

**PERSONAL PREFACE:  
ON DISCOVERING THOMAS AQUINAS**

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I first heard of Thomas Aquinas when I was ten years old, in a novel by Wilmar H. Shiras about an unusual child. Not until graduate school did St. Thomas cross the horizon of my awareness again, when a professor for whom I served as a teaching assistant gave exactly one lecture to the great thinker in an undergraduate survey. I am pretty sure the professor, who considered faith and reason implacable competitors, did not believe a word that St. Thomas said, but I am grateful for the exposure.

Not long after that, I read Dante for the first time, my interest piqued by a book about teaching literature, the author of which mentioned the souls frozen in ice at the center of Dante's *Inferno* – for although they were imprisoned there for different sins than mine, I too, a young nihilist, felt myself frozen in ice. Dante, of course, was so profoundly influenced by St. Thomas that his *Comedy* has been called “the *Summa* in verse.”<sup>1</sup> It will not be surprising, then, that when I began my own teaching, I devoted a good deal more than one lecture to St. Thomas, nor will it be astonishing that I sometimes illuminated his points by quoting lines from Dante's poem.

It amazed me that so many scholars in my own field of ethical and political philosophy, scholars who ought to have known better, jumped over the middle ages as though they had produced nothing worth noting and were nothing but darkness and obscurantism -- or even as though they had never taken place. Some teachers crossed the entire two millennia between Aristotle and Thomas Hobbes without taking a breath. The idea seemed to be to get to Nietzsche as quickly as possible. We have no need to discuss the reasons for this deliberate oblivion. Suffice it to say that even while I was still attracted to Nietzsche, it seemed to me both unaccountable and strangely wrong.

Though still a nihilist, I was powerfully drawn to what I devoutly told myself was merely the *appearance* of truth in St. Thomas's arguments – so much so that one of my students remarked after class one day, "I've been listening carefully, and I figure that you're either an atheist or a Roman Catholic. Which one is it?" After my return to Christian faith, though not yet of St. Thomas's communion, I began studying his work still more carefully, making, of course, all the mistakes that an autodidact makes, but perhaps having some of the advantages of an autodidact too, since I considered him the greatest authority on himself instead of viewing him through the blurry lenses of numerous secondary sources. Not that this commentary is anything other than a secondary source, but at least his own words are included.

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<sup>1</sup>This widely-quoted expression seems to have been coined by a student, W.F.X.R. Freeman, in “Sources of Dante's Inspiration,” *Fordham College Monthly* 40:2 (November, 1921), pp. 76.

Everyone who aspires to think seriously should try to understand how his own mind works. Most people, I think, cannot teach anything until they understand it. May God deliver me from ever teaching what I do *not* understand, but my bent is somewhat different, for the way I come to understand something is to work out how I could teach it. Despite the convenience of technical terms, which I certainly use sometimes, I am convinced that unless one can put something in everyday language, he still does not grasp it. Learning how to put St. Thomas in everyday language took some years, during which I discovered that I had to learn a lot of other things as well before I could grasp his thought.

At a certain level, the Angelic Doctor is highly intuitive, because classical thinkers always begin with what we dimly know already – where else could one begin? – and then try to clarify and elevate it. His apparatus for clarifying and elevating, however, is most difficult. To understand his theory of law I had to grasp his ethics, to understand his ethics I had to grasp his understanding of the good, to understand his understanding of the good I had to understand his metaphysics, and ultimately – though of course this goes beyond what we can know without God’s help -- I had to understand his theology. Needless to say, in order to understand any of these things I had to understand his own sources, and of course, given my quirk, I could not understand any of *those* things until I knew how I might teach them too.

Of course I am a scholar, writing in large part for scholars. A good many persons outside academia also write to me; I delight that they find my work worth reading, and I hope they will continue to do so. In trying to elucidate St. Thomas’s writing, however, I consult the memory of all of my own former difficulties – and of course the difficulties of my students. Teaching young persons who are considering these matters for the first time has been enormously helpful, not only because I teach to understand, but also because the so-called silly questions that some students ask are often the most helpful of all. This is because they are the hardest to answer, requiring the most searching consideration of first principles. One may think that one understands something – right up to the point when someone asks a question about a point that seems obvious to oneself but is not obvious *to him*. In the process of trying to make it obvious to the questioner too, one discovers all kinds of things – not least about the mysteries of knowledge. By God’s mercy, I hope I have made some things clear.

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I am grateful for the example of friends who mirror to me the life of the mind under God. First among these are Hadley Arkes, Francis Beckwith, Kenneth L. Grasso, John P. Hittinger, F. Russell Hittinger, Christopher Kaczor, and Robert C. Koons. Moreover I have been blessed by graduate and law students whom I did not deserve, who took the sorts of things this book discusses much more seriously than I would have at that stage of my life. Among those whom I once had the honor to teach I list my friends and colleagues Christina Bambrick, Thomas Rives Bell, Kody W. Cooper, David A. Crockett, Paul DeHart, Justin Dyer, William McCormick, S.J., Kevin Stuart, and Matthew D. Wright. But there are so many.

The opportunity to test-fly several of the arguments in this book came to me when I was invited to make a presentation at the conference “Aquinas and the Development of Law,” held at the Aquinas Institute, Blackfriars, Oxford, in March, 2018. The conference was illuminating, the Blackfriars were gracious, and I am especially grateful for the hospitality shown to both me and my wife by Fr. Richard Conrad, O.P., the director, and Dr. Ryan D Meade, of Loyola Chicago School of Law, another participant in the conference, who was there as a visiting scholar. After the manuscript of this book was finished, Richard Conrad offered immeasurably helpful suggestions. I am also grateful to Robert Dreesen, Robert Judkins, and Hilary Hammond, who were crucial in bringing this book to light.

To declare the fiftieth part of what I owe my wife, Sandra, would be a task too high for me. She so overflows with charity, however, that to her it seems no debt.