

Providence, Distributive Justice, and Divine Government in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas: Some Implications for Ecclesial Practice

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Abstract

Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa Theologiae* to provide Dominican friars with solid theological instruction in moral theology and pastoral care on the firm foundation of scripture. Despite an increasing awareness among scholars of the importance of Thomas' scriptural commentaries to his thought, few have attempted to interpret his theology and philosophy in light of his scriptural commentaries and the mendicant context of the 13th century. This paper offers a reading of Thomas' theology of providence and divine government both as a mendicant friar and Master of the Sacred Page in order to understand some of the implications of the doctrine of providence for distributive justice in ecclesial practice today.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, divine providence, scriptural commentaries, distributive justice, mendicant

One of the most important questions facing Christian faith in public life today is the relation between ecclesial practice and the social and political economy. Although there have been many works both by theologians and social and political theorists on third-world debt, poverty, and other social problems of our time, the majority of them are grounded in various economic models or social theories rather than in the theological ground of scripture, doctrine, and tradition. This is not of course the first time the church has faced the social, political, and economic challenges of rapidly changing times. When Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa Theologiae* in the 13th century, for example, the church also encountered in society unprecedented economic growth, expanding markets, and the challenges that accompanied the emergence of the profit economy at that time.

However, recent scholarly interest in Thomas Aquinas has generally not focused on his theological response to these kinds of challenges to ecclesial practice. Ever since Leo XIII published an encyclical in 1879 calling for the restoration of Christian philosophy according to the teachings of the Angelic Doctor, scholars have tended to interpret Thomas either as a neo-scholastic keeper of orthodoxy or as a philosophical apologist who offered rational arguments to buttress the faith against the encroaching criticisms of modern philosophy. Even in recent investigations in which Thomas is studied as a Dominican friar and Master of the Sacred Page, few scholars have paid attention to the broader social context to which his biblical and doctrinal theology responded. Although it is widely agreed that Thomas sought to develop his theology on the firm foundation of scripture so as to prepare Dominican friars in moral theology and pastoral care, little scholarly attention has been paid to the kinds of relations that connected scripture and doctrine to the social and economic challenges the church faced during the 13th century. In this paper I shall offer a reading of Thomas' theology of providence in light of his biblical commentaries and the mendicant framework of the 13th century in order to illuminate some of the implications of his doctrine of providence for ecclesial practice today.

I. In Search of the Mendicant Thomas

The period between the 11th and 13th centuries heralded the onset of a movement away from the old feudal economy and toward a market-based profit economy.¹ During this period, an increase in agricultural production resulted in a population explosion that, in turn, brought about an increase in trade and wealth in the newly emerging urban centers of Europe. In parallel with this increase in wealth, however, was the rise of a new form of urban poverty. While rural poverty deprived the serfs of the opportunity to extricate themselves from their lords and thereby increased their limited access to food and clothing, it rarely resulted in starvation, for the land almost always provided something to eat.² Urban poverty, however, was a different story. In cities whose populations were exploding into the tens of thousands, work was characteristically irregular, pay notoriously low, and workers subjected to the precarious fluctuation of market supply and demand. Moreover, in cities in which merchants, bankers, and entrepreneurs became a privileged minority, the poor not only were at risk of starvation but also became highly visible

¹ Jan G.J. van den Eijnden, *Poverty on the Way to God: Thomas Aquinas on Evangelical Poverty* (Leuven: Peters, 1994), p. 8.

² *Ibid.*

outcasts in the new social hierarchy.³ This social ostracism of and contempt for the poor engendered in them a deep distrust and hostility, both toward the profit economy and its wealthy beneficiaries. This became especially problematic for the church, for it radically altered the way the masses had come to understand wealth, especially the conspicuous wealth of the Church. "Wealth was now seen as a threat to the poor resulting from greed which should not exist in the Church. Ecclesiastical possessions became a thorn in the flesh and gave occasion for the Church to be accused of avarice and called to conversion."⁴

The mendicant reform movements of the 12th and 13th centuries represented a grassroots, biblically based response to the increasing wealth of the church and to the profit economy that had promoted it. Although Thomas Aquinas and the Dominicans have usually been distinguished from the more radical fringes of such reform movements, the theology of Thomas, like that of all mendicants, was "directly and concretely determined by the essential characteristics"⁵ of this society. Thus, as Marie-Dominique Chenu has argued, if we are to understand Thomas in his time, we cannot separate the context of his work from that of St. Francis, for it was the same evangelical spirit and return to the Gospel that gave birth to these movements of Catholic reform.⁶

Of course Francis, Dominic, and Thomas did not emerge out of thin air, so to speak, for they were preceded by a series of lay confraternities that initiated a movement of social and theological change that challenged the practices of the institutional church and medieval feudal society. The Waldensians, Poor and Barefoot Catholics, Humiliati, and others inspired an evangelical awakening that was to reach full expression and ecclesial approval through the rise of the Dominican and Franciscan orders of the early 13th century. "To vow mendicancy in the thirteenth century," Chenu writes, "was to refuse the feudal system of the Church both institutionally and economically, including the benefices and the collection of tithes."⁷ One cannot overlook, therefore, the evangelical "shock" that these poor beggars evoked as they pledged a life of voluntary poverty, humility, and simplicity and urged laity, clerics, and ecclesiastics to do the same. Unlike the monastic orders in which monks withdrew from the

³ Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 28.

⁴ Van den Eijnden, *Poverty on the Way to God*, p. 8.

⁵ Little, *Religious Poverty and Profit Economy*, p. 24.

⁶ M.-D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, trans. A.M. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago: Regency, 1963), p. 46.

