

The Demands of Sacred Doctrine on 'Beginners'

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Thomas states in the Prologue to the *Summa theologiae* that he intends to teach beginners (*incipientes*).¹ This description of the *Summa's* intended audience might lead us to ask what qualities identify beginners (*incipientes*) as beginners. Alternatively stated, we might ask what deficiencies these beginners must overcome in order to become proficient.

The Prologue itself suggests one answer to these questions. Beginning students, or as Thomas describes them in the Prologue, "novices in this doctrine" (*hujus doctrinae novitios*)² are impeded in their efforts to learn sacred doctrine by a multiplication of useless questions, articles, and arguments. In addition, things which are necessary to a sound grasp of sacred doctrine are presented according to the order required for the exposition of a text rather than according to the order of learning. Finally, frequent repetition of material bores and confuses the student.

In his reading of the Prologue, Marie-Dominique Chenu suggested that Thomas would have understood beginners as those who lack a sufficient grasp of the intelligible principle that pervades sacred doctrine. Chenu argued that with the influx in the West of the Aristotelian corpus in the 13th century, theologians were forced to ask anew the question, "Is sacred doctrine a science?" It was in part to show that sacred doctrine is truly a science that Thomas sought to construct his *Summa theologiae* according to an intelligible order.³ This effort to show the scientific nature of sacred doctrine was no mere academic exercise, though. Effective learning required that the material taught be presented in such a way that the student might grasp the unifying principle of the material itself.⁴ The references in the Prologue to useless questions, to a lack of *ordo doctrinae* in presenting useful material, and to undue repetition suggest that beginners (*hujus doctrinae novitii*) lack a scientific grasp of sacred doctrine in so far as they do not understand the intelligible principle that transforms the various elements of sacred doctrine into an intelligible whole. For such beginners, present pedagogical resources as described by Thomas in the

Prologue hinder the effective acquisition of this intelligible principle. Thus, Thomas intends to redress this situation by presenting sacred doctrine to his beginning students briefly and clearly and according to an *ordo doctrinae*, thereby enabling these students to move beyond the status of beginners and to become proficient.⁵

In addition to describing the beginning students as *hujus doctrinae novitios*, Thomas also in the Prologue describes the beginners in Pauline terms as "children in Christ" (*parvulis in Christo*). In this paper I suggest that in this biblical description of beginning students Thomas indicates another deficiency that beginning students must overcome in order to become proficient in sacred doctrine. I will try to make this case by first considering Thomas' interpretation of the phrase, *parvuli in Christo*, as given in Thomas' commentary on I Corinthians. Here we will see the shortcomings in and the needed growth by beginners that the designation, *parvuli in Christo*, alludes to. We then turn to Thomas' discussion of sacred doctrine as a science (ST, 1.1.2). Here we find that if beginning students are to become proficient in the science of sacred doctrine they must grow and overcome the very shortcomings alluded to in the designation, *parvuli in Christo*. Indeed, Thomas identifies sacred doctrine as a science, it would seem, to make clear to his beginning students the shortcomings that they must overcome if they are to become proficient in sacred doctrine.

I *Beginners as 'Parvuli in Christo'*

Thomas cites in the Prologue a text from I Corinthians (I Cor.3:1): "As children in Christ, I was able to give you milk, not meat."⁶ Recall the context of this passage. The Corinthians are "little children in Christ" because of their carnal or fleshly lives as manifested in their jealousy and communal strife.

I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were unable to take it. Indeed, you are still not able, even now, for you are of the flesh. While there is jealousy and rivalry among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving in an ordinary human way? (I Cor.3:2-3).

Furthermore, these "little children in Christ" were praised by Paul earlier in his letter as not lacking any spiritual gift and being enriched in every way with all discourse and knowledge (I Cor. 1:5). In effect, the Corinthians are acting like children in sacred doctrine when they who have been abundantly blessed in spiritual gifts ought to have been more advanced spiritually.

