, too, but it seems that considerably more people over the years have found Thomas's thought livable, or at least of interest, than they have Bonaventure's.

However, the fact that Thomas has enjoyed a relatively large readership raises the second question. Many books have been written about his work, some of which are very good, so why write yet another? My answer is no doubt much the same as many others who think that they, too, have something worth saying about Thomas. That is, I think that my perspective on his work, though certainly not original, is one that should be better known. As with any great thinker, people have appreciated Thomas for various reasons, depending in part upon their own agendas and contexts. My own more particular reasons for thinking that his work is worth careful study today have shaped my account of it here, so it is only fair to state them at the outset. They can be reduced to three.

Three Reasons

First, I read Thomas as a theologian. Thomas was a Christian theologian, as I am, too, though, to be sure, he and I are by no means in the same league. I find Thomas worth reading because he was an extremely good theologian and an extraordinarily skilled Christian. His theological judgment, acuity and imagination are among the best in the tradition. Faced with a choice between two more or less reasonable yet apparently unappealing theological alternatives, Thomas will find a third that combines the best of the other two, or rework one of them to recover some little-noticed aspect of the tradition, or bypass the problem altogether by some ingenious move. Certainly there are many areas where one might pose critical questions, especially in light of the differences between his and our intellectual contexts and concerns. But many of his theological judgments and proposals have held up well over time, so that they may still be brought to bear in contemporary theological inquiry.

Second, I read Thomas as an evangelical and Catholic Christian.[2] Thomas's thought is grounded in Scripture, and his reading of Scripture is structured by the doctrine of the Trinity and centered upon Jesus Christ. This, in combination with his good judgment and insight, suggests that his theology may offer resources for those Christians who are concerned to recover a similar orientation within an ecumenical context. Put another way, I think one can make the case that, when read on his own terms, Thomas's theology can be made to respond to the concerns of the Reformers in a more convincing way than some might suppose. While the thirteenth-century Thomas does not always agree with his colleagues of the sixteenth century, his and their respective positions evidently reflect the same fundamental concerns.

My third reason for thinking Thomas worth another book has to do with what would now be called his theological method. According to a now popular periodization (itself not unproblematic), Thomas lived in that era some call the premodern. The era ended with the onset of the modern period sometime about the middle of the seventeenth century. Now we seem to be moving into a post- or late-modern period. This is not the place to expand upon the characteristics of modernity or modern theological methodology, which are difficult to formulate without appearing tendentious.[3] And what may be in store for us in the new period, if indeed we are in such, can only be guessed at. But it has been quite reasonably suggested that the decline of the dominance of modern theological methods, a decline linked perhaps to recent challenges to certain of the presuppositions and norms of modernity, may permit the recovery of some elements of premodern theological method for postmodern use. I think Thomas's method offers one of the best hopes for such a recovery.

One or two of my reasons for reading Thomas are already largely taken for granted among a growing number of Thomas scholars, and I am fortu-

nate indeed to be able to draw upon their work. To learn of Thomas's wise judgments and evangelical orientation, one cannot do better than to consult the work of some of the contemporary French Dominicans, particularly Jean-Pierre Torrell and Gilles Emery. I am indebted, too, to experts in the USA, including David Burrell, Thomas Hibbs, Mark Jordan and Joseph Wawrykow. And there are a number of others whom I will gratefully acknowledge in due course.

Alternatives

However, such interpreters of Thomas are still a minority. Until recently, the premodern Thomas was read and taught almost everywhere as if he were a modern Neo-Scholastic *avant le temps*. His manifestly scriptural, Christoform and theocentric premodern theology had been transformed into something more like a modern philosophical system or, more accurately, an anti-modern system of religious philosophy that shared many of the principles of modernity. One reason for this transformation may have been that for many centuries Thomas was the most authoritative theologian of the Roman Catholic church, so later commentators used his work to deal with issues he did not consider. They made him support proposals sometimes quite foreign to his own views and for which his theology was neither intended nor suitable. The relocation of Thomas's work on to alien ground has guaranteed that certain parts of it were widely read, especially during the heyday of Neo-Scholasticism in the first half of the twentieth century. But this has been at the cost of considerable distortion of his work.