⁷ M.-D. Chenu, *Aquinas and His Role in Theology*, trans. P. Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 8.

world to dedicate their lives to prayer and asceticism to further their own salvation — often accepting generous gifts to pray for the souls of their wealthy benefactors⁸ — the mendicants, initially at least, rejected the wealth and prosperity of the world and moved into the urban centers to gain new recruits and serve the needs of the poor. Through their teaching, preaching, and living an exemplary life of apostolic poverty, the mendicants carried out a cultural movement that sought not only to root out dissenters and opponents of the faith, but also to bring structural transformation to the church and medieval society according to a strict reading of the Gospel itself.

Thus mendicancy was not simply a social protest against the vanities and corruptions of the world. Nor was it simply a strategy for winning over heretics. Rather, it was a genuine theological movement that sought to change the world and reform the church by returning to the life of Jesus and the early apostles, thereby infusing both church and society with a radical and revolutionary interpretation of the Gospel. Inspired by a literal reading of scripture that grew weary of overly allegorical interpretations, the mendicants sought to take Jesus' response to the young rich man literally as the mark of apostolic perfection (Mt 19:21); they gave up their possessions and lived their faith in the service of others that their treasure in heaven might be great.

As Dominic and Francis sent their friars to the university centers of Europe, the friars immediately encountered open hostility and often violent opposition from the secular masters and lay and clerical feudal lords. When Thomas arrived in Paris in 1256, the University boycotted his inaugural lecture and Thomas had to receive special papal permission to teach. Moreover, during his first regency, Thomas even had a Lenten homily interrupted by William of St. Amour, a fierce opponent of the mendicants, who distributed pamphlets and lampooned the purported hypocrisy of a fat, wealthy beggar whose religious order siphoned off much needed resources from local parishes. It was therefore not without reason that the King of France had royal archers placed outside the Dominican priory in Paris or that Thomas' mother had Thomas locked up in the family castle at Roccasecca following his decision to join the Friar Preachers. At that time, joining the mendicants was akin to running away and marrying a gypsy⁹ and was not a respectable form of religious life for the sons of noble or well to do families.

Despite intense, initial opposition, the Dominicans and Franciscans were soon to become the intellectual leaders of a new Christianity that sought to express their radical Gospel vision through a new

⁸ Little, *Religious Poverty and Profit Economy*, p. 67.

⁹ Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. R and C. Winston (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), p. 65.

scientific method of theology that gave intellectual credence to their evangelical awakening while offering, simultaneously, a “new exemplar of sanctity.”¹⁰ Since Thomas wrote his magisterial *Summa* in this particular context, one would expect to see evidence of this radical vision throughout his work. Yet, in most recent research, one is hard put to find anything quite so radical. Perhaps this can be accounted for, in part, because in the years following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) many continued to identify Thomas with neo-scholasticism and neo-Thomism. Thus little attention was given either to an historical and biblical reading of his thought or to the social implications of his doctrine. As Mark Jordan has argued, Thomas’ thought has been taken over by successive generations of Thomists who function as a kind of “police” that claim their own interpretation as the legitimate heir and final authority of his thought.¹¹ In many cases, Jordan argues, various schools of the Thomist police used his thought for coercive purposes that had more to do with securing power for their own theological and philosophical agendas than for opening the doors of dialogue. Such tendencies have prevented fresh interpretations of Thomas’ thought and encouraged an authoritarian approach to Christian doctrine, so that Thomas need only be cited as the definitive authority on a particular matter. As Jordan and others have shown, however, Thomas himself never understood his own work as the final word on theology — despite his proclivities for producing massive *Summae* — for the nature of scholastic argumentation always allowed for more questions and responses that yielded new and deeper insights into the nature of Catholic faith.¹²

My own aim in this paper is much more modest than the universalizing tendencies in much modern Thomistic interpretation. Far from aligning myself with any one school of interpretation, I hope simply to offer a new insight for the interpretation of Thomas’ theology of providence and suggest some implications for ecclesial practice. I shall attempt to do this by interpreting Thomas as both a mendicant friar and biblical theologian. Indeed, by profession, Thomas was a Master of the Sacred Page and not a philosopher as this word often had a pejorative connotation at that time.¹³ He lectured on scripture throughout his professional life and most doubt he ever lectured

¹⁰ M.-D. Chenu, “The Masters of the Theological ‘Science,’” *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, trans. J. Taylor and L. Little (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 291.

¹¹ Mark D. Jordan, *Rewritten Theology: Aquinas after his Readers* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 1–17.

¹² See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 124.

¹³ Jordan, *Rewritten Theology: Aquinas after his Readers*, p. 154.

on his own systematic works.¹⁴ As Chenu has argued, Thomas' most rational arguments must never be understood merely as ends in themselves¹⁵ or as rationalistic proofs for the articles of faith. They are, instead, analogical expressions (*ana-logia* = saying again) of that which is revealed by God in scripture. For Thomas, *sacra doctrina* is *sacra scriptura*¹⁶ and philosophical arguments are useful only "for the greater manifestation of those things which are handed down [*traditio*] in this science."¹⁷ Therefore, as Jean-Pierre Torrell has remarked, "If we wish . . . to get a slightly less one-sided idea of the whole theologian and his method, it is imperative to read and use in a much deeper fashion these biblical commentaries in parallel with the great systematic works."¹⁸

1. The Mendicant Thomas of ST I.1.1-10

One of the defining characteristics of the mendicants during this period was their extraordinary sensitivity to the distress of sinners and needs of all people, especially the poor. As Chenu tells us, "All of the new apostles, from Robert of Abrisselles (died 1117) to Francis of Assisi, addressed their wonderful message to the little people of the shops and cellars — 'in the winecellars, in weavers' shops, and in other such subterranean hovels' . . . to the unfortunate ones with neither fire nor shelter, to the serfs bound to the soil."¹⁹