In Thomas' commentary concerning the phrase, "*parvuli in Christo*," Thomas observes that by calling the Corinthians "little

children in Christ," Paul was reiterating his charge that the Corinthians were fleshly. In I Cor.3:1 Paul says to the Corinthians: "Brothers, I could not talk to you as spiritual people, but as fleshly people, as little children in Christ I could give you milk not meat." "*Parvuli in Christo*," Thomas observes, is simply another way of saying "fleshly."⁷ As fleshly persons, or as little children, Paul could not talk to them spiritually but had to accommodate his words to their condition. Thomas associates Paul's inability to speak spiritually to the Corinthians with the prophet Isaac's inability to teach the people due to their carnal lives. "To whom would he teach knowledge? To whom would he make to understand what is heard? Those weaned from milk, those taken from the breast" (Is. 28:10). Thomas interprets the phrase from Isaiah, "weaned from milk," to mean a weaning from carnal and sensual conduct.⁸ Just as the prophet could teach knowledge only to those weaned from a carnal life, so Paul could speak spiritually only to those who were spiritual. As "fleshly" people or "children in Christ," Paul had to adapt his words to their condition and so could not speak to the Corinthians in a spiritual way.

In addition, Thomas understands Paul's phrase, "little children in Christ," as an admonishment of the Corinthians for their spiritual immaturity. That is, the shame of their fleshly state arises from the fact that these Corinthians ought to be advanced in sacred doctrine.⁹ Thomas observes in his commentary that milk might be the suitable nourishment for some, as I Peter 2:2 testifies: "Rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, insincerity, envy, and all slander; like newborn infants, long for pure spiritual milk so that you may grow into salvation." However, for those who ought to be proficient since they have had much time to become perfected, a need for milk is shameful, as Hebrews 5:12 testifies: "Although you ought to be teachers by this time, you need to be taught the basic elements of the word of God."¹⁰ The fact that the Corinthians need milk testifies to a spiritual immaturity on their part beyond which they could and should have progressed.

Finally, Thomas observes in his commentary that Paul gives the reason why he considers the Corinthians to be fleshly or carnal. Their envy manifests their carnal state.¹¹ Thomas explains that envy and contention are fleshly since they arise from desire for bodily or material good. Bodily good is not able to be possessed wholly by more than one person at the same time. By someone's possession of a material good, another person is denied the simultaneous possession of that good. Envy and contention follow. Spiritual good, on the other hand, can be possessed at the same time by more than one person. Possession of a

spiritual good by one person does not deny its simultaneous possession by another person. Regarding spiritual good, envy and contention do not arise.¹² It is of the spiritual person, Thomas observes, that Wisdom 7:13 speaks, "I communicate without envy."¹³ Indeed, Thomas observes in his commentary that without divine help, human beings live in a fleshly way, since human reason gains knowledge through the senses of the flesh. Only if elevated by the Spirit of God can human beings know of spiritual good.¹⁴

From Thomas' analysis of the phrase, *parvuli in Christo*, in his commentary, we can make the tentative observation that Thomas refers to his students as "beginners" for two related reasons. First, Thomas' students, whether they are the *fratres communes* described by Leonard Boyle or the advanced student preferred by John Jenkins¹⁵, will exercise the ministry of preaching and of reconciliation that the Dominican Order was charged with. By calling his students, "beginners," Thomas alludes to Hebrews 5:12 and thereby exhorts his students to master sacred doctrine lest they who should be teachers be found to be only beginners. Second, if these students are to avoid the shame of being "beginners" in the discipline of sacred doctrine, then they must leave behind their "fleshly" ways and must be inducted into God's own manner of understanding and loving.¹⁶

