

## *Chapter One*

# Jesus Christ: The Coming Together of Two Ecstasies

It all begins, really, with a joke. The spirituality of Thomas Aquinas begins, not with rational speculation, not with "proofs" and demonstrations, but with the wonderful, surprising, and wholly incongruous event of God becoming a creature. This jest is such that Christians have not ceased for the past two millennia to laugh at it in delight. In the light of this Incarnation, the strangeness and ungraspable mystery of God's love is, for the first time, *revealed* to human beings. The spiritual life, for Thomas, is nothing but the stunned and sustained reaction to this disclosure.

As was hinted at in the introduction, one of the most powerful "spiritual" critiques of Thomas Aquinas is that he "thinks" his way to God, basing his entire theology on rational proofs and philosophical arguments. There seems to be, some say, a sort of hybris or dangerous pride in this approach, a certain lack of docility and humility before the mystery of God. And from some Protestant critics one hears the charge that Thomas's thought is insufficiently Christological, that Jesus Christ is not the cornerstone and culmination of his system. If either or both of these charges were true, Thomas would be not only an inadequate theologian, but more importantly a misleading Christian spiritual director.

What I hope to show in the course of this chapter is that neither reproach is justified. Aquinas never storms the gates of heaven with prideful reason, nor does he in any sense bracket or dismiss the unsurpassable event of God's self-disclosure that is the Incarnation. Rather, taking Jesus Christ as his point of departure, Thomas invites his reader into a stance of wonder and openness in the presence of the God whose generosity and love know no bounds. With the icon of the incarnate God in mind, Aquinas endeavors to lure us into an ecstatic appreciation of the ecstasy that is God, to find the God of self-forgetting love in our own self-forgetfulness.

I will explore these themes by looking at some of Thomas's texts dealing with, first, the event of revelation and then with the person and work of the ultimate "revealer," Jesus of Nazareth.

### Revelation

The very first question posed in the *Summa theologiae* has to do with the nature of what Thomas calls *sacra doctrina*, or sacred doctrine.\* What exactly is theology, this "talk

\*It is important to call attention here to the structure of the *Summa theologiae*. Thomas's great work is divided into three major sections, the *prima pars*, the *secunda pars*, and the *tertia pars*. The *prima pars* deals with God, Trinity, and creation; the *secunda pars* with the human being; and the *tertia pars* with Incarnation, Jesus Christ, and the sacraments. Each major section is subdivided into questions that are, in turn, subdivided into articles that specify the questions. An article begins with the statement of a question, e.g., Does God exist? The statement of the question is followed by the listing of several objections or counter-positions to the one that Thomas will take. After the objections, there is usually a *sed contra* (but on the other hand), a quotation from a philosopher or theologian or a scriptural citation meant to bolster and illumine Thomas's response. Following the *sed contra*, there is a *respondeo* (I respond), Thomas's formal answer to the question. Finally, Aquinas returns to the objections and, one by one, answers them, usually placing them in the context of the *respondeo*. A Thomist scholar might cite the *Summa* as follows: S.Th. Ia, q. 2, art. 3, ad 3, meaning, the first part of the *Summa*, question 2, article 3, response to the third objection. We recall from the introduction that this approach mirrors the style and practice of the "disputed question" in the medieval context.

about God," and why is it necessary? We recall that in the great universities of Thomas's time, philosophers were boldly using reason to probe the mysteries of nature and God. Aristotle's metaphysics, his study of the principles of being, seemed to allow the philosopher access even to the inner life and reality of God as cause and principle of the world. Given this rational confidence, why did the medieval scholar require the "science" of theology, or *sacra doctrina*?