In his own way, Thomas also displays a profound sensitivity to the needs of others and the responsibility of ecclesiastics to serve their needs selflessly. As is well-known, Thomas dedicates his *Summa Theologiae* not only to the advanced but especially to the beginner whom the teacher of Catholic faith has a greater responsibility to serve according to Paul: "As unto little ones in Christ, I gave you milk to drink not meat" (1 Cor 3:1-2). Whether this refers to beginners at the university,²⁰ the *fratres communes* of the Dominican

¹⁴ An exception to this is Leonard Boyle, "The Setting of the *Summa Theologiae* of Saint Thomas" *Facing History: A Different Thomas Aquinas* (Louvain-La-Neuve, 2000) and M. Michelle Mulchahey, "First the Bow is Bent in Study . . .:" *Dominican Education Before 1350* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1988).

¹⁵ Chenu, *Toward Understanding St. Thomas*, p. 322.

¹⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.1.10. (Tarini, Italy: Marietti, 1820). All English translations, unless otherwise noted, will come from *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1948).

¹⁷ *ST I.1.5 ad 2* (my translation). See also *I.1.8 ad 2*.

¹⁸ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, Vol. I, trans. R. Royal (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 55.

¹⁹ Chenu, "The Evangelical Awakening," *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, p. 242.

²⁰ See John I. Jenkins, *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 79–98.

studium,²¹ or both, Thomas' scriptural commentary suggests that the *incipientes* or *parvuli in Christo* are the beginners in the faith, who are still living according to the flesh and whose lives are marked by jealousy, conflict, and vanity with their mind set on fleshly things.²² As future preachers and teachers, they are going to be entrusted with the task of guiding others through exemplary living and their knowledge of Christian faith. Thus they are in need of sound teaching (*doctrina sana*) in moral theology and justice, not in vain teaching of the world (*doctrina vana*) or the strong meat of advanced mystical teachings.²³ Moreover, since the subject of this teaching is God, who is the beginning and end of all things and is not available through sensory perception, it is imperative for students to set their minds on God's revelation in scripture. Yet, since understanding comes through the senses, students must also be led from what they already know to that which transcends their finite intellect, if they are to be formed to the image of God in Christ. Hence, in order to help his students understand the transcendent subject matter of theology Thomas argues both deductively and inductively, that is, by both revelation in scripture and the world of sense²⁴ in order to provide basic instruction in moral theology and pastoral care. As the *sed contras* of articles 1 and 2 from the first *quaestio* make clear: "this science pertains to the instruction of scripture which is inspired by God 'to teach, reprove, correct, and instruct in justice' (2 Tim. 3:16) . . . 'whereby saving faith is begotten, nourished, protected, and strengthened.'"²⁵

Thomas' understanding of the responsibility to serve the needs of the little ones in Christ is not limited to the Prologue of the *Summa* where he complains that students, all too often, are not instructed according to the demands of the divine subject matter but according to the plan of a book or occasion of the argument. This concern is evident throughout his work, especially, as we shall see, in his theology of providence. Even in the first article of the *ST*, Thomas argues that a science of revelation is necessary "because the truth about God which reason could discover would only be known by a few, and that

²¹ See Leonard E. Boyle, "The Setting of the *Summa Theologiae* of Saint Thomas" p. 67.

²² See Anthony Keaty, "The Demands of Sacred Doctrine on 'Beginners,'" *New Blackfriars* 84 (2003), pp. 500–509.

²³ As Henri de Lubac points out, it was customary in medieval and patristic theology to speak of the theological education of beginners in terms of the "milk" of sacred scripture and not the "solid food" of mystical theology for the advanced. Origen, for example, states "The food of milk in holy Scriptures is said to be the first moral instruction which is given to beginners, as to little children. For one ought not to hand over immediately to beginning students what pertains to the deep and more secret sacraments; rather, to them are given correction of morals, improvement of discipline. . . ." *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, Vol. II, trans. by E.M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 200), p. 29.

²⁴ *ST* I.117.1.

²⁵ *ST* I.1.1; I.1.2.

after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors.”²⁶ While many commentators have concentrated on the apparent inference of the possibility of the natural knowledge of God,²⁷ Thomas’ point is also that a science of revelation is necessary precisely so that the knowledge of salvation may be known by all, especially those who are *not* intellectually sophisticated or who lack the time needed for philosophical speculation.

Thomas makes this point more forcefully in the opening pages of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* where he suggests that what is most wonderful about Christian revelation is that that “there is inspiration given to human minds, so that simple and untutored persons, filled with the Holy Spirit, come to possess instantaneously the highest wisdom and readiest eloquence . . . and not [through] violent assault of arms or the promise of pleasures [even] in the midst of the tyranny of persecution.”²⁸ Thomas’ sensitivity to the needs of the simple is further evident in his defense of the use of metaphors in scripture, so that “even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may by able to understand it;”²⁹ and for the fittingness of the incarnation itself:

It is easy for the human being to know and love another human being . . . Therefore in order to open for us all an easy way to God, God wanted to become human, so that even the little ones might contemplate and love someone who, so to speak, would be like them, and so, by what they are able to grasp they progress, little by little, toward what is perfect.³⁰

2. “*Deus Elegit Abjectos:*” *The Wisdom of this Science*

The teacher of Catholic faith not only has a greater responsibility to meet the needs of all people, especially the little ones, but also to order and arrange all things according to the wisdom of Christ and

²⁶ *ST* I.1.1.

