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### **Religion, the Greatest of the Moral Virtues**

The virtue of religion is a virtue that many in our day would be surprised to hear spoken of as a virtue because we usually hear of it referring to a system of beliefs. In reality, though, it is a virtue that is just as important as it is forgotten. In fact, St. Thomas speaks of it as the greatest of the moral virtues (cf., II-II q.81 a.6 s.c.). In this essay we will enquire into its treatment by the Common Doctor. This will prove especially useful because, as Pius XI pointed out, St. Thomas, who “brought the whole science of morals back to the theory of the virtues and gifts,” (*Studiorum Ducem*, 21)<sup>1</sup> was particularly well suited to establish the order among the virtues. As the same pontiff said, if anyone “desires to understand fully all the implications of the commandment to love God ... he must have recourse in the first place to the Angelic Doctor” (ibid.). For Aquinas, though, any true virtue is an implication of the commandment to love God; consequently, by having recourse to his writings, we can come to have a proper understanding of the virtue of religion - both in itself and in its relationship to the love of God.

Aquinas teaches that a virtue can only be properly (or “simply”) called a virtue to the extent that it flows from the love of God (cf., I-II q.65 a.2c., I-II q.84 a.1 ad.1 and I-II q.71 a.4c.) Moreover, although he often discusses virtues both as natural and acquired, he does not seem to do this regarding religion. Accordingly, even if he often times quotes non-Christians such as Cicero, Macrobius and Valerius Maximus (II-II q.80 a.1 and q.95

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<sup>1</sup> *The Papal Encyclicals: 1903–1939*, ed. Claudia Carlen (Ypsilanti, MI: The Pierian Press, 1990), 254.

a.3 resp.) when explaining the virtue, he treats it as an infused virtue that is not acquired by natural means. As Jean Porter noted, “he assumes that true religion will be grounded in grace and guided in its expressions by the theological virtues, above all by charity (in particular, *Ia IIae*, q. 81, a. 5, ad 1; *Ia IIae*, q. 82, a. 2).” In keeping with the Angelic Doctor, therefore, we will be treating it as an infused virtue that is the consequence of God’s grace (cf., *I-II q.100 a.12c.*). In doing so, our emphasis will be on understanding the virtue of religion in itself by comparing it to the other virtues. Aquinas himself had the opportunity to fully consider its acts (*II-II q.82*) and opposite vices (*II-II q.97*), but lack of space will force us to consider it primarily in itself and in its relation to other virtues. Even so, the fact that “habits are known by their acts, and acts by their objects” (*II-II q.4 a.1 resp.*) will necessarily cause us to take note of some of its acts and objects as well.

The first thing to understand about it, then, is that it is a virtue. Among the various definitions of virtue, one of the simplest is that of the Catechism, which calls it a “habitual and firm disposition to do the good” (CCC 1803).<sup>2</sup> This pithy definition really gets at the heart of the matter, yet its brevity necessarily causes it to leave out certain aspects of virtue that will be useful for us to keep in mind. Foremost among these is that God, who is our last End, is not only the principle of “the entire moral order” (*I-II q.72 a.5c.*), but also the principle of any true and perfect virtue, which He necessarily infuses due to its supernatural character (*I-II q.65 a.2c.*). For this reason, St. Augustine’s definition, stating that virtue is a “good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously,

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 443.

of which no one can make bad use, which God forms in us, without us” (I-II q.55 a.4 obj.1) is good to keep in mind.

All the virtues, as principles of action (I-II q.66 a.3c.), enable a person to do the good. Actually, they even go beyond this by making both the individual good and his act good (II-II q.81 a.2c.). He must be good, after all, if he is going to be able to do truly virtuous acts. Just as act follows upon being, the kinds of actions a person does depend on the kind of person he is. So it is only possible for someone to perform truly good acts if he possesses virtue, and the performing of truly good acts will be proof that he possesses virtue; as Aquinas says, “a thing is known by its operation” (Suppl. q.42 a.4 ad.1). The different virtues, though, engender different kinds of acts and it is the difference among the acts that specifies the differences among the virtues (II-II q.184 a.1 obj.3).