It is interesting to note that Thomas in the first article of the *Summa* (ST. I.1.1), when discussing the necessity of sacred doctrine, cites as his authority a text associated with I Corinthians 3:1. In the first article, Thomas cites Isaiah (64:4): "Eye has not seen without you, Lord, what you, have prepared for those who love you."¹⁷ Since the happiness to which we are destined transcends the happiness graspable by philosophy, as Isaiah teaches, and since we must have some grasp of the happiness for which we act if we are to order our activity to this happiness, a discipline like sacred doctrine is necessary. Paul in I Corinthians 2:9 appears to cite this text from Isaiah. Introducing the text with the words, "as Scripture says," Paul goes on to say in this verse (I Cor.2:9): "what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor ascended in the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him."¹⁸ In his commentary on I Corinthians, Thomas understands Paul to be citing Isaiah 64, although not in a literal way.¹⁹ While Thomas himself cites the Isaian text in article one of the *Summa*, Thomas, nevertheless, appears to turn once again to Paul's words in I Corinthians as a source in so far as the themes discussed by Thomas in his commentary on this Pauline version of Isaiah's text form something of a bridge between his discussion of the beginner as *parvulus in Christo* in the Prologue and his discussion of the scientific nature of sacred doctrine in article two (ST, I.1.2).

In his Corinthians commentary, Thomas states that Paul identifies two reasons why the glory of the heavenly vision is unknown by human beings. The first reason is that the glory prepared by God transcends sense knowledge, from which all human knowledge begins. Thus the glory prepared by God can neither be discovered, that is, seen, nor can it be taught, that is, heard.²⁰ Again we see that the flesh-bound ways typical of those who are *parvuli in Christo* will prove inadequate to the demands of sacred doctrine.

Thomas also notes in his commentary that Isaiah, as cited by Paul, gives a second reason why the glory prepared by God is unknown to us. Thomas' discussion of this second reason introduces the theme to be discussed at greater length in article two (ST, I.1.2). "Next he excludes intellectual knowledge of it (the glory of God) when he says, 'nor ascended in the human heart.'²¹ When something either inferior or superior to the intellect is grasped by the intellect, that thing exists in the intellect in a manner different than it exists in itself. When the intellect grasps something inferior to it, this inferior object exists in the intellect in a higher manner than it exists in itself. We can say that the object "ascends" by being grasped by the intellect. When the intellect grasps something superior to it, we can say that the superior thing "descends." To illustrate and to verify this principle, Thomas cites the letter of James (1:17): "Every perfect gift is from above, descending from the Father of light." The glory prepared by God does not ascend in the human heart, as if this glory were intellectually grasped in sensible objects. Rather, the glory prepared by God descends to the human heart since the glory known through revelation is superior to the human intellect.

II The Demands of Sacred Doctrine as a Science

In his discussion of sacred doctrine as a science (ST, I.1.2), Thomas again discusses themes that he alluded to in his description of his students as *parvuli in Christo*. First, Thomas reminds his audience that in their study of sacred doctrine they are preparing themselves to aid others in their journey to God. Thomas does this by citing as his authority for calling sacred doctrine a science in the *sed contra* of article two Augustine's statement from the *De Trinitate*, book 14: "to this science alone belongs that whereby saving faith is begotten, nourished, protected, and strengthened." In that same book, Augustine points out that it is one thing to possess saving faith and another to be able to assist the faithful in their lives of faith. It is this ability to assist the faithful that Augustine here refers to as science. By citing Augustine here, Thomas seems to remind the beginning student that what they are

to acquire in sacred doctrine is a science whereby they will be able to help others, Unless they grasp this science, these students will remain mere beginners.

In the body of article two Thomas turns to the flesh-bound ways that beginners must overcome and explains that the term "science" is applied to two types of disciplines. Some sciences, like geometry and arithmetic, proceed from principles known by the natural light of reason. Other sciences, like optics and music proceed by the light of a higher science, namely geometry and arithmetic. Sacred doctrine can be said to be a science for the same reasons that optics and music can. That is, like optics and music, sacred doctrine proceeds from principles known by a higher science, namely that which belongs to God and to the blessed.