²⁷ Despite Thomas’ statement in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* affirming the possibility of the natural knowledge of God, in the theological *Summa* he argues that “even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by divine revelation” (I.1.1). His point here is that there is no place in human nature or thought that is devoid of God’s grace, for even in the so-called ‘natural’ knowledge of God, it is necessary to be led by revelation. Unlike later Thomists, for Thomas there is no such thing as “pure nature” or pure natural reason which can operate apart from God. See Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 134–148.

²⁸ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, trans. A.C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), I.6.1.

²⁹ *ST* I.1.9.

³⁰ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, Vol. II, trans. R. Royal (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press), pp. 109–110, citing *De Rationibus Fidei* c. 5, n. 976.

to judge those things that are repugnant to this teaching according to 2 Cor 10:4-5: "Destroying the councils and every height/arrogance (*superbia*) that exalts itself against the knowledge of God."³¹ This passage is important because Thomas also cites it to justify the use of philosophy as "taking all understanding captive in obedience (*obsequium*) to Christ."³² To grasp its significance, it is necessary to recall Paul's discussion of spiritual warfare in which we rely not on the weapons of this world, but on the power of God to defeat the enemies of faith "who fight," Thomas states, "according to the flesh, or wage war [with the weapons of] riches, pleasures, and temporal honors and power."³³

In his commentary Thomas identifies three effects of spiritual warfare against the enemies of God. First, he argues that through God's army the rebels are confounded, by which he means the proud and haughty, those who elevate themselves above the power of God, such as political tyrants, Satan, and philosophers who rely on human wisdom but not on the power of God.³⁴ Against these rebels, Thomas cites Romans 12:16: "Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly," and condemns those who trust in the profundity of their own intellect and knowledge of the law or human wisdom. Against this, Thomas cites Isaiah 5:21: "Woe to you who are wise in your own eyes."³⁵ Second is the conversion of unbelievers and instructs us to take all knowledge captive in obedience to Christ to support the ministers of God. Here Thomas cites Psalm 149:8 to show God's judgment against political oppressors who use their power and knowledge for the own gain, but not for the well being of others: "binding their kings in shackles and their nobility in fetters of iron."³⁶ The third effect of spiritual warfare is correction of sin by means of one's own perfect obedience.³⁷ In this latter way, the disobedience of another forces one to perfect one's own obedience and humility before correcting another, so that "contraries are cured by contraries;"³⁸ the pride and arrogance of others may be

³¹ ST I.1.6 ad 2 (my translation): "*Consilia destruentes et omnem altitudinem extollentem se adversus scientiam Dei.*"

³² ST I.1.8.

³³ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *In Omnes S. Pauli Apostoli Epistolas, Super Primam Epistolam St. Pauli ad Corinthios*, (Taurini: Marietti, 1820), X.1, p. 485 (X = chapter; 1 = lecture). For English translations of Thomas' commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Hebrews, and Colossians by Fabian Larcher O.P., see <http://www.aquinas.avemaria.edu/Commentaries.asp>

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*: "*Vae qui sapientes estis in oculis vestris.*"

³⁶ *Ibid.*: "*Secundus effectus est conversio infidelium ad fidem. Et quantum ad hoc dicit: Et in captivitatem redigentes, etc.; quod quidem fit quando id quod homo scit, totum supponit ministerio Christi et fidei: A alligando reges eorum in compedibus, etc.*"

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 484–485.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 486: "*contraria enim contrariis curantur.*"

cured by the power and wisdom of God through one's perfect moral example.

Understood in terms of the problem of simoniac bishops and feudal exploitation, it should not be surprising to hear Thomas issue prophetic warnings against the powerful and extol the power of God and the virtues of lowliness, simplicity, and humility. Just as Thomas understands the responsibility to teach the beginner, as well as the advanced, he also understands, like all mendicants, that God has a special concern for the poor and lowly.

Consider, for example, his commentary on 1 Cor 1:27 where Thomas follows St. Paul and argues that God elects the rejected, the poor, the weak, and the powerless and gives them a position of power and authority in order that they might humble the proud, the wise, and strong. For, according to Thomas, Paul himself (whose name in Latin, *Paulus*, means small or little one), is the least of the apostles.³⁹ Yet, to the least is given a great responsibility, he states, for God elects those who are of little consequence in the world (Eph 3:8). Moreover, that Paul himself is the least of the apostles is a mark both of his humility and his dignity of being called by the grace of God⁴⁰ for, according to Matthew 11:25, God has hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to the "little ones" (*parvulis*).⁴¹ By doing so, Thomas argues, God grants the little ones "greater honor" by offering a position of great significance to an "insignificant person."⁴² As Thomas explains, God elects what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, that is, "those who trust in the wisdom of the world." God elects instead what is weak in the world, "such as peasants [and] plebes," he continues, "to shame the strong [and] the powerful of this world;" and God chooses the lowly, the ignoble, and the despised of this world to point out the defect of worldly nobility and put down the "grand opinion" that human beings have of them. Citing Isaiah 23:9, Thomas states that "The Lord of hosts had purposed it, to defile the pride of all glory [and] to dishonor all the honored of the earth."⁴³ In these ways, he concludes, God reveals God's own glory and goodness by electing and lifting up the nobodies of the world in order that none will glorify in themselves or in the things of the world. All worldly power and wisdom are vanquished by the cross of Christ and by God's election of the rejected (*abjecti*), the powerless (*impotentes*), the rustics

³⁹ Ibid., I.1, p. 221.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. "[*Q*]uod hoc nomen praemittit in signum humilitatis: nam Paulus idem est quod modicus: quod ad humilitatem pertinet. . . Consequenter describit eam a dignitate: et primo ponit modum adipiscendae dignitatis, cum dicit, Vocatus, secundum Heb. 5:4.