Thomas is still often read as if his significance lies primarily in his philosophy. Among such interpreters are some who are not at all Neo-Scholastic and to whom I am indebted for help in understanding this aspect of his thought. An outstanding contribution is that of John F. Wippel, who believes that Thomas had a 'well-worked-out metaphysics in his own mind [which] can be recovered from his various writings'. On this basis, Wippel puts together a comprehensive Thomistic philosophy as if Thomas had written, as Wippel puts it, a *Summa Metaphysica* (Wippel, 2000, pp. xvii, xxvii). The founding members of the self-described Radical Orthodoxy group, John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, have argued that Thomas's work represents the supreme Christian metaphysical synthesis before the decline into modernity ushered in by Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. In at least one of their works they seem to read Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* (henceforth ST) as a system, the culmination of which is its concluding Christology, wherein the synthesis of the divine and the human is achieved (see, e.g., Milbank and Pickstock, 2001, pp. 59, 68f.). Their analysis is often brilliant and penetrating. Yet I cannot but think that their focus on philosophical issues, however sympathetic they are to more strictly theological matters, leads them and Wippel to bypass the main thrust of Thomas's

project. A similar focus can be seen in the work of Thomas scholars in other areas, in my view, such as the lucid studies of Thomas's ethics by Ralph McInerny, who seems to privilege the perspective of 'moral philosophy' over that of Christian theology (e.g., McInerny, 1982/1997).

There is considerable truth in the pervasive assumption that Thomas's thought, broadly viewed, presents us with an internally coherent and cohesive system. His work is indeed so 'enormously systematic' (Davies, 1992, p. viii) that the boundaries between philosophy, morality and theology tend to break down under the pressure of Thomas's synthetic genius. In my view, though, his more philosophically minded readers have tended to overlook the way in which Thomas engages in imaginative, flexible and often anti-systematic and dialectical forms of inquiry. These are a vital part of his method because they reflect, indeed, they grow out of, his fundamental concern, which is theological. Thomas's theology is evangelical. That is, his method depends upon Scripture, and not upon philosophical principles that could stand apart from Scripture, even if they were once derived from it. The purpose of his theology is to help preachers preach on Scripture better and Christians to live the Gospel more truly. Thus his chief concern was not to develop a complete system – a Christian Theory of Everything or Grand Totalizing Narrative, to use some modern and postmodern expressions. Rather, he sought to display Christianity as a way of life that always and with good reason accords the primacy to Scripture and thus to Jesus Christ.

An Outline

My primary goal throughout what follows is to present a clear account of Thomas's mature theology. I make some effort at placing his work within its historical and cultural context, but I do not have enough space to discuss the many theological and ecclesiastical controversies of his time, except those that bear most significantly upon his work. Nor can I discuss the development of Thomas's theology except, again, when it is particularly relevant. I do not offer any criticism of Thomas, but neither, I believe, do I avoid or hide those aspects of his work that are likely to strike the reader as needing further critical reflection. My main concern is to display the evangelical, pastoral and theocentric character of his premodern theology, a concern that has required me to make choices about what to emphasize, and what to treat more summarily. Naturally, I do not expect everyone to agree with my decisions, but I am sure all will agree that they have to be made if I am to reduce so complex and voluminous a thinker to the confines of this little book. I have centered my account on the *Summa Theologiae*, since that work is his most mature and broadest in scope. It often lives up to its title, however, in its summary style, so I draw upon parallel passages in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, the Commentaries on Scripture and other works when it is useful to do so. I have tended to be brief in my account of the

more philosophical aspects of Thomas's thought, focusing only upon what is necessary to understand his theology.

Organizing Thomas's theology into a clear yet sufficiently detailed presentation is extraordinarily difficult. Thomas's own order of exposition in such works as the *Summa Theologiae* is brilliantly conceived, yet in my view it is best not to replicate it since it so easily leads to misunderstanding for contemporary readers. My account here is arranged in six chapters. The first chapter is introductory and historical, and begins with a brief overview of Thomas's life and career. In the seven hundred years since his death, his writings have been subjected to a range of interpretations, culminating in Neo-Scholasticism and the various Neo-Thomisms of the twentieth century. To grasp what is involved in interpreting Thomas today one needs at least a passing acquaintance with these developments, which I present in a brief overview in the remainder of the chapter.

The main body of the book – Chapters 2 through 6 – begins and ends with Thomas's treatment of the Christian life. Chapter 2 describes the key elements of Thomas's formation as a Dominican and his later understanding of the purpose and goals of the Order. The Order was thoroughly Christocentric in its orientation and in the formation of its members, stressing preaching and obedient following of Christ in poverty. The remainder of the chapter explores the bearing of Dominican (and scriptural) principles upon Thomas's theological method and his hermeneutics.