In the discussion of sacred doctrine as a science, Thomas is evidently drawing upon that section of book 1 of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* (78b34-79a16) where Aristotle discusses *propter quid* and *quia* syllogisms as they are found in superior and subordinate sciences. There, Aristotle lists four pairs of sciences as examples of superior and subordinate sciences: geometry and optics, stereometry and mechanical arts, arithmetic and music, astronomy and navigation. The superior sciences yield *propter quid* syllogisms in that these sciences produce a grasp of the reason why something is the case. The subordinate sciences yield *quia* syllogisms in that these sciences produce a grasp of the fact that something is the case. As we have seen, Thomas uses two of Aristotle's examples in article two (ST, I.1.2), namely geometry and optics, and arithmetic and music. It would seem no accident that while Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics* gives four examples of subaltern science, optics, music, stereometry and navigation, Thomas in ST, I.1.2 limits his discussion to the two examples of optics and music that are manifestly dependent upon the sense perceptions of sight and sound.

In Thomas' commentary on this section of the *Posterior Analytics*, Thomas asks about the exact nature of the relationship between these superior and the subordinate sciences. There are, he points out, two ways to understand this relationship. First, the higher science can be related to the lower as genus to species. In this case, the subject of the lower science would be a species of the higher science, as animal body is a species of the more generic science of natural bodies. Second, the higher science can be related to the lower science as formal to material. In this case the lower science would apply to a sensible medium the formal principles developed in the higher science in somewhat the same way that a wooden triangle is an application of the triangular form to wooden material.²²

The relationship of formal to material rather than genus to species more accurately describes, according to Thomas, the relationship between Aristotle's superior and subordinate sciences. Whereas geometry is a science of lines, optics is a science concerned with visual lines, or lines as applied to sense perception. Similarly, whereas arithmetic is a science of number, music is a science of number as applied to the sensible perception of sound.²³ The subordinate sciences, since they derive their knowledge principally from sensible things, yield knowledge that something is true (*quia*). The superior sciences, since they deal with causes, produce knowledge of the reason why something is true (*propter quid*).²⁴

Sacred doctrine, then, as presented by Thomas in the *Summa theologiae* is to the natural light of human reason as geometry is to optics and as arithmetic is to music. Just as the more sense bound sciences of optics and music must rely upon the more formal sciences of geometry and arithmetic in order to produce *propter quid* knowledge, so also must sense and flesh-bound human reason rely upon the more formal, spiritual manner of understanding characteristic of God's own knowledge. While Thomas clearly maintains in this second article (ST, I.1.2) that sacred doctrine is a science that yields *propter quid* knowledge, he primarily seeks, it would seem, to impress upon the student the student's need to transcend sense-bound knowing and to participate in God's own, spiritual knowledge.

That Thomas might present the scientific nature of sacred doctrine in such a way so as to impress upon his beginning students their need to transcend their flesh-bound ways of knowing becomes plausible when we note that in the *Summa theologiae* Thomas seems to emphasize the relation between the scientific nature of sacred doctrine and its transcendent source of knowledge, while saying little about drawing conclusions from principles.²⁵ In the *Scriptum* Thomas argues for the scientific nature of sacred doctrine by comparing the articles of faith to first principles grasped by reason. Just as certain first principles are grasped as self-evident by the natural light of reason, so are the articles of faith by the light of faith. Just as the principles grasped by the natural light of reason cannot be demonstrated, so also the articles of faith cannot be demonstrated. Finally just as conclusions can be drawn from first principles grasped by the natural light of reason, so also conclusions can be drawn from the articles of faith. (*Scriptum*, I Prologus, a. 3, q. 2)

In q.2, art.2 of his *Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate*, Thomas asks whether there can be a science of divine realities. Here, Thomas begins his reply by noting that science proceeds from things

known to conclusions that necessarily follow. He goes on to note that we come to know God either through creatures or through the divine realities themselves. Philosophers handed on a divine science acquired from the knowledge of creatures. In addition to this philosophical, divine science, there is another divine science that begins from the divine realities themselves. We cannot in this life perfectly apprehend divine realities in themselves but can grasp the divine reality by faith. From these principles held by faith we draw conclusions. While acknowledging a difference between these two forms of divine science, Thomas makes clear that both disciplines are sciences in so far as they, like any science, proceed from principles to necessary conclusions.