In the case of religion, all of its acts pertain to showing due honor or worship to God (II-II q.81 a.4c.; II-II q.81 a.5 and q.95 a.2 obj.2), considered as “the first principle of the creation and government of things” (II-II q.81 a.3c.). Its acts are distinguished from those of other virtues by the fact that they show Him the reverence that is due the One Who is infinitely more excellent than any other being (II-II q.81 a.4c.). In view of the fact that the act of rendering to another his due “has the aspect of good” inasmuch as it enables the one paying the debt to be suitably ordered to the other (and order “comes under the aspect of good”), St. Thomas proves that religion is a virtue (II-II q.81 a.2c.). In other words, since its orderly act is good and virtue is a good operative habit that both produces good works (I-II q.55 a.3c.) and is made known by its acts (cf., II-II q.4 a.1 resp.), it must itself be a virtue.

Its internal acts, which are its most important, are devotion (which prepares the will for its external acts: II-II q.82 a.2c.) and prayer. The proper and immediate acts it elicits are sacrifice, service, worship, adoration and the like (cf., q.81 a.1 ad.1), which, by reason of their very nature, pertain to the reverence due to God (II-II q.81 a.4 ad.2) and the manifestation of the individual's subjection to Him (q.81 a.3 ad.2). However, it also has other acts that it brings about by commanding all of the other moral virtues (II-II q.81 a.4 ad.1)<sup>3</sup> towards its end, which is God (II-II q.81 a.5c.). It does this by "commanding" any given deed at all to be done in honor of God (II-II q.81 a.4 ad.2).

As already mentioned, of all the acts that come under religion, the interior ones are most important. This is because interior acts cause exterior acts (I-II q.78 a.1 ad.3) inasmuch as the interior act of the will is directed to the end or the goal (I-II q.18 a.6 resp.), which is the first principal of any moral action (I-II q.8 a.2c.). In other words, whatever we intend to do internally, we do for the sake of some goal and that goal influences us to direct our external actions in pursuit of it. For this reason, St. Thomas notes that the interior act "is compared to the external act, as form to matter" (I-II q.18 a.6 ad.2) in the sense that the interior act informs it as to what its goal is and provides the impetus to it that causes it to go after it. With all of this in mind, he argues that religion's internal acts not only take precedence to the others, but even belong to it essentially, whereas all of its external acts must be considered secondary and subordinate (II-II q.81 a.7c.).

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<sup>3</sup> St. Thomas simply says it commands "all other virtues," but seeing that he explicitly says the theological virtues command religion (II-II q.81 a.5 ad.1), it seems he means by this 'all other moral virtues.'

The principal interior act of religion is that of devotion (II-II q.104 a.3 ad.1), which is an act of the will that causes a man to subject himself readily to the service of God (II-II q.82 a.3c.). Because it is not possible to always explicitly perform acts of reverence, devotion makes it possible to *always* be ‘religious’ on account of the readiness of the will. For a man to be religious, though, he also needs to be ready to serve God in his intellect. The virtue of prayer, which comes immediately after devotion among religion’s principal acts (II-II q.83 a.3 ad.1), is that which religion moves in this regard.

Some might be surprised that St. Thomas does not consider prayer to be religion’s principal act; it is able to move the intellect, which is not only “higher and nobler” than the will (I q. 82 a.3c.), but directs it, as well (II-II q. 23 a.6 obj.1). The intellect, after all, is “the principle of human and moral acts” (I-II q.19 a.1 ad.3).<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, if religion, which resides in the will (II-II q.83 a.3 obj. 1), is able to move the intellectual part of man by means of prayer, it would seem that this is religion’s most principal virtue on account of its excellence. However, we have to keep in mind that religion is a moral virtue and there can only be *moral* virtue when the will is involved. Actually, the word ‘moral’ comes from the Latin word, ‘*mos*,’ which implies an inclination to something, and an inclination pertains to the desiring power and not the intellect (I-II q.58 a.1c.). Besides, all actions are determined to be good or bad based on the inclination or object of the will (I q.48 a.1 ad.2).