According to Thomas, the Dominican life, like that of Christians generally, is an active one, lived with others in the world. The Dominicans are to serve the needs of Christians by their preaching and teaching. They are to engage with the world by bringing to it the fruits of their contemplation, following the example of Christ. The next three chapters discuss the 'fruits' of Thomas's theological contemplation. Chapter 3 begins the contemplative ascent that Christian theological inquiry requires. My reading of this movement is in part intended to counter the notion, pervasive among his Neo-Scholastic interpreters and those they have influenced, that Thomas works out his doctrine of God in a linear and deductive fashion. On the contrary, because Thomas's inquiry is undertaken in obedience to Christ, he moves dialectically from (and away from) ordinary and philosophical talk about God's existence to the Christ-revealed doctrine of the Trinity. Throughout this 'ascent' he is guided by Scripture and the church's doctrines, with the goal of arriving somewhere near to the 'high, full and perfect' vision of the triune God required of the Christian theologian, following John the Evangelist.

Chapter 4 continues on with that same perspective as Thomas makes the link between God as such and God's work as creator and redeemer. Again, the logic of Thomas's theology in these doctrines is more flexible and complex – and more scriptural – than some of his critics have suggested. The 'link', of course, is the second person, the Son of God, God's wisdom and Word revealed and active: Jesus Christ. Here, then, I discuss Thomas's Trinitarian understanding of creation and its purpose before turning to his

Christology. Chapter 5 considers the link between Christ's person and work and ourselves. Thomas makes that link with the concept of grace. Grace refers to the salvific work of Christ brought to us through the infusion of the theological virtues and the gifts and operations of the Holy Spirit. Here, too, I treat matters associated with the Reformation controversies, including faith and works, merit and election. Finally, Chapter 6 returns to Thomas's conception of the Christian life, considered now in light of its ground in the Trinity and in the work of Jesus Christ. I have developed this in terms of Thomas's understanding of law, primarily the eternal law and the new law of the Gospel. Under this rubric I discuss Thomas's understanding of human action, sin, Israel and the church. The church serves, and is a product of, the new law of freedom in Christ. So I conclude with a brief look at Thomas's sacramental theology and the place of the cardinal virtues within the Christian life.

A Note on Translations

English translations of some of Thomas's works are sometimes difficult to find. My citations from the Commentaries on Scripture are from the Marietti edition and are my own translations.[4] I have used the translation of the *Summa Theologiae* by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province for its convenient size, availability and its fairly literal rendering of the Latin. Though somewhat torn over the matter, I thought it best to replace the 'Holy Ghost' of my childhood with the now more familiar 'Holy Spirit'. For the *Summa contra Gentiles*, I have used the translation by Anton Pegis and others. I have altered both translations slightly and without comment in order to conform to the publisher's requirement that I use inclusive language. Throughout, I have avoided male forms when talking about God as such and the Holy Spirit, even though it makes for awkwardness at times. For theological reasons, though, I have retained male terms when referring to the Son and the Father.

Notes

1 I believe it was Stanley Hauerwas who taught me to think of the Christian life as an 'adventure'.

2 I do not mean 'evangelical' in the sense often, though confusedly, associated with Protestant fundamentalism. That kind of evangelicalism seems to trade on modernistic hermeneutical assumptions that are no longer reasonable, nor would they have seemed reasonable to Thomas. Rather, I mean 'evangelical' in the sense, say, of the first article of the Barmen confession, i.e., concerned to maintain or recover the primary of Scripture and its witness to Jesus Christ within the church. I mean 'catholic' in the sense of ecumenical, along the lines of Augustine's usage which, for me, includes Catholic in the more restricted sense.

3 One good attempt to do so can be found in the opening essay by George Schner, in *Theology After Liberalism: A Reader*, John Webster and George P. Schner eds, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
4 See the References section at the end of the book.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Life and Interpretation

Too much can certainly be made of the bearing of lived experience upon a thinker's work. Knowing a little or a lot about the author's personal experience and social situation cannot fully explain a text, yet it may well help us to understand it better. Thomas Aquinas lived so long ago and in a context so very different from our own that his readers need some idea of his life and career if they are to avoid even the most elementary misunderstandings. Moreover, Thomas's writings have been subjected to various and often conflicting interpretations from his time to ours, interpretations that not infrequently reflect a failure to acknowledge his historical and social context. So some acquaintance with the history of the reception of Thomas's texts is vital to reading his work well today. Any interpretation of Thomas is controversial, including the one that I will present here, and best presented with such alternative readings in mind. Thus this chapter is introductory; it provides some of the background for the more detailed consideration of Thomas's texts that follows. The first section begins with a biographical sketch and then, in the second section, I offer a brief account of the history of Thomism.