Thomas's extremely illuminating answer to this question is the key to reading his entire project:

It was necessary for our *salvation* that there be a knowledge revealed by God, besides philosophical science built up by human reason. Firstly, indeed, because the human being is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason. (S.Th. Ia, q. 1, art. 1)

We require a science beyond the philosophical and natural sciences precisely because we human beings are oriented to an end that surpasses our powers of rational comprehension. We are destined to be united to a power that is beyond whatever the eye can see or the mind can know, beyond the world in all of its richness, beyond the web of contingent things. Here in some of the first lines of the *Summa* we see the theme of ecstasy and self-transcendence, a motif that will be repeated throughout Thomas's work: human beings are made to go beyond themselves, their "end" or purpose is to surrender themselves to a transcendent power.

And we notice something interesting in the subtle play of the language: there must be knowledge that goes beyond those sciences *built up by human reason*, that is to say, constructed by our minds and for our purposes. Purely "human" sciences are those that are expressions of the ego's desire to grasp and cling and control. Thomas seems

to imply that, even if these disciplines gave us some insight into God, they would not give us *saving* insight precisely because they are still too much in our hands, still too marked by the desire to *grasp* God, to have God, to know God in a manipulative way. But the God who is known in this manner is an idol, a creation of the ego — and thus a God who could in no way correspond to the deep and abiding desire for self-transcendence. It is not so much *what* the philosophical sciences tell us about God that is problematic; it is rather *how* they do so. Augustine said, “Si comprehendis, non est Deus” (If you understand, it is not God that you understand), and the Buddhists have a saying, “If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him.” Both of these maxims of the soul make a similar point: the moment *you* have the mystery or *you* see the divine, you have, in fact, ceased to have and failed to see. In insisting on God’s *revelation* as the starting point of his project, Thomas is holding off the enormous tendency of the ego to control.

*Sacra doctrina*, or knowledge revealed by God, is necessary because the final goal of human life is not to grasp but to be grasped, not to rise up but to be raised up, not to ascend but to be drawn. The mind’s hunger to control the world, to be the absolute power, must be disciplined before the human being can come to proper fulfillment. Of course, this theme of docility, passivity, and openness in the presence of the divine power is a commonplace in the great mystics. What I find intriguing is that Thomas Aquinas, the supposed rationalist, invokes it at the very beginning of his principal theological work. The spiritual master Aquinas is inviting the spirit to find itself in losing itself, to discover its richest power and destiny in surrendering to that reality that it cannot in principle control or have. In some ways, Thomas’s entire understanding of God is implicit in this last statement. If the power to which human beings are oriented is radically and in principle

ungraspable, uncontrollable, unreachable, then that power cannot be a thing or a being in or alongside the world. It cannot be one reality among many; it cannot even be the “supreme” or highest being; rather, it must be a reality that breaks all bonds and that surpasses all the categories of thought. It must be that reality in whose presence awe and worship are the only proper responses. Whatever Thomas says about God throughout his writings, flows from this great insight given in revelation.

The spiritual focus of this discussion becomes even sharper when we attend to the first words of Thomas’s response: God’s self-disclosure was necessary “for human salvation.” God does not reveal Godself in order to illuminate our minds or satisfy our curiosity. Rather, God does so in order to move us, to shake us, to push us outside of and beyond ourselves in order that we might be *saved*. The implication is that without revelation we would tend to rest in ourselves, to remain comfortable with our ordinary lives among the finite things of the world. Revelation is a sort of spiritual wake-up, a radical reorientation of human beings, touching them at the center of their being and spurring them out and beyond. And thus *sacra doctrina*, theology, cannot be seen as a mere academic discipline; rather, as a codification of God’s breakthrough, it is a matter of spiritual life and death, a way of conducting human beings to their final destiny.

And therefore what will follow in the rest of Thomas’s great *Summa* is a type of spiritual direction, an articulation and explanation of that divine self-disclosure that is necessary for our salvation. It might be worthwhile to pause and reflect here on the fundamental meaning of the word “salvation,” *salvus* in Thomas’s Latin. In common Latin parlance, *salvus* meant “health,” and thus an ancient Roman might have greeted his neighbor with the term “*salve*” (good health to you). It is only by analogy that *salvus* came to mean “salvation” or “health of the

.. NOT  
"but theology"

soul." Interestingly, when the first Christians endeavored to designate the significance of Jesus Christ, they called him "healer," *sōtēr* in Greek, *salvator* (bearer of the *salvus*) in Latin. In short, Jesus, precisely as the *revealer* of God, was experienced as the one who carries the healing salve, the soothing balm. As a Christian theologian, Thomas will explicate dogma and doctrine as expressions of the healing power of revelation, as signposts or landmarks on the journey into God, and therefore as solutions to the fundamental dilemmas and struggles of human life.