⁴² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. F.R. Larcher (Albany, NY: Magi, 1966), III.2, p. 126.

⁴³ *Super Primam Epistolam St. Pauli ad Corinthios*, I.4, pp. 232–234.

(*rusticos*), and the plebes (*plebijos*) “to destroy the wisdom of the wise and the prudence of the prudent” (1 Cor 1:19; Is 29:14).⁴⁴ As such, this wisdom is not recognized by “the rulers of the age” (1 Cor 2:8), such as kings and nobility, Satan, or philosophers, precisely because it is a wisdom that is “*contrarium sapientiae*,” “*contrarium potentiae*,” and “*contrarium nobilitati*” and thus excludes the excellence of race or class.⁴⁵ As Thomas was fond of saying, “God is no respecter of persons” or social class (Acts 10:34).

From this perspective, we can better understand why a science of revelation is necessary, for it is not only the transcendence of God that escapes the human intellect, but it is also a wisdom that is not of this world and reverses ordinary notions of wisdom and power. As Chenu tells us, the Gospel for 13th century mendicants is a “foolish” Gospel “that makes no sense to wise people” for it subverts what the ordinary mind is capable of understanding.⁴⁶ Therefore, if we are to order, arrange, and judge all things according to the wisdom of the cross and the poor Christ, then Thomas’ understanding of theology not only will require the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:15),⁴⁷ but also issue prophetic judgments against those who fail to grasp the implications of this wisdom to order and arrange their affairs for the best interest of others, especially the poor, weak, sick, ignoble, and the despised. This characteristic mendicant concern for the little ones and the nobodies explains Thomas’ harsh denunciations in the Prologue of the *Summa* as well as his meticulous arrangement of material according to the order of learning (*ordinem disciplinae*); and is evident throughout his writings, especially in the doctrines of providence and divine government which, when read in the light of his biblical commentaries, explain the ordering of this wisdom for the pastoral care of the church in any age.

II. Distributive Justice in Thomas’ Theology of Providence and Divine Government

Thomas’ theology of divine providence has often been taken as a rational argument to demonstrate that the world is governed by an

⁴⁴ It is significant that Thomas repeatedly mentions God’s election of the *abjecti*, given the meaning of that term in the Middle Ages. There was a descending scale of destitution and social ostracism among the poor at that time, from “disdain, contempt, and finally, repugnance.” “The weakness of the little man (*impotens*) is close to the vulgarity of the peasant (*ignobilis, vilis*, and even *vilissimus*.)” But at the bottom, the most repulsive pauper was the *abjectus*, who was “[d]irty, dressed in rags, foul smelling, [and] covered with sores.” Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History*, trans. A. Goldhammer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 3.

⁴⁵ *Super Primam Epistolam St. Pauli ad Corinthios*, I.4, pp. 232–233.

⁴⁶ Chenu, *Aquinas and His Role in Theology*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ *ST* I.1.6.

intelligible first cause which must exist necessarily if our experience of order is to be intelligible. Despite repeated assertions by Thomas that the doctrine of providence is an article of faith,⁴⁸ many neo-scholastic and neo-Thomist scholars have interpreted Thomas' argument for providence as an apologetic defense that can be demonstrated universally on the basis of reason. John P. Rock, for example, argues that the intelligible ordering of the world offers convincing proof for the world's governor⁴⁹ while the influential neo-scholastic, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, begins his great treatise on providence by laying out the rational foundation that "the greater does not come from the less, the more perfect does not come from the less perfect."⁵⁰

The problem with such interpretations, however, is that they either omit or contradict Thomas' biblical doctrine and suggest that the doctrine of providence can be deduced from a general philosophy of creation. For Thomas, however, such arguments can offer only a "vague and confused" understanding of God⁵¹ and overlook the specific ordering of the triune God as revealed in scripture. John Rock epitomizes this problem when he argues that "In man the lower parts are ordained to the higher, the vegetative and the sensitive to the intellectual; so in the universe all material creation is ordained to man — *to serve his bodily needs.*"⁵² While this may be true in the limited sense of the biological realm, whereby lower orders serve higher orders, it is patently false in the social and ecclesiastical realms where it is the precisely the higher orders that have the greater responsibility to follow more perfectly the self-giving of the triune God in the service of others. Just as mastership does not subject others to slavery or servitude, but guides them to their own best end for the common good,⁵³ so too does providence govern subordinates by superiors who use their wisdom and love for the well-being of others and for the common good. Although all members of the body of Christ are to have mutual care for one another, according to Paul, the greater honor and dignity goes to those parts which appear weaker and more dispensable (1 Cor 12:14-26).⁵⁴ As mendicant friar and Master of the Sacred Page, Thomas does not simply take over the pagan cosmology of Aristotle *tout court* but rather subjects it to a rigorous re-interpretation and critique according to the Gospel.

⁴⁸ See *ST* II-II.1.7; II-II.1.8 *ad* 1; *De Veritate* 14.9 *ad* 8.

⁴⁹ John P. Rock, "Divine Providence in St. Thomas Aquinas" *The Quest for the Absolute*, ed. by F.J. Adelman (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), pp. 67–103.

⁵⁰ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Providence*, trans. D.B. Rose (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1998), p. 3.

⁵¹ *ST* I.2.1 *ad* 1.

⁵² Rock, "Divine Providence in St. Thomas Aquinas," p. 84 (emphasis added).

⁵³ *ST* I.96.4.