So even if the intellect can be considered the ultimate principle of moral acts (since the will can only pursue the good that is made known to it by the intellect), the will can also be considered “the principle of moral actions” (I-II q.20 a.6c.) inasmuch as it is

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<sup>4</sup> The text actually says that ‘reason’ is, but the intellect and the reason are the same power; cf., I q.79 a.8c.

necessarily involved in an act considered as moral. For this reason, Aristotle said that moral virtue is “a habit of choosing” (cf., I-II q.59 a.1c.). The will, then, is involved as a mover in every moral virtue and even if prayer is able to move the intellect, it presupposes a movement of the will. Besides, religion, which is in the will, is more proximately related to devotion (which also pertains directly to the will), whereas prayer follows immediately after as religion’s secondary act. In other words, the fact that prayer’s act is primarily interior secures its place as one of religion’s two principal acts, but the fact that it “belongs to the intellective part” (II-II q.83 a.3c.) precludes the possibility of its being what devotion is; namely, the “chief of the acts of religion” (q.83 a.3 ad.1).

So far, we have investigated the relationship between religion and its internal acts of devotion and prayer, but it has many other acts such as worshipping (II-II q.81 a.3 obj.2; q.81 a.1 ad.3), adoring (II-II q.84), taking vows (II-II q.88 a.5), and sacrificing (ibid.). Actually, any act that it commands via another virtue can be considered one of its acts because “there is only a logical difference between a virtue that is active of itself, and a virtue that is active through the command of another virtue” (I-II q.60 a.3 ad.2). Religion commands many other virtues, though, one example of which is almsgiving when it is performed as a sacrifice to placate God (II-II q.32 a.1 ad.2). Moreover, acts such as those of gratitude (II-II q.106 a.1 ad.1), when directed towards its end can be considered its acts, and since it is able to direct any given act at all that needs to be directed towards it, its acts are potentially infinite. Among them, St. Thomas mentions any acts done in God’s honor (II-II q.81 a.4 obj.3), as well as such particular ones as visiting the fatherless and keeping “oneself unspotted from this world” (II-II q.81 a.1 ad.1).

Because the act of directing other acts to their end “belongs to the commanding virtue” (II-II q.88 a.5c.), the excellence of religion is made manifest. Interestingly, though, when its elicited or commanded acts are referred to God, religion takes the name of sanctity, which is essentially the same as religion and is in some way distinguished from it in that it generally refers to the disposition to serve God. The sense seems to be that when a man is actually adoring God in spirit and in truth, he can be called religious, whereas if he needs to prepare himself to do so in some way or if his act of adoration is in some way in need of being further referred to God, he exercises religion under the name of sanctity, the purity and firmness of which is necessary to perform religion’s acts well or to refer them to God (cf., II-II q.81 a.8c.).

So religion, which sometimes goes by the name of sanctity, directs various acts to its own end, which is God. Since the end always excels the means in excellence (I-II q.66 a.3; I-II q.111 a.5 resp.) and the virtue which is concerned with the end commands the virtues which are concerned with the means (II-II q.81 a.1 ad.1), it is understandable that St. Thomas would say religion commands the other moral virtues.<sup>5</sup> In order to really understand religion, though, it is necessary to investigate the virtues that move it. Despite religion’s excellence, it is commanded, first of all, by the theological virtues, which cause the very act of religion (II-II q.81 a.5 ad.1).