This existential quality of theology becomes even more apparent when Thomas moves to consider the seemingly dry question of whether sacred doctrine is a science. At first glance, it appears rather cold and abstract to refer to theology as a science: the self-disclosure of God reduced to principles and formulas. But Thomas's theological science, as he defines it, has nothing to do with disinterested knowledge at a distance. He tells us that *sacra doctrina* is a "subalternate science," that is to say, one derived from the principles of a higher science. In a similar way, he explains, music is derived from, or subalternate to, the study of arithmetic. But what is the higher discipline from which theology draws its principles and perspectives? It is, states Thomas, the "science of God and of the blessed." Now the word *scientia* can designate an intellectual discipline, but it can also denote a direct, experiential type of knowing, a sort of knowledge through contact and touch. In what amounts to a delightful play on words, Thomas is telling us that the academic "science" of theology is drawn from the direct experience (*scientia* in the second sense) of God that is had by God himself and by the "blessed," those saints, who are now enjoying the vision of God in heaven. He means that the "science" of sacred doctrine is a kind of participation in the inner life of God, or better, an anticipation of the beatific vision of God that is our proper goal as human beings. The ultimate source and orientation of

theology is once again the transforming and transfiguring "taste" for God.

One of the problems involved with reading these texts of Aquinas on revelation is that we interpret them from a post-Cartesian, post-Enlightenment perspective. Descartes wanted a philosophy that was purely rational, constructed along the lines of mathematics and geometry, and the Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century wanted all branches of human knowing to reflect the clarity and precision of Newtonian physics. In both perspectives, the ideal knowers are the detached observers, careful that their prejudices, desires, and traditions do not cloud the objectivity of their judgment. Thomas's "science" of God, his attempt to "know" the source and end of his life, has little to do with these more modern points of view. When Aquinas speaks of "knowing" God, his words have a biblical resonance and overtone. In a biblical perspective, "knowledge" can designate sexual union, the most intimate participation of one person in another: "How is this possible, for I do not know man?" says the puzzled Mary to the angel of the Annunciation. In enticing us into knowledge of God, in drawing us onto the ground of *sacra doctrina*, Thomas Aquinas is offering us, not clear and distinct ideas, but rather a loving participation in God, a foretaste of heaven. He presumes that the one touched by this "knowledge" of God will be seared and shaped and overwhelmed by the contact.

Now if it is indeed the case that Thomas Aquinas's theology is radically revelation based, why does it seem to depend so fully on rational arguments, on philosophy? Why does Thomas so often use language borrowed from natural science, from metaphysics, from pagan thought, sometimes, it seems, setting aside the terminology and style of the Scripture? In constructing his great Gothic cathedral of rational theology is he not indeed guilty of that charge of intellectual hybris that we alluded to

above? Does he not, as Luther and some of the reformers implied, effectively deny the primacy of God's revealed Word in the Bible and in Jesus Christ, prostituting himself, as it were, with secularists and nonbelievers? In order to respond to these questions, and to grasp the master's spiritual strategy, it is vitally important to understand precisely how and why Thomas Aquinas uses philosophical tools in his work.

The wisdom of pagan philosophers and scientists, the insights of Jewish rabbis, the speculation of Muslim metaphysicians, all of it is employed by Thomas in his *pedagogical task* as teacher of revelation. Theology, he claims, in no sense depends upon this wisdom; it is not derived from it; it does not presuppose it or stand upon it. However, theology can *use* these intellectual treasures in order to entice and lure the human mind to a deeper vision of the truth of revelation.

