

The Teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas
on the Virtue of Gratitude

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1. Introduction

As revealed in Scripture, “the fundamental virtue is to seek God with one’s whole heart in obedience to the divine will.”¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, the esteemed thirteenth century Catholic theologian and author of the comprehensive doctrinal work known as the *Summa Theologiae*, understood the connection between faith and moral actions as fundamental to man’s eternal happiness. Aquinas based his philosophical thought on Aristotelian principles, but he infused those principles with Christian faith.² So when St. Thomas set out to compile the complete teachings of the Catholic Church in such a way that even beginners could understand, he devoted himself to examining, in detail and in true Scholastic fashion, the good dispositions and actions which lead man to his Creator. This paper will examine St. Thomas’ work on the specific virtue of thankfulness or gratitude, as well as its opposing vice of ingratitude. And since St. Thomas understood that virtues are connected within the moral order, first the general topic of virtue and then the cardinal virtue of justice, to which gratitude is ordered, will be examined.

2. Virtue

In the second part of the *Summa*, St. Thomas turns his focus to man’s advance toward God, and in the second part of the second part, he examines the particular moral actions that lead to man’s perfect end of the beatific vision. In a general sense, St. Thomas describes human virtue as an operative habit, a good habit which produces good works.³ It renders both the human act, and the man himself, good.⁴ The rational human soul⁵ has powers or faculties which

¹ Edward J. Gratsch, *Aquinas’ Summa, An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Alba House, 1985), 167.

² John A. Hardon, “Meaning of Virtue in Thomas Aquinas”, *Great Catholic Books Newsletter* 11, no. 1, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/SPIRIT/MEANVIR.TXT>, accessed 17 April 2015.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 55, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II-II, 58, 3.

are potencies for action, possibilities for acts. These rational powers are inclined indifferently toward many actions, and need to be determined or disposed to acts by means of habits, i.e. human virtue.⁶ St. Thomas argues that virtue belongs to these powers, and disposes them to their best end.⁷

Since human virtue is a habit which disposes man toward good deeds, it is important to recognize the principles of man's actions. These are two in number: the intellect, which is man's faculty or power for knowledge; and the appetite, man's capacity for desires. St. Thomas teaches that every virtue perfects one of these powers.⁸ Those which perfect the intellect are called intellectual virtues, and those which govern the appetite are called the moral virtues; both are required for good deeds.⁹

Within the moral virtues, St. Thomas classifies the virtues whose subject matter is considered to be of utmost primacy as the principal, or cardinal virtues. He quotes Pope St. Gregory I, "The entire structure of good works is built on four virtues",¹⁰ and identifies them with respect to the power which they each perfect. First is prudence, which perfects the intellect; second is justice, which governs the rational appetite or will; third is temperance, which moderates the passions prone to excess; and fourth is fortitude, which strengthens passions against fears.¹¹ St. Thomas recognizes that these four are called the principal virtues because their subject matter is more universal or general in comparison to those of all other virtues. And consequently, all other virtues can be related to one of the four cardinal virtues. For example,

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 78, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I-II, 55, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 58, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I-II, 61, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

since justice is the cardinal virtue concerned with due actions between equals,¹² all virtues which perfect man in his operations with others fall under justice. These virtues, which are concerned with lesser matters, are described by St. Thomas as potential parts of the cardinal virtue. While they share in the core character of the cardinal virtue, they differ in some respect, too. In this manner, gratitude, which concerns repayment of a debt to a benefactor, falls under justice.¹³

3. Justice

Since gratitude shares in the principle character of its cardinal virtue, let us first examine justice. St. Thomas declares justice to be the greatest of the moral virtues, because it disposes man toward good action not in himself, but with respect to others.¹⁴ The common good of loving one's neighbor far exceeds the individual good of the virtuous person.¹⁵ Scripture uses the word justice in a variety of ways, as when Abraham is charged "to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice"¹⁶, and as in found in the book of Amos, "O you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth!"¹⁷ St. Thomas, however, uses the term specifically to mean giving the good which is owed to another person. He defines justice as the habit which inclines man, by a constant and unwavering will, to render to others that which is proportionally due.¹⁸ It establishes equality between individuals, as between a buyer and seller in the exchange of goods. It is a social norm which ensures fair and just dealings with others.¹⁹ Since it perfects the will, justice necessarily disposes man to good actions toward other persons. The actions must be voluntary, enduring, and persistent to such a degree that it becomes one's

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 60, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II-II, 58, 12.