III Conclusion

If Thomas' students are to become proficient in the science of sacred doctrine, and indeed they are expected to become proficient, they must become acclimated to the transcendent principles that sacred doctrine relies upon. Only in this way will the beginning students be able to leave behind them their status as beginners and to attain the status of those able due to their proficiency in sacred doctrine to aid the faithful in their lives of faith. Thomas intends, it seems, to introduce his students to the transcendent principles of sacred doctrine through the treatise on God.

- 1 "Quia catholicae veritatis doctor non solum provecos debet instruere, sed ad eum etiam pertinet incipientes erudire, secundum illud Apostoli, 'Tamquam parvulis in Christo, lac vobis potum dedi, non escam'; propositum nostrae intentionis in hoc opere est, ea quae ad christianam religionem pertinent eo modo tradere secundum quod congruit ad eruditionem incipientium." (ST, Prologue)

"Because the teacher of Catholic truth ought to instruct not only the advanced, but to him it also belongs to instruct beginners, according to the Apostle, 'As children in Christ I gave you milk, not meat.' (I Cor.3 :1) our intention in this work is to hand over that which belongs to the Christian religion by a mode suitable to the instruction of beginners."

- 2 "Consideravimus namque hujus doctrinae novitios in his quae a diversis scripta sunt plurimum impediri, partim quidem propter multiplicationem inutilium quaestionum, articulorum, et argumentorum, partim etiam quia ea quae sunt necessaria talibus ad sciendum non traduntur secundum ordinem disciplinae, sed secundum quod requirebat librorum expositio, vel secundum quod se praebebat occasio disputandi, partim quidem quia frequens eorumdem repetitio et fastidium et confusionem generabat in animis auditorum." (ST. Prologue)

"For we have considered that novices to this doctrine are greatly impeded in those books which are written by different authors, partly because of the

multiplicationem of useless questions, articles, or arguments; partly also because those things which are necessary for such students to know are not handed over according to an order of learning, but according to what the exposition of books requires or according to what the occasion of disputing furnishes; partly because frequent repetition of those things generates both boredom and confusion in the spirit of the hearer."

- 3 Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Toward Understanding St. Thomas*, translated by AM. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago: H. Regnery Co, 1964), pp. 303-305.
- 4 Chenu, *Toward Understanding St. Thomas*, pp.300-301.

- 5 According to Chenu, Thomas determined that organizing principle of sacred doctrine was that of *exitus-reditus*. As such, the proper place to begin the study of sacred doctrine was with the treatise on God from whom all things come. See M.-D. Chenu, "Le plan de La Somme," *Revue Thomiste* 39 (1939)95-108; *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, pp. 298-322.

Inspired by Chenu's argument concerning the scientific organization of the *Summa theologiae*, different authors proposed different "plans" according to which the *Summa theologiae* was organized. Tom O'Meara presents a helpful summary of the significant proposals made in the course of this debate. See Thomas O'Meara, "Grace as a Theological Structure in the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas," *RTAM* 55 (1988), pp. 130-53.