Thomas's Life and Career

Thomas Aquinas was born into a minor aristocratic family in Italy in 1224 or 1225 at the family castle of Roccasecca, located not far from Naples on the road to Rome.[1] As was the custom with the younger sons of the nobility, he was destined for a career in the church. He was sent as a child to the nearby Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino to be an oblate, perhaps with the idea that he would eventually become the abbot there. In 1239, the Benedictines sent him to Naples to begin his studies in the liberal arts. At Naples he came into contact with the Dominicans, who had recently established a priory there. Their influence seems to have been decisive, for when the time came to make a decision about his future, Thomas chose to become neither a Benedictine monk nor a regular priest, but a friar in the order founded less than thirty years before (in 1217) by St Dominic. His decision to join this less than socially acceptable order – he took the habit in April 1244 – upset his relatives, particularly his mother. The story is told of how she arranged for Thomas to be taken by force and kept in the family castle at Roccasecca for a little over a year, during which his family tried various strategies to change his mind.

His family's concern was understandable, for the friars dedicated themselves to what was then a somewhat countercultural way of life. Unlike priests, they did not settle in a parish under the authority of a bishop, nor, unlike the various orders of monks, did they devote themselves to contemplation and manual labor within the walls of a monastery. Instead they dedicated themselves to a more itinerant and unusually independent life of 'preaching in poverty'. Thomas's decision for the Dominicans reflects the radical nature of his conception of Christianity, 'radical' Christian in the original sense of having a deeply rooted desire to follow Jesus Christ whatever the cost, but also in the contemporary colloquial sense of innovative and going against cultural norms and assumptions.[2]

Realizing that Thomas was not going to change his mind, the family returned him to the Dominicans at Naples. In 1245 he was sent to Paris, where he probably studied in the Faculty of Arts of the University with the Dominican scholar, Albert the Great (1206–80) (see Torrell, 1996a, pp. 19–24). In 1248, Albert was asked by his superiors to teach at a new *studium generale* (a college for members of the Order) at Cologne, and he took Thomas along with him. It is likely that Thomas was ordained a priest there. He began to teach as a bachelor – a kind of apprentice professor – by taking students through some books of the Old Testament. In 1252 he was sent back to the University of Paris to teach, even though he had not yet reached the canonical age. There he began what was required of any aspiring teacher of theology at the time, namely to write a commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. The resulting book, the *Commentary on the Sentences* (*Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*), was his first large work. Peter's *Sentences* – so called because they were a collection of brief opinions (*sententiae*) on different theological issues drawn from patristic writers – had been arranged into four books about a century earlier. The authoritative texts of the *Sentences* provided a common basis for debate among the range of theological positions of the time (Buckley, 1987, p. 43). They prompted commentators to engage with the main issues in Christian theology, but were flexible enough to permit them to introduce their own concerns. And Thomas did so, as Torrell says, 'most resolutely' (Torrell, 1996a, p. 41), adding considerable material from Aristotle and substantially changing the principle of organization.[3]

In 1256 he became a master, roughly the equivalent of a professor of theology, though the word 'theology' is not quite right, since Thomas's discipline was not divided into specialties, as it is now customarily divided into systematics, ethics, biblical studies and history. It is perhaps better to retain his full title, namely *magister in sacra pagina*, master of the sacred page (sacred page = Scripture). The title appropriately draws attention to the master's focus upon the Bible. For Thomas and those of his time, theological inquiry was not as easily distinguishable from commentary upon Scripture as it is today. Scripture itself is theology or *sacra doctrina* – sacred teaching in the sense both of something taught and the action of teaching,

too – and so theology is largely the explication of Scripture. One might say that Scripture displays God's 'theology', God's own self-understanding, in a form appropriate for us, upon which, of course, our theology must depend.[4] To be sure, the two terms were never synonymous. Scripture is the norm over all its theological interpretations. Theology serves Scripture by relating it to everything else we know in order to show that it makes sense and that it can reasonably be held to be true.