¹⁶ *Gen.* 18:19, RSV, Catholic edition, 2nd edition.

¹⁷ *Amos.* 5:7.

¹⁸ Aquinas, II-II, 58, 11.

¹⁹ Gratsch, 171.

second nature to act for the good of others.²⁰ Thus, to be a just person, one must consistently perform just actions; it is not enough to simply recognize what is just.

St. Thomas identifies the virtues which are annexed or related to justice (its potential parts), and stresses that they, like justice, must be directed to the good of other persons. However, since they are potential parts of justice, they also must in some way “fall short of the perfection of justice”.²¹ Since the essence of justice concerns habitually willing what is due between equals, a related virtue can fall short in two ways.²² First, with respect to rendering what is due, but not as to an equal: this is the case when man considers all that he has been given by God. All of creation comes from God, and to suggest that man is capable of repaying even a small portion of what he owes is absurd; no matter what man offers, it will never be sufficient. St. Thomas therefore relates the virtue of religion to justice, since through religion, man offers service and worship to the Divine. A virtue can also fall short of its principal with respect to the actual good or due, and in this case there are two further aspects. The first is a debt which is owed and required by legal obligations, and this is the concern of justice itself. However, there is also a moral aspect of the just due. This is the debt which is not enforced by law, but which is required morally, as viewed from the perspective of the person to whom the debt is owed, and this is the concern of gratitude.²³

4. Gratitude

So here we finally see the relation between the virtue of gratitude and its cardinal virtue of justice: gratitude concerns the good of one’s neighbor (in this narrow case, a benefactor) and

²⁰ Aquinas, II-II, 58, 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80, 1.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

the repayment of something due (thanksgiving for gifts or favors). It makes sense that gratitude is annexed to justice because its essence is similar, i.e. it is concerned with paying back something owed. But there is a real difference in the universality of its object, so as stated previously, gratitude is classified as a potential part of its cardinal virtue. The difference lies primarily in the aspect of what is due, since that which is owed is not a legal obligation incurred through the exchange of goods but rather a debt owed because of the generosity and kindness of another. St. Thomas, in his continual search for exactitude, differentiates between the generality of the debts owed. Since justice is concerned with all operations between equal members of society, gratitude must necessarily be a 'lesser' virtue since it pertains to a specific type of debt, i.e. a moral debt rather than a legal obligation.²⁴ It is important to note that for St. Thomas, 'lesser' does not signify a virtue which can be ignored because of a lesser 'importance'; all virtues are connected, and the cultivation (and degradation) of one impacts another.

St. Thomas considers the virtue of gratitude in depth in Question 106 of the "Secunda Secundæ Partis" (Second Part of the Second Part) of the *Summa*. He takes up the question of whether gratitude is a distinct virtue from the other virtues, whether the circumstances of a beneficiary rightly influence a grateful response, whether one is always obligated to express thanks for favors bestowed, whether it is appropriate for gratitude to be deferred in some cases, and whether man should gauge his response of thanks by what was received or by the intent of the giver. He also considers whether it is necessary to repay the favor in kind.

Concerning the issue of whether gratitude should be classified as a distinct virtue, rather than as perhaps a related circumstance in justice, St. Thomas argues according to cause and effect. He states that what is owed corresponds to what was given, and so as he did in the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 106, 1.

treatise on justice, recognizes the relational positions (from higher to lower) of God, parents and country, figures of authority, and finally the benefactor. He points out that the debt owed to each is different, and therefore if religion is the virtue through which man is disposed to worship God, and piety is the virtue which inclines man to pay honor and reverence to parents and country, and if the virtue of observance guides man in his actions with those worthy of respect, then gratitude must be a separate virtue because man is still obliged to give thanks to the benefactor who bestows him favors. St. Thomas also acknowledges that it is reasonable that gratitude be classified as a distinct virtue from justice because the due is a moral debt, and repayment therefore must occur voluntarily and spontaneously, rather than by obligation as in a contractual agreement. He quotes the philosopher Seneca to emphasize his point: “Thanksgiving is less thankful when compelled.”²⁵