- 6 "secundum illud Apostoli, 'Tanquam parvulis in Christo lac vobis potum dedi, non escam.'" (ST, Prologue)
- 7 Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio et Lectura super Epistolas Pauli Apostoli. Opera Omnia*, volume 20 (Vivès: 1871-72), p.628.
- 8 Thomas Aquinas, *ibid*.
- 9 Thomas Aquinas, *ibid*.
- 10 See Thomas Aquinas. *Expositio et Lectura super Epistolas Pauli Apostoli*, pp.628-629.
- 11 Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio et Lectura super Epistolas Pauli Apostoli*, p.629.
- 12 Thomas Aquinas, *ibid*.
- 13 Thomas Aquinas, *ibid*.
- 14 Thomas Aquinas, *ibid*.
- 15 Leonard Boyle, *The Setting of the Summa Theologiae of Saint Thomas*, Etienne Gilson Series, vol.5 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1982); John Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 16 Thomas will also use the term, *incipientes*, to identify those who occupy the first stage in the life of charity (ST. II-II.24.9) The chief task, Thomas says, for these *incipientes* in the life of charity is to overcome the concupiscence that has ruled their lives (ST. II-II.24.9). Similarly. Thomas' use of the term *incipiens* to refer to the beginning student whom he addresses in the *Summa theologiae* suggests that these beginners must turn away from their fleshly way of thinking in order to adopt a more spiritual knowledge.
- 17 The above translation is a translation of the text of Isaiah as given by

- Thomas in his commentary on I Corinthians. "Oculus non vidit, Deus, absque te, quae praeparasti his qui diligunt te." See Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio et lectura super Epistolas Pauli Apostoli*, p.625.
- 18 The above translation is a translation of the text as given in Thomas' commentary on I Corinthians: "quod oculus non vidit. nec auris audivit, nec in cor hominis ascendit, quae praeparavit Deus his qui diligunt illum." See Thomas Aquinas, *Ibid.*
- 19 Thomas Aquinas, *Ibid.*
- 20 "Primo quidem, quia non subjacet humanis sensibus, a quibus omnis humana cognitio initium sumit. Et ponit suos sensus. Primo, visionis, quae deservit inventioni... . Secundo ponit sensum auditus, qui deservit disciplinae." See Thomas Aquinas, *Ibid.*
- 21 "Deinde excludit notitiam ejus intellectualem dum dicit neque in cor hominis ascendit." See Thomas Aquinas, *Ibid.*
- 22 Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Libri Posteriorum*, Opera Omnia, Leonine edition, (Paris: J.Vrin, 1989), p.90. For an English translation, see Commentary on the *Posterior Analytics* of Aristotle, tr. by F.R. Larcher (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1970), pp. 79-80.
- 23 Thomas Aquinas, *ibid.*
- 24 Thomas Aquinas, *ibid.*
- 25 Indeed, the underlying aim of the entire first question (ST. I.1) seems to be to convince the student that the proper and necessary starting point for the beginning student's study of sacred doctrine is God, as the prologue to question 2 tells us.

In a manner similar to twelfth and thirteen century commentary prologues which introduce their text with a consideration of such topics as the *intentio*, *auctor*, *modus*, and the *materia*, Thomas also introduces his *Summa theologiae* with a consideration of the purpose (*intentio*) and structure of his work. See Richard William Hunt, "The Introduction to the 'Artes' in the Twelfth Century," in *Studia Mediaevalia in honorem ... R.J. Martin* (Bruges: De Tempel, 1948), pp.85-112; Edward A. Quain, "The Medieval *Accessus ad Auctores*," *Traditio* 3 (1945): 215-264.

The *Summa's* Prologue begins in its opening sentence by stating the purpose (*propositum nostrae intentionis*) of the *Summa*. In I.1, Thomas examines the nature of *sacra doctrina* itself. This examination of sacred doctrine, Thomas tells us, is meant to further specify the purpose of the *Summa* ("*Et ut intentio nostra sub certis limitibus comprehendatur*"). After the ten articles of I.1. Thomas briefly describes the three part structure of the *Summa* that is consistent with the purposes of the *Summa* ("*Quia igitur principalis intentio hujus sacrae doctrinae est Dei cognitionem tradere*").