As a doctor of Scripture (another contemporary title), Thomas's function was threefold: to 'preach' upon scriptural texts (*praedicatio*); to 'read' Scripture (*lectio*), i.e., to analyze books of the Bible in the form of commentaries; and to engage in 'disputation' (*disputatio*), to argue for and against rival interpretations of Scripture and their doctrinal and moral consequences. Thomas wrote many commentaries upon Old Testament books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, the Psalms; as well as upon the New Testament: the gospels of Matthew and John and some of the letters of Paul. This area of Thomas's work has been too often ignored, perhaps in part because of the commentaries' dry, scholastic style, with its sometimes laborious concern for noting distinctions and categories that seem to have little significance. Yet these works are of vital importance in properly interpreting Thomas's thought, for hidden within them are a multitude of insights that enable a better reading of his more obviously 'theological' works. They give us some idea of which texts he drew upon in treating particular doctrinal issues. They make it clear how much his theology depends upon his reading of Scripture, and how his reading is oriented throughout to Jesus Christ.

Thomas sometimes notes that theology's concern is not only the right interpretation of Scripture and doctrine, but also the correction of errors and the removal of stumbling-blocks to the faith, among which are mistaken philosophical principles and concepts. Thomas made a life-long habit of writing treatises and commentaries upon philosophical works, although this was never a part of his official duties; nor did he ever teach philosophy. While still a bachelor, he wrote a significant work, *De Ente et Essentia* (*On Being and Essence*), in which he worked out certain metaphysical distinctions which became fundamental for his doctrine of God and creation. While at Paris he wrote a commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate* (*On the Trinity*), which addresses questions to do with scientific inquiry and how we may know God. In later years he wrote a number of commentaries on works by Aristotle, on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, written while Thomas was working on his own moral theology in the second part of his *Summa Theologiae*. As Torrell puts it, 'he undertook these commentaries in an apostolic perspective in order better to carry out his job as a theologian, and better to accomplish his labor of wisdom ... : to proclaim the truth and refute error' (Torrell, 1996a, p. 239).

The University curriculum required one's understanding and use of authoritative texts to be tested by engaging in debate. The bachelor learned the art of public disputation by arguing for his own resolution of a question and

by responding to objections from his audience. The master would then give his determination orally, followed later by a written version, in which he would set out his resolution of the question, together with possible objections and his responses to them. Thomas's disputations were collected and written down as *Quaestiones Disputatae*. Once or twice a year, the audience for such debates could present a question they wanted discussed. These were collected into Thomas's twelve *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, questions on freely chosen topics. Many of the texts of the period, though composed independently of any debate, preserved the format of the disputation, as is the case with Peter Lombard's *Sentences* and commentaries thereon, as well as Thomas's larger theological works, the *Summa contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*, which I will discuss in a moment.

Thomas left Paris after about four years, returning to Italy probably in late 1259. He went back (perhaps) to Naples for a couple of years (Torrell, 1996a, pp. 98–101), before arriving in Orvieto by September 1261. There he was appointed conventual lector, the prior in charge of the education of friars who were unable to study at a *studium generale.* One of the more significant works from this time was the *Catena Aurea* (*The Golden Chain*), a collection of texts from the Latin and Greek Fathers discussing each verse of the four gospels. It is likely that at Orvieto he largely completed the great work he had started in Paris, his *Summa contra Gentiles*. It was here, too, that he wrote the Office for the feast of Corpus Christi. Thomas then moved to Rome in late 1265 to start another *studium* for specially selected Dominicans. He conducted a series of disputations, collected in the *De Potentia* (*On Power*), and wrote, among much else, a commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul*, and the *Compendium Theologiae*, a book-length treatment of the Christian faith organized according to the three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity (the work remained unfinished, stopping half-way through hope). It was while in Rome that he began the first part of what would be his most widely read work, the *Summa Theologiae*. At this point it will be helpful to make some preliminary remarks about the two *summae*.

The Summae

It used to be thought that the *Summa contra Gentiles* (abbreviated henceforth as 'ScG') was an occasional work, written at the request of a Dominican master general, Raymond of Peñafort, to aid missionaries in converting the Muslims of Spain. This now seems unlikely. There is no dedication to Raymond, nor is there any discussion of Muslim doctrines, so some contend that the book has a more general purpose, namely to display the relationship between philosophical wisdom, i.e., the knowledge of the *gentiles* or pagans, and Christian wisdom (Hibbs, 1995, pp. 11f.). In line with this purpose, Thomas focuses upon the philosophical or metaphysical aspects of whatever is being discussed. As there is no expressed occasion for Thomas to write the work, it has been suggested that it is 'an essay in personal