⁵⁴ See *Super Primam Epistolam St. Pauli ad Corinthios*, XII, 3, pp. 356–358.

1. "To Give Food in Due Season:" Thomas' Theology of Providence Reconsidered

In his *Summa Theologiae* Thomas' defines providence as the "ratio ordinis rerum in finem,"⁵⁵ that is, the ordering of all things according to "right reason" to their final end in God. This ordering, Thomas states, is the ordering of all things in Christ who, according to Ephesians 1:11, "works all things according to the counsel of his will." Yet this ordering can also be seen from the world of sensory experience for those who take counsel in God through prayer.⁵⁶ Here, providence or prudence may be discerned by the power of God from the good that is in created things. Since this good must pre-exist in the eternal divine mind, which knows all things through God's own self-knowledge, this ordering must be certain even in the case of future contingents.⁵⁷ Moreover, since all things are created good, Thomas argues, this good may be seen from the way in which things or individuals are ordered to some end, just as, for example, the way individuals order their affairs to their own best end. But this general ordering is not a specifically Christological ordering of the goodness of creation, Thomas argues. Rather, the specific providence of God in Christ is understood in the way a king or man orders well the affairs of his family, city, or kingdom *to others*, and not to the end of his private self-interest, according to Matthew 24:45: "A wise and faithful servant whom the lord has appointed over his family."⁵⁸ Unfortunately, however, Thomas does not cite the full reference nor does he explain its proper context. Thus the meaning is not immediately clear to those less familiar with scripture or unaccustomed to a scriptural reading of the *Summa*.

Matthew 24:45 occurs in the context of Jesus' parables on the final judgment when he is warning his disciples to be careful and "watch" for they know not when their master will return. In this parable, the master of a house elects a servant to look after his household while the master goes away. The full reference explains that the servant is elected to watch over the household, specifically, to "give food in due season." Thus, the goodness of created things that bears witness to God's providence is seen when elected servants take care of the needs of others, principally, by giving food to those in need. This refers not only to the spiritual nourishment of sound teaching, preaching, and administering the sacraments, but also to the prudent

⁵⁵ *ST* I.22.1.

⁵⁶ *ST* I.22.1 *ad* 1.

⁵⁷ See Harm Goris, "Divine Foreknowledge, Providence, Predestination, and Human Freedom" *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. by R.V. Nieuwenhove and J. Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 2005), pp. 99–122.

⁵⁸ *ST* I.22.1.

distribution of the wealth of the church to others. Thomas makes this point repeatedly in both of his commentaries on this passage.

In his collection of Patristic authors, the *Catena Aurea*, Thomas turns to Hilary and states that this passage offers a “general exhortation to all in common to unwearied vigilance,” although it also includes “a special charge to the rulers of the people, that is, the bishops, to be watchful for the Lord’s return.”⁵⁹ More specifically, Thomas argues that the “literal sense” commands the rulers and prelates of the church to be “faithful in dispensing the revenues of the Church,” not to “devour . . . that which belongs to widows” but to “remember the poor” and “be prudent [in] understanding the cases of them that are in need, whence they come to be, what has been the education and what are the necessities of each.”⁶⁰ Thus, “to give food in due season” pertains to the knowledge and execution of good government, principally, by bishops, as Thomas cites the same passage in his article on the bishops.⁶¹ “As the Lord repeats to Peter,” Thomas states, “Feed, feed, feed my sheep” (John 21:17). “Feed them by word, feed them by example, and feed them with temporal assistance.”⁶² In the *Catena Aurea* on John 21, also cited in his article on bishops,⁶³ Thomas further explains that Jesus repeated this command to Peter three times because Peter denied him three times and to “show of what importance He esteems the superintendence of His own sheep, and how He regards it as the greatest proof of love to Him.”⁶⁴ Accordingly, Thomas states that

to feed the sheep is to support the believers in Christ from falling from the faith, to provide earthly sustenance for those under us, to preach and exemplify with all our preaching by our lives, to resist adversaries, to correct wanderers. [However] they who feed Christ’s sheep, as if they were their own, not Christ’s . . . are moved by lust of glory, power, gain, not by the love of obeying, ministering, pleasing God. Let us love, therefore, not ourselves, but Him, and in feeding His sheep, seek not our own, but the things which are His.⁶⁵

Unfortunately, Thomas laments, there are many who, in the words of Philippians 2:21, “look after their own interests, [but few who look after] those of Jesus Christ” (RSV).⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: St. Matthew*, Vol. I, trans. J.H. Cardinal Newman (London: St. Austin Press, 1999), p. 838.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 839–840.

⁶¹ *ST II-II.185.1.*

⁶² *In Matthaeum Evangelistam Expositio*, XXIV, p. 226 in *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 10 (Parma: Fiacadori, 1852–1873), Taurini, Italy: Marietti, 1820): “*Pasce, pasce, pasce oves meas.*” *Pasce verbo, pasce exemplo, pasce temporalis subsidio.*”

⁶³ *ST II-II.185.1.*

⁶⁴ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: St. John*, Vol. I, trans. by J.H. Cardinal Newman (London: St Austin Press, 1999), p. 623.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 624.