Religion has worship as both its matter and object, and its acts do not reach out to God Himself as the object - as the acts of the theological virtues do (II-II q.81 a.5c). We should not be surprised, then, that the greater proximity they have to the Ultimate End allows them to direct the acts of religion. Even if religion excels the other moral virtues

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<sup>5</sup> See II-II q.81 a.4 ad.1 and footnote 3.

due to the fact that it “approaches nearer to God” than they do, it remains one of the moral virtues, which are always about the *means* to arriving at God (II-II q.81 a.6c), whereas the theological virtues, again, have “God Himself, Who is the last end of all” as their object (I-II q.62 a.2 resp.). St. Augustine rightly said, therefore, that religion’s object (the worship of God) is performed “by faith, hope and charity” (II-II q.81 a.5 ad.1). Nevertheless, charity, which is the greatest of these, is more than any other virtue said to direct all the other virtues (II-II q.23 a.8 ad.3). Consequently, it is said to be the “ultimate form” of all the virtues (II-II q.24 a.12 ad.5) and the “principle of religion” in particular; actually, it moves men to worship God by means of religion and thereby directs religion’s acts to its own object (cf., II-II q.83 a.15c.).

After the theological virtues, St. Thomas gives the intellectual virtues primacy in the order of excellence. These virtues “regard the reason itself,” the order of which determines the varying degrees of good among the virtues (II-II q.161 a.5c.). Given that it is natural for inferiors to be moved by their superiors (I-II q.9 a.6 obj.1), one might assume that these virtues would, therefore, move the virtue of religion, as well.

The fact is, though, that the virtues of the speculative intellect (wisdom, science and understanding) do not directly involve themselves in practical affairs and the virtue of art (a virtue of the practical intellect along with prudence) is about external things that can be made, and not directly about moral acts. Therefore, among the five intellectual virtues, the virtue of prudence, whose primary act is to command (II-II q.47 a.8), is the only one that directs moral actions. Its dignity is so great in the realm of morals, in fact, that St. Thomas says it directs *all* moral actions (I-II q.60 a.1 ad.1) including, of course, those of religion, while excluding (in some sense, at least) those of the theological virtues

which themselves direct prudence (cf., e.g., I-II q.65 a.4 ad.1).

When St. Thomas orders the virtues according to their excellence, he places, as we have seen, the theological virtues first, followed by the intellectual virtues. Immediately after the intellectual virtues, though, he places justice (II-II q.161 a.5c.). One might reasonably assume, therefore, that justice, too, commands religion. This case, though, is not as clear as it was in regard to that of the theological virtues and prudence.

The problem, first of all, is that St. Thomas says religion is the greatest of all the moral virtues (II-II q.81 a.6 s.c.), and justice is a moral virtue. It syllogistically follows, therefore, that religion is superior to justice;<sup>6</sup> consequently, it seems incongruous that justice could command it. In support of this conclusion, St. Thomas himself says, “every deed, in so far as it is done in God’s honour, belongs to religion” (II-II q.81 a.4 ad.2) and it would seem that any infused moral virtue (including those of justice) would be done in honor of God. If acts of infused justice “belong to” religion, though, it is unclear why Aquinas also teaches that general justice “directs the acts of all the virtues” (II-II q.58 a.6c.).

There does, however, seem to be a way out of our conundrum of having both of these virtues supposedly commanding all the other moral virtues. Religion (though under the name of sanctity, which is its synonym (II-II q.81 a.8 s.c.)), when considered as a general virtue, “directs the acts of all the virtues to the Divine good” just as justice considered generally “directs the acts of all the virtues” to the “human common good” (II-II q.81 a.8 ad.1; II-II q.59 a.1 ad.1). In other words, the end of religion is higher than

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<sup>6</sup> This does, in fact, seem to be true, as will be further argued below. Nevertheless, it is a mystery that in the body of II-II q.161 a.5, St. Thomas mentions justice first after the intellectual virtues instead of religion.

the end of justice. Another way of wording this is to say that its end is more remote because that which is divine transcends that which is common. “The more remote an end is,” though, “the more universal the agent to which it corresponds” (I-II q.18 a.7c.); in other words, religion, which is the agent moving various acts to the Divine good (which is more remote) is more universal than justice. Moreover, the virtue that pertains to the last end “commands the virtues or arts which are concerned about other ends which are secondary” (II-II q.23 a.4 ad.2) and as there is no end beyond the Divine good, religion must command justice. Finally, St. Thomas explicitly says that virtues such as charity and religion, “which are directed to the Divine good” are to be preferred (*praeferuntur*) to justice because “the Divine good surpasses all manner of human good” (II-II q.117 a.6c).

