

Thomas Aquinas on Prayer: A Few Remarks

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Prayer and Divine Providence

In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 3, chapters 95 and 96, St. Thomas situates his views on prayer in the broad context of divine providence. Being provident is an essential attribute of God (see *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 22), who has an overall design regarding the universe. Being eternal, that is, not in time and having no past and no future, God does not change his plans. Any change of mind implies a passage from potency to act. Potency is the capacity to receive a perfection, and such a perfection is called the act. Hence, for all finite beings, two facts are noteworthy: something is missing in the state of potency, and there is attainment of a perfection in the subsequent state of act. In the case of God, however, since he is perfect, he cannot acquire any further perfection.

As first cause, the Creator is always at work within the acting power he has granted to the secondary causes. Moreover, in his eternal knowledge, he takes account of all the contingent (that is, not necessary) events that affect or are brought about by unfree creatures and of all the decisions made by free creatures. Prayers rank among those free actions and they make a difference, because anyone who prays increases personally and helps others to increase in terms of being, both supernaturally and morally. Hence the importance of desire, which Aquinas, as a good medieval thinker, rightly takes for granted and mentions often, since any sound desire launches a movement of growth.

Prayer as Infused Wisdom

Besides prayer as petition, which Thomas discusses in *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 83, he recognizes a place for a mystical kind of prayer, chiefly in articles 12–14 of that question. However, one of the most important texts is found elsewhere, in II-II, q. 45, a. 2:

Accordingly, it belongs to the wisdom that is an intellectual virtue to pronounce right judgment about divine realities after reason has made its inquiry, but it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit to judge aright about them on account of affinity with them, as

Dionysius says (in *The Divine Names*, 2.9) that Hierotheus is perfect in divine realities, for he not only learned (*discens*) about them, but was patient of them (*patiens divina*). Now this sympathy (*compassio*), or affinity (*connaturalitas*) with divine realities, results from charity, which unites someone to God: "He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him" (1 Cor 6:17).

This kind of wisdom is not acquired through active learning, but it is infused by the Holy Spirit, that is, obtained in a receptive form of prayer. After Augustine, Thomas remarks that *sapientia* (wisdom) takes its name from *sapor* (savour, taste, relish; II-II, q. 45, a. 2, ad 1). Quoting his predecessor, who speaks of a "perception" (*perceptio*) in this context, he writes: "'Perception' points to a certain experiential knowledge (*experimentalem quamdam notitiam*), and this is properly called wisdom (*sapientia*), as it were a knowing that is tasted (*quasi sapida scientia*)" (I, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2).