St. Thomas addresses a different aspect of the virtue when he considers how circumstances influence a beneficiary’s disposition. He poses the question of whether an innocent man owes more thanks to God than does the sinner, and quotes Luke 7:43 to suggest that he who receives more, owes greater thanks.²⁶ Thomas argues that a greater favor implies greater thanks due, but since a favor is something given gratis or freely, it can be considered greater in two ways. First, with respect to what is given, and in this case, the innocent man owes more to God because he has received the greater gift of God’s grace. But a favor can also be considered greater from the aspect of being more gratuitous or generous. So the sinner owes more to God because he has received God’s grace even though he deserved punishment. In the case of the innocent man, the gift of grace is considered absolutely greater, but the gift given to

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ad2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

the sinner is greater in relation to the recipient.²⁷ Thomas' example of the small gift and the poor man²⁸ reinforces his point that gratitude is less about the favor received than it is about the disposition of the receiver.

St. Thomas draws on Scripture and quotes 1 Thessalonians²⁹ in his argument that gratitude requires that every benefactor receive due thanks. He again draws on the philosophical idea of cause and effect, and says that since every effect (beneficiary) must be directed to the end of the agent (benefactor)³⁰, the natural order of things requires that one who receives a favor must return thanks in an appropriate manner for the circumstance and the persons involved. St. Thomas spends much effort emphasizing that gratitude comes from the heart. So even if a favor is given grudgingly or perhaps with an attitude that is less than gracious, the person who receives the gift or favor is still obliged to express thankfulness.³¹ Thomas does allow for a little less thanks to be given in such a situation, but the subject of gratitude regards a virtuous act, so even if the individual bestowing the favor is resentful, the virtuous man gives thanks for his generosity and wishes his benefactor well. Similarly, when someone does a favor but with his own profit as motivation, i.e. with some agenda other than pure generosity in mind, the virtuous receiver still rejoices and expresses thanks for not only his fortune, but for that of his benefactor's, too.³²

St. Thomas, always the thorough theologian, also considers whether it is necessary to express gratitude to a slave, a wealthy benefactor, or a sinner. In each case, the answer is yes, because true thankfulness arises from the heart and no kindness is unworthy of recognition. The

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ 1 Thess. 5:18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, II-II, 106, 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, ad2.

³² *Ibid.*, ad3.

slave is owed thanks for the favors he provides over and above his duties;³³ the wealthy man, who needs nothing material in return, still values the fellowship and sincere friendship he may receive as thanks; and the sinner perhaps can be led back to a virtuous life by a reciprocal kindness shown to him. Even the man who lives in poverty has an obligation to offer thanks in return for gifts bestowed, because even though he who has no material wealth, he has the wealth that arises from the love in his heart and is thus capable of showing honor and respect.³⁴

St. Thomas also considers the prompt repayment of favors. Gratitude disposes the response of a grateful man to be thoughtful and timely. Thomas points out that when a favor is offered, it reflects both the kindness of the benefactor as well as the actual thing given. Therefore the recipient must respond to that kindness, and offer an immediate repayment of gratitude. However, an expression of thanks given too quickly might be construed as a repayment of a legal debt, not a true expression of gratitude for favors.³⁵ It is therefore important to be respectful of the benefactor's circumstances and to avoid rushing into giving thanks, when in fact, the situation may be inconvenient for the giver.³⁶

The question as to whether the benefactor's disposition or deed is more important is also considered. St. Thomas answers that it is the disposition which is paramount, because a favor is given gratuitously, and for that to happen, the benefactor's will must be inclined toward good.³⁷ Since the virtuous act is more important than the gift given, the recipient must first consider the disposition of his benefactor when giving thanks. And while God alone can truly know a man's

³³ *Ibid.*, ad4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, ad5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, ad3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

nature, it is possible to tell by one's expressions and words whether his actions are sincerely kind and generous.³⁸