The consequence of all of this is that the virtue of religion, considered generally, apparently commands the virtue of justice. However, in view of the fact that religion is the “chief” part of justice (II-II q.122 a.1 resp.; cf., II-II q.81 a.4 s.c.) since justice essentially pertains to giving another his due (II-II q. 80 a.1c.),<sup>7</sup> there is still value in grasping some other principles regarding the way the two virtues relate to each other. We can do this by considering some practical examples. After all, the better we understand justice, the better we can understand the part of it known as religion,<sup>8</sup> and vice versa.

When considered generally, justice directs acts to its own end, which is the

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<sup>7</sup> It may be useful to point out that while justice has many kinds of parts, religion is technically a potential part, which is the kind of part that is “directed to certain secondary acts or matters, not having, as it were, the whole power of the principal virtue” (II-II q.48 a.1c.).

<sup>8</sup> It should be kept in mind, though, that religion is not a potential part of justice in the sense that a man is a potential part of animal, but rather in the sense that it is effected by justice’s power (II-II q.58 a.6c.); knowledge of one still aids knowledge of the other but not in the same way as if one were a potential part of the other.

common good (I-II q.60 a.3 ad.2). In this way, justice can be called ‘legal justice’ because the law also directs to the common good (I-II q.90 a.2c.). It can also be said to “direct the acts of all the virtues” (II-II q.58 a.6c.) or even be considered synonymous with every virtue (II-II q.58 a.4 ad.3). Additionally, the name of justice can be given to any act wherein something due is given to another (I-II q.60 a.3 ad.1). Since, therefore, religion gives what is due to an Other, any act of religion could be called an act of justice.

The two virtues are so closely related, in fact, that religion is said to be annexed to justice. Nevertheless, it falls short of the ‘perfection’ of justice regarding the notion of equality (II-II q.80 a.1c.), which is such an essential aspect of justice that it is called the “general form of justice” (II-II q.61 a.2 ad.2) – meaning that justice necessarily renders the “perfect due” to the one to whom one is indebted (I-II q.60 a.3 ad.1). Although this repayment might be “paid in the equivalent” (ibid.) when equality depends on proportion rather than quantity (II-II q.61 a.2c.), equality remains the ‘informing principle,’ as it were, of the virtue.

Since the true notion of justice consists in rendering to another his due according to equality (II-II q.80 a.1c.; q.58 a.11), religion clearly falls short of justice because there is no possibility of repaying God (Who gave us our very being) for all that He has given to us (II-II q.80 a.1c.). Moreover, according to St. Ambrose, “justice renders to each one what it his” (II-II q.58 a.11 s.c.), but, as St. Paul tells us, there is *nothing* we have that we have not received (1 Cor. 4:7; cf., II-II q.132 a.3c.) and even our very selves are not our own (cf., 1 Cor. 6:19). Consequently, all things are God’s and attaining equality (which is the “real mean between greater and less” (II-II q.58 a.10 resp.)) in our repayment is impossible; we we have nothing of our own that we can give. We can, in the end, only

say with the Psalmist, “What shall I render to the Lord for all the things that He hath rendered to me?” (Ps. 115:12; II-II q.80 a.1c).

By God’s grace, however, we can give to Him what is His due according to an “equality of proportion” (cf., II-II q.58 a.11c.), which is not an absolute equality, but one that takes into consideration “man’s ability and God’s acceptance” (II-II q.81 a.5 ad.3). In other words, what counts is the disposition of the will, so even if the ‘religious’ man fails to attain “the mean of justice” on account of an inability to render what is objectively the “equal due,” he is still worthy of praise (II-II q.80 a.1c; q.81 a.6 ad.1). In other words, God is satisfied if we accomplish whatever we are able to accomplish (II-II q.57 a.1 ad.3).