Thomas tells us that theology must utilize philosophy, not because of some defect of its own, but rather because of the *debilitas* or weakness of the human mind. Like many of the Fathers before him, Aquinas takes seriously the problem of the "fallen" mind. Like the will, the mind is profoundly and negatively affected by the power of sin. Instead of gazing naturally at the vision of God, the fallen mind tends to contemplate the things of the world, to concentrate upon the ordinary realm of creatures. In one of his biblical commentaries, Thomas speaks of "inordinate lovers of this world" and those whose "eyes are fixed on the ground," that is to say, whose minds are mired in the world of everyday experience. This fallen mind is simply overwhelmed by the intensity of the light that comes from God's self-disclosure:

It may well happen that what is in itself the more certain may seem to us the less certain on account of the weakness of our intelligence, which is dazzled by the clearest

objects of nature as the owl is dazzled by the light of the sun. (S.Th. Ia, q. 1, art. 5, ad 1)

The "weak" mind cannot easily take in, accept, cope with the strangeness and otherness of God that appears in revelation; it is "dazzled" by such a vision. And thus it requires help in the form of a more "natural," more "down-to-earth" wisdom. For Thomas, philosophical and scientific arguments are precisely these teaching devices, these tools, used to lead the fallen mind to a richer participation in the vision of God. In his language, they are "handmaids" of theology, servants of the divine science, "leading by the hand" (*manu ducentes*) those who seek to see.

In Thomas's own lifetime there were many voices raised in protest against his somewhat unconventional use of pagan and philosophical sources. His colleague St. Bonaventure charged that Aquinas was diluting the wine of the Gospel with the insipid water of pagan philosophy. But Thomas responded: "I am hardly diluting wine with water; rather, I am transforming water into wine." He was claiming, in other words, to ennoble and reanimate philosophy precisely by putting it into service of the divine science; he was allowing all provisional truth to find its proper place as a handmaid to the Truth itself.

This "transformation of water into wine" is an extremely instructive spiritual strategy. Thomas teaches us that all things, all objects, all stories, in some way can speak of the transcendent and infinite mystery that is given in revelation. He implies that the spiritual directors, the mystagogues, the theologians, should get up into any pulpit that they can, even those offered by "pagans" and "nonbelievers." Since *sacra doctrina* speaks, not of some "being" sequestered above or alongside the world, but rather of that all-embracing power that suffuses and sustains the universe, then all wisdom, even the most sec-

of  
Aquinas  
Bonaventure

ularized, can be used to lead us to God. In a sense, Aquinas's method presupposes that a sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular, between nature and grace, is misleading, since all of "nature" is destined for the supernatural and can be used in its service. In the contemporary context, the follower of Thomas's spiritual strategy should feel at home utilizing the findings of depth psychology, sociology, anthropology, and mythology. Thomistic spiritual guides do not establish *sacra doctrina* as an "independent" discipline, a sort of fortress careful to defend itself against the other sciences. Rather, inspired by the breadth of theology itself, they welcome the secular disciplines as allies in the spiritual quest.

### The Event of Jesus Christ

Having examined some of the key texts at the very beginning of the *Summa*, we can say with confidence that Thomas Aquinas sees his entire theological and spiritual project as a response to the unexpected and overwhelming act of God's self-disclosure. Theology begins in wonder at the revealing power and ends in the rapture of the vision of God; and the theologian, as spiritual master, explores the mystery in order to guide others to salvation. But what exactly *is* revelation and where does it come from? *How* is one grasped by the all-embracing power of being, lifted up beyond oneself and oriented to the pure communion with God? To answer these questions, we must turn to the third and final section of the *Summa*, more specifically to the questions and articles dealing with Jesus Christ. What becomes clear when we read the first questions of part one and part three together is that Christ himself *is* the locus, the event, of revelation, that energy by which the spirit is opened up and directed to God.

It is most instructive to attend carefully to the prologue