For rare indeed is such a faithful servant serving his Master for his Master's sake, feeding Christ's sheep not for his own [profit] but for the love of Christ, skilled to discern the abilities, the life, and the manner of those put under him, whom the Lord sets over, that is, who is called by God, and has not thrust himself in.⁶⁷

After discussing the literal sense as "to give food in due season," Thomas immediately turns to the anagogical sense of eternal awards and punishments. For those who give to the needy, he suggests, especially those who instruct others in the ways of God's justice, the maximum award shall be forthcoming, according to Matthew 24:47, "he will be set over all his possessions." For those faithful and prudent servants, who are called by God and who feed Christ's sheep, they shall preside over all of God's goods in eternal beatitude and union with Christ.⁶⁸ According to Daniel 12:3: "those who teach, they will be as the splendor of the firmament, and those who enlighten many in justice, as the stars for ever and ever."⁶⁹ However, for those in positions of power and authority who look after their own interests, setting an "evil example" to the flock, the maximum punishment shall be exacted. According to Micah 3:9-10: "Hear this you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong" (RSV).⁷⁰ Thomas warns that elders in the church should not rule in this way, but according to what is written in 1 Peter 5:2: "Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock" (RSV).⁷¹

Clearly, then, if we adhere to scripture as the norm and understand the philosophy for its greater manifestation, then the particular ordering of all things in Christ to their end in God is evident whenever superiors provide for their subordinates through their exemplary apostolic life and the distribution of their resources to the poor. Here we not only see Thomas using the wisdom of scripture to issue prophetic denunciations against those who use church resources for their own gain, but we also see the specific way in which the *ratio ordinis rerum ad finem* of God's providence is evident in the pastoral care of the church on behalf of the poor and weak, so that ecclesial practice itself offers the strongest witness to the providential ordering of all things in Christ.

⁶⁶ *In Matthaeum Evangelistam Expositio*, XXIV, p. 226.

⁶⁷ *Catena Aurea: St. Matthew*, p. 838.

⁶⁸ *In Matthaeum Evangelistam Expositio*, XXIV, p. 227.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

2. *Divine Government and the Perfection of the Universe: Thomas Aquinas' Theology of the Gift*

Thomas' theology of divine government expands on this basic biblical meaning of providence. However, while Thomas locates his theology of providence in the doctrine of God, his theology of divine government is placed in his theology of creation. In this way, Thomas ensures both the perfection of God's providential knowledge and sovereign will and the perfection of creation, for government pertains to preserving creatures in their goodness and moving them to be a cause of goodness in others.⁷² In both ways, creatures themselves become the dignified executors and intermediary agents of God's goodness, all the more so as they are higher and nearer to God,⁷³ by participating in God through sharing their gifts with others.

Every creature participates in the divine goodness, so as to diffuse the goodness it possesses to others . . . So the more an agent is established in the share of the divine goodness, so much the more does it strive to transmit its perfections to others as far as possible.⁷⁴

Hence, for Thomas, participation in the life of God is predicated, first, upon receiving God's wisdom and love (the essential attributes of the Son and Holy Spirit), and, second, by using them for other creatures. This is the "morality of divinization" whereby creatures are enabled to attain their own perfection through perfecting the agency of others, especially those who enjoy the very least of God's benefits. The hope and expectation of receiving these gifts of God's life is that these creatures too may also be enriched in divine goodness and thus become a cause of goodness in others still, the net result being nothing less than the perfection of the universe itself. Since God is the "very essence of goodness" and since

[the] highest degree of goodness in any practical order, design, or knowledge . . . consists in knowing the individuals acted upon, as the best physician is not the one who can only give his attention to general principles, but who can consider the least details . . . we must say that God has the design of government of all things, *even of the very least.*⁷⁵

Indeed, the government of God, he continues, "will be so much the better *in the degree the things governed are brought to perfection.*"⁷⁶ As Thomas states in his *De Veritate*:

⁷² *ST* I.103.4.

⁷³ *ST* I.104.2.

⁷⁴ *ST* I.106.4.

⁷⁵ *ST* I.103.6 (emphasis added).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

The ordering of the universe, as a result of the outpouring of God's goodness, [requires that] superior creatures have that not only by which they are good in themselves, but especially that by which they are the causes of goodness for other things which participate at the greatest remove [*in extremis*] from God's goodness.⁷⁷

Thus, for Thomas, the right ordering of God's government is accomplished by certain creatures that are blessed with abundance by using the gifts of their knowledge and love for others whose need is extreme. This pertains not only to the most excellent spiritual gifts of administering the sacraments and teaching doctrine, but also, and more importantly in cases of extreme need, to sharing their wealth with those in need.⁷⁸ Operating within the paternalistic framework of medieval theology, long before the Second Vatican Council's teachings on the laity, Thomas understands this responsibility to fall on all Christians, but especially the prelates of the church. Following Gregory the Great, Thomas maintains the radical position that the highest creatures, such as bishops, have the greatest responsibility to follow the perfect self-giving of the poor Christ by undertaking any hardship and even sacrificing their lives for the salvation of others and for the just distribution of wealth to the poor.⁷⁹ Although Thomas, unlike his Franciscan counterparts, does not hold that the renunciation of wealth is the mark of spiritual perfection, he does state that the perfection of one's spiritual life and love of God may be judged from the intensity of this love and from what one is willing to give up, suffer, and sacrifice for others.

The perfection of divine providence requires that the excess of certain things over others be reduced to a suitable order. Now this is done when one makes available some good for those who have less, from the abundance of those who have more. So, since the perfection of the universe requires that certain things participate in the divine goodness more than others . . . the perfection of divine providence demands that the execution of the divine rule be accomplished by those that participate more in divine goodness.⁸⁰

Yet the government of God by superiors over inferiors is not something that human beings can accomplish on their own. It is only possible through the wisdom of the Son and the love of God poured into the heart through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). Indeed, while government is accomplished by means of a descending hierarchy of secondary agents, it is always primarily the love of God

⁷⁷ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* 5.8 in *Providence and Predestination: Truth Qs. 5 & 6*, trans R.W. Mulligan (South Bend, IN: Henry Regency, 1961).