Another way that religion is distinguished from justice is that justice, “commonly so called” is observed among equals (II-II q.122 a.1c.; cf., I-II q.100 a.2 ad.2), whereas religion is always paid to God. A slightly different distinction is that justice “properly” pays to *anyone* that which is due to him (II-II q.122 a.6c.), whereas religion pays the debt to God in particular. In both of these distinctions, religion is more specific than justice and it obtains its distinctiveness in virtue of its relationship to God. Yet no matter how distinct it is, it is also closely related to justice due to the presupposition that the acts of religion are commanded by God and the fact that justice is the only virtue that, in itself, “implies the notion of duty” (I-II q.99 a.5 ad.1).

This connection of the two virtues in their reference to duty is most manifest in St. Thomas’ treatment of the Commandments, all of which, generally speaking, “belong to justice, inasmuch as they refer immediately to acts of justice” (II-II q.122 a.1c.). However, just as religion is the chief part of justice, the chief part of the Decalogue, or

the first table, belongs to religion in particular. In light of the fact that we are *commanded* to revere and honor God (especially by the first three precepts, which pertain to what is due to God (I-II q.60 a.3 ad.1)), the virtue of religion comes under the virtue of justice. What distinguishes religion from it in this context is that religion's object is to give God in particular the reverence and honor that He commands.

Though all the Commandments pertain to justice, the first three (as mentioned already) are specifically "about acts of religion" (II-II q.122 a.1c.), whereas the one about honoring parents is about piety and the last six are about "justice, properly so called" (II-II q.122 a.6c.). By the words, "properly so called," Thomas seems to mean that they refer to giving either a peer or anyone indiscriminately his due (see I-II q.60 a.3 ad.1 and q.100 a.2 ad.2 for this use of 'proper' justice).

Underlying this threefold division of the Decalogue is the varying degrees of ability to pay the debt. Although we certainly cannot pay to God what is called "the equal due" (cf., II-II q.80 a.1c.), we cannot pay it to our parents, either (II-II q.102 a.1c.). Being secondary causes of our being in some way, there is no way to fully repay them. With this in mind, it is manifest that the fourth Commandment is in a different category than the preceding ones, which refer to God. Yet it is also distinct from the following ones, which refer to our equals. The last six, which regard contracts of some sort "between one man and another" (I-II q.100 a.12 resp.), actually imply an ability to make an equal repayment; consequently, they are "about justice commonly so called, which is observed among equals" (II-II q.122 a.1c.).

Another interesting aspect of the ordering of the Commandments is that they proceed according to the "the order of excellence" (II-II q.102 a.3 s.c.). St. Thomas'

reasoning is that the “order of precepts is proportionate to the order of virtues, since the precepts of the Law prescribe acts of virtue.” He notices, moreover, that the “precepts pertaining to religion are given precedence as being of greatest importance.”

Consequently, “religion is the chief of the moral virtues” (II-II q.81 a.6 s.c.). The clear implication of this is that religion, apparently even considered as a special virtue that gives to God the worship that is His due, is more excellent than particular justice, which is treated in the last six precepts.

By way of conclusion, then, we find ourselves returning to the point made at the beginning; namely, religion is the “greatest of the moral virtues.” (II-II q.81 a.6 s.c.). We have seen that it can be considered preeminent among the moral virtues both when considered generally and when considered more properly. Thus, Jean Porter’s view that St. Thomas considers religion “preeminent among all the moral virtues, including justice”<sup>9</sup> seems to be true. The fact that it has charity as its principle (II-II q.82 a.2 ad.1) and God as its end (II-II q.81 a.5c.) as it leads the other moral virtues to the Divine Good (II-II q.81 a.8 ad.1) will hopefully not only convince us of its preeminence, but also spur us on to zealously embrace its object, the worship of God (II-II q.81 a.5 resp.).

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Porter, "The Virtue of Justice (IIa IIae, Qq. 58–122)" in, *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope, Moral Traditions Series (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 279.

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