Some may argue that St. Thomas' view that a favor should be repaid in excess of what is received creates a spiral of never-ending gifts and repayments. He argues that since a favor has been bestowed freely and with generosity, the giver deserves praise, and the beneficiary of his largesse has the moral obligation to return the favor. He then goes on to say that the grateful man inclines to return not an equal favor, but one which is something more, because otherwise his repayment is merely a return of what he received and not the praise or thanksgiving due to the benefactor.³⁹ The key to Thomas' argument is the will, and its inclination to good acts. If through charity one is disposed to be generous, then likewise the recipient should be disposed to offer gratitude without adhering to a limit established by the original favor. Gratitude should incline one to offer thanksgiving proportionally greater than what is received; its essence concerns the love of one's neighbor, not an equal return for material value.⁴⁰

5. Ingratitude

In Question 107, St. Thomas turns his attention to gratitude's associated vice, ingratitude.⁴¹ He first considers whether ingratitude is always a sin, then whether it is a special sin. A further refinement of his inquiry examines whether every act of ingratitude is a mortal sin. And finally, St. Thomas considers whether it is reasonable to withhold favors from an ungrateful person.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, ad3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, ad2,3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

In his previous discussion of gratitude, St. Thomas characterizes the debt owed to a benefactor as a moral debt, because that which is given is bestowed from a spirit of generosity, without expectation of repayment.⁴² At the same time, he demonstrates that the virtue of gratitude perfects the will towards the good act of paying a moral debt. Now by definition, ingratitude is the opposite of gratitude; and since sin is defined by Thomas as that which is contrary to virtue, it follows that ingratitude must always be a sin.⁴³ Thomas addresses specific circumstances in which the recipient of a kindness might claim to be excused from gratitude, such as an inability to repay the favor or unintentional forgetfulness. However, there are no exceptions as St. Thomas states, for it is always possible to return a favor with one's good will alone. And forgetfulness, if due to neglectfulness and not a physical defect which is unable to be perfected by the will, always equals ingratitude and is thus a sin.⁴⁴ According to Thomas, the ungrateful person is lacking in love.⁴⁵

In order to determine the seriousness of the sin involved with ingratitude, St. Thomas first identifies the necessary steps which must be taken to properly express one's thankfulness. First the beneficiary must acknowledge the gift as being received. Then he must express his thanks for the kindness shown. And lastly, he must repay the favor in a timely and appropriate manner. The failure to repay is a serious matter and, from Thomas' perspective of negation, equates to returning an evil for good. But more serious still is the failure to give thanks for the favor. It gives the appearance of finding fault with the kindness which was bestowed. The gravest error, however, is the failure to acknowledge receipt of the gift, since that suggests the favor was

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, ad2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ad3.

scorned as an act of unkindness imposed upon the receiver.⁴⁶ St. Thomas acknowledges that every sin demonstrates a lack of gratitude toward God, but in the specific case of failing to show gratitude to one's fellow man for the receipt of a favor, one is guilty of the special sin of ingratitude.⁴⁷ St. Thomas judges ingratitude to be more often a venial sin, especially when caused by the unintentional error of negligence or by a failure to express gratitude in its fullest aspect. However, if one harbors contempt for the benefactor or intentionally means him harm by withholding gratitude, then it is possible for ingratitude to be a mortal sin.⁴⁸

Finally, St. Thomas considers whether future favors should be withheld from the individual who fails to properly express gratitude to his benefactor. The Scripture quotation which he selects (Luke 6:35-36) gives a good indication of his view on the matter: man should strive to imitate God's unfailing kindness and forgiveness.⁴⁹ Thomas points out that even though the actions of a person may be sufficient cause for refusal of future gifts or favors, one should not be too quick to judge another. It may be the situation that the beneficiary of one's generosity is truly appreciative, but for some unknown reason has been unable to repay the kindnesses bestowed on him. It is better for one to assume the best of his neighbor and to give him another opportunity to show his gratitude. Repeated acts of kindness may even have the effect of creating within the recipient a spirit of gratitude which previously did not exist, allowing him to become more virtuous in his actions. However, if one's generous acts continue to be spurned, and the individual to whom they are given grows even more contemptible, then it is appropriate for the giving of favors to cease.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, ad1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

6. Conclusion

For St. Thomas, the moral man is a virtuous man not because he adheres to a norm between extremes, but because his dispositions and actions move him toward his ultimate destiny of everlasting life with God.⁵⁰ The virtue of gratitude, as important as it is to inclining man's will toward the good of his neighbor, must still be considered as just a stepping stone toward man's final goal, eternal happiness with the Father.

⁵⁰ Hardon.

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