⁷⁸ See *ST* II-II.188.6; II-II.182.1.

⁷⁹ See *The Perfection of the Spiritual Life* translated as *The Religious State* by Rev. Procter (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), pp. 81–82, 93–94.

⁸⁰ *SCG* III.77.5.

that enables creatures to attain their own their perfection through distributing their abundance to others. Thomas' understanding of the *perichoretic* indwelling of the Trinity in creation makes it clear that what is accomplished by creatures is also, and more fundamentally, the Trinitarian action of God who accomplishes even greater works through other creatures than Christ did himself, for according to John 14:12: "the works that I do, he shall also do, and greater works than these shall he do."⁸¹ And what could be greater, Thomas asks, than giving the power to work miracles to others for the justification of the unrighteous.⁸² This is even greater than the creation of the world itself, for the world will one day be no more, but the justification of the unrighteous will endure forever. Moreover, these works are even greater than the works of Christ not simply because they are greater in number but also because they are accomplished by Christ through others *less than he*. In this way even simple and illiterate fishermen are lifted up and included in God's work of salvation. Even Jesus was unable to convert the young rich man, Thomas notes, but Peter and others had brought many more to the faith so that there was not a needy person among them and distribution was made to each as they had need (Acts 4:33).⁸³

III. Some Implications for Ecclesial Practice

Thomas' theology of divine providence and government is centered on the triune self-giving of God's Word and Spirit. Since the church is the mystical body of Christ, it has the principal responsibility of preaching, teaching, and exemplifying the providential goodness of God in its work for salvation. Hence, providence is not only the eternal plan of God that provides everything with a meaning and a place for its existence. It is also the dynamic action of the Trinity in and through human beings who mediate God's wisdom and love to others.

From this radical theocentric view of God in creation and creation in God, we can now consider some of the implications for ecclesial practice today. Clearly, reading Thomas in the context of 13th century mendicancy and through his biblical commentaries make it clear that the church's work in both liturgy and temporal governance must extend the wealth of its resources to others, the sinner, the sick, and the poor. Fundamental to this mission is that the church must not simply teach, preach, and administer the sacraments, but also testify through the social, political, and economic action of all its members

⁸¹ *ST* I.105.8.

⁸² *ST* III.43.4 *ad* 2. See also *Catena Aurea: St. John*, p. 459.

⁸³ See *Evangelium Joannis*, XIV, 3, p. 550.

to the providential goodness of God who works all things together for the good (Rom 8:28). Only in this way can the church be the light of the world to all the nations. And since this light comes from God and appears foolish to worldly wisdom and values, the church must not only center itself in the love of God, but must also be prepared to be rejected by a world that is perishing (1 Cor 1:18). Moreover, since the veracity of its witness will be judged by the intensity with which it is ready to suffer and sacrifice itself for the salvation of others, the church must also consider whether its witness resembles and justifies the wisdom and power of the world or the wisdom and power of God in the perfect poverty of the cross of Christ. As Thomas states, since divine truths are most clearly revealed not in great or noble things, but in those things that are the furthest from God,⁸⁴ the church's public witness must consist essentially in the sublation (*aufhebung*) of its hierarchy while distancing itself from worldly semblances of power and glory. In this way the church not only will carry out its mission to those in the greatest need but will also set an example that will lead the faithful and that will allow it to defend itself from the many detractors who continue to accuse it, rightly or wrongly, of avarice, pride, or corruption. This pertains to all members of the mystical body, but especially to its rulers. For, as Thomas was fond of saying, "If the blind lead the blind, they will both fall into a pit" (Mt 14:15).

This is not of course to say that wealth in the church is a sin. It is only to point out that wealth is often a temptation to sin as well as a cause of pride that should not exist in the church.⁸⁵ Hence, if the church is seriously committed to the spiritual and material transformation of an increasingly globalized world, perhaps, according to the wisdom of the cross, it should also consider the ways in which its own wealth and abundance both model and justify human ambitions to achieve wealth and power in the private sector as well as undermine the church's ability to convert others from their exalted opinion of worldly glory and influence. Indeed, if contraries are cured by contraries, then it seems that in an age of gross materialism and an ever widening chasm between rich and poor, the church has the greatest charge to teach through an apostolic life that trusts all things into God's good hands, even in poverty, so that others may know that they too may truly gain their life only as they are prepared to lose it and become servant of all (Mark 8:35; 10:43-44).

In attempting to meet the challenges of the world today, there is no easy way for the church to live up to such a high standard of ecclesial conduct or even to anticipate the practical and disruptive

⁸⁴ *ST* I.1.9 *ad* 3.

⁸⁵ *ST* III.40.1 *ad* 1.

implications of embracing such a radical doctrine. It is possible only through God, through cleaving to God and eschewing the temptations of worldly glory and temporal honors that others might be encouraged and enabled by God to do the same. As the great lives of the saints readily testify both in word and deed, this is possible only to those who are called and enabled by grace to order, direct, and judge all things for the greater honor and glory of God, his church, and all creation, especially, as Thomas would say, for the least, *etiam minimorum*.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested an alternative way of reading Thomas Aquinas' theology of providence as a mendicant friar and biblical theologian who uses philosophy for the greater understanding of scripture for moral theology and pastoral care in the church. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to outline a practical ecclesiology for local parishes, bishoprics, or papal government, but to set forth the biblical and doctrinal foundation for that activity in the being and activity of the triune God. It is the hope that others will similarly revisit Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* in light of his biblical commentaries and historical context so as to discover other gems of saving wisdom that the Angelic Doctor has yet